

## The People Around Us

A few years ago, *Booklist* published a review of my fiction that included the phrase: “Her characters are some of the best in current fantasy.” My publisher liked this line so much it has been splashed on a number book covers. Hah!

But even several of my editors have quietly asked me, “How do you make these characters feel so real?”

The answer is that I don’t know, but for much of my adult life, I have practiced a technique that is often discussed in writing courses: “Pay attention to the people around you and take notes.”

I started doing this in college, and the habit stayed with me. Even snippets of conversations can provide food for thought when it comes to the creation of characters and understanding of the human psyche.

For example, about ten years ago, I was waiting in line in a deli, and there were two middle-aged women in front of me. I sensed from their body language that they were friends, but their verbal communication seemed careful enough that I believed they had not “connected” in some time.

Finally, one of them asked, “So . . . how are things going with Dave?”

Response: “I filed for divorce last week.”

The first woman appeared surprised and said, “What? But I thought he quit drinking?”

Her companion nodded. “He did. I’d always thought he was a mean drunk. Turns out, he’s just mean.”

Wow. As soon as I got home, I wrote this down. I considered body language, voice inflection, and the implications in regard to human nature.

Last year, I was sitting in an airport, waiting to board a plane, and I noticed an absolutely stunning woman sitting across from me in the waiting/gate area. She looked like she had just stepped out of a hair salon. She was slender with perfect skin and long, layered hair. Her clothes were expensive. She wore a white silk blouse and a pair of boot-cut jeans (that probably cost \$200) with spiked heels. Everything about her physical appearance was perfect. But she had her arms crossed, and she looked angry.

About four seats down the otherwise empty row sat a man who was about thirty-five years old. They were not together, and he didn’t seem to even notice her existence.

Just then, another man, this one tall and well dressed, came hurrying back from the ticket counter, and he appeared worried. After sitting down with the beautiful woman, he began to explain rapidly, in pleading tones, why he could not get them upgraded to First Class (as it was full). She didn't say a word to him, but stared straight ahead angrily. After a while, he stopped talking and fell silent himself. He looked miserable.

A few moments later, the man sitting down the row from them brightened, and I glanced over to see a short, slightly chubby woman with dark, curly hair (cut into a bob) trotting towards him. She wore flat sneakers and a navy blue T-shirt dress. She carried two iced lattes.

She smiled at him and sat down, handing him his drink. He smiled back, and they began whispering to each other in the comfortable manner of two people who have been together a long time. Then, she took out an electronic tablet, leaned against him affectionately, and they began to play some kind of word game together.

I looked back to "Couple A," the well-dressed man and the beautiful woman. He offered to go get her some coffee. She bit off, "We could be served coffee in First Class." Her arms were still crossed, and she stopped talking to him again. He continued to seem miserable.

Looking back to "Couple B," who were still playing word their game and laughing quietly, I focused on the man and thought, "That guy is a whole, whole lot smarter than the one sitting a few seats up from him."

I could not wait to get a moment to write all this down! It filled my mind with ideas for substance over style in the creation of characters. I've used variations of these four people several times.

Then . . . not long ago, I had an experience that really stayed with me.

I don't normally spend money at Starbucks, but I was shopping at Fred Meyer, and they have an in-house coffee shop, and I was dragging a little, so I got in line for a latte. There were two men front of me and one man behind me. The man behind me was very tall and in his late thirties. The two men in front of me were engaged in a verbal disagreement about who owed who money.

As they walked up to the counter, this disagreement turned into a near shouting match, and the clerk behind the cash register looked startled. Within seconds, one of the men pushed the other one. At that point, I was startled, and on instinct, I stepped backward, away from the confrontation. In same moment, the man behind me stepped forward and put his right arm in front of me.

Both men shouting at each other seemed to notice everyone else's reactions, and they stopped the argument.

The man who'd stepped in front of me suddenly became embarrassed and actually apologized. "Sorry. Instinct."

I assured him that he did not need to be sorry, and I politely thanked him.

But later in my car, as I was writing all this down, I began to think that his reaction was not a gender issue. Looking back, I realized I've done this myself with children. I think it is human nature to step in front of someone much smaller than ourselves in such a situation. Again, I took notes on reactions, on body movements, on instinct . . . on human nature.

So, I guess the moral of this blog post is that paying close attention to the people around us actually helps us to understand ourselves a little better, and for writers, it can be an invaluable tool in the creation of characters.