

“Nasty People meet Nasty Ends” -- Cabin Tales Episode 2 Transcript

(By Catherine Austen)

[0:00] Introduction:

Welcome to Cabin Tales: Spooky Stories for Young Writers. This is Episode Two: Nasty People meet Nasty Ends. I’m Catherine Austen. And my guests today are great Canadian writers Karen Krossing, Monique Polak, and Tim Wynne-Jones.

Today we’ll be talking all about characters. You’ll hear a story about a monstrous woman who gets her comeuppance. You’ll hear advice on how to introduce a character with an excerpt from *Dracula*. You’ll hear advice on how to show characters from different points of view, with excerpts from the children’s novel, *The Bad Beginning*, and the young adult novel, *The Universe versus Alex Woods*. You’ll hear about favourite characters from our guest authors, along with their thoughts on villains and monsters, and their recommendations to young writers who want to create memorable characters. And finally, you’ll hear how to keep an eye out for real-life characters that might inspire your next story.

That’s all on Episode Two of Cabin Tales: Nasty People meet Nasty Ends.

[crickets]

[1:15] Story Intro

Have you ever met a real-life villain, someone with a little bit of power who wields it like an axe over those around them, chopping off bits of confidence and joy, someone who only feels “good” by feeling “better” than others? And you meet them and, if you’re in a good mood, you’ll think, “How awful it must be to *be*

them." But quite often, those little tyrants live long happy lives feeling just great while making the timid people around them feel just miserable. Well, today you'll hear a story where such a person does regret their fate – not because they see themselves clearly but because their fate turns very gruesome.

[1:50] Trigger warning:

Build a campfire in your mind. Seat some young people around it. They're all taking turns telling stories. Next up is Manny, a fun-loving boy who likes horror comics, monster movies, and YouTube videos about... parasites. Manny loves the spotlight, so all of this stories are a bit long, plus a bit tongue-in-cheek and a bit grotesque. And I have to warn you, this one includes some cruelty, some crime, and references to suicide. So if you have a special sensitivity to any of those things – or parasites -- feel free to skip ahead 10 minutes when you hear this musical bar near the beginning of the story.

[musical bar]

This podcast is rated PG-13, so if you want to share it with very young listeners, please download the "fright-free" versions of episodes available on the website at CabinTales.ca. Nothing creepy there. But something creepy coming up right now from Manny.

Pull up a chair around the campfire and listen in to... "The Spot."

[crickets]

[3:10] "The Spot" by Manny T.

Myra Markham was a happy young millionaire who worked as a consultant for

multinational corporations. It was her job to travel around the country and fire people whenever the companies closed a factory or office. There was nothing she loved more than to sit down with a single-mother bank teller, or a father-of-six filing clerk, to fondle her diamond necklace and stroke her fur coat and drum her manicured nails on the table, and tell them they were out of work.

Myra had inherited her millions *and* her meanness. She'd spent her childhood watching her parents berate the servants and beat the horses and buy the locals' houses out from under them. She was a fast learner, and after years of practice, she was the best in the world at being wealthy and being cruel.

Like many wealthy cruel people, Myra loved to collect rare objects. She particularly liked to collect white things. She had a massive collection of white gold, ivory, and skulls. She had the horn of an albino rhino glued to the dashboard of her white Cadillac. She had the skin of albino crocodile nailed to the wall of her white kitchen. She had a glass maze filled with albino mice and rattraps in her office, and she could stare at it for hours. *Snap, snap, snap.*

When Myra caught wind of a floor-length fur coat made from the skin of an albino Sumatran tiger—one of the most critically endangered animals on Earth—she could not resist. She outbid every other wealthy cruel person in the world and bought that coat.

Myra was marching down the street in her tiger-skin coat when she tripped on the cold bare leg of a homeless person hunched in a doorway. "How dare you touch me with your cold bare homeless leg?" Myra shouted. She took a good look at the homeless person: it was a young mother who had bruises on her face and a baby in her arms and a paper cup in her hand marked with the words, *Please give. Anything helps. God bless.*

[musical bar]

Myra laughed and laughed. "God has not blessed you! " She leaned down into the homeless woman's face and whispered, "That baby of yours will never have a good life. It will never have servants to berate or horses to beat. It will never wear jewels or furs like mine. You might as well take that baby and drown it in the river."

The homeless woman covered her baby's ears. She tried to be a good person, she really did, but life on the streets was tough. Someone had stolen her paper cup this morning and someone else had spit at her. So by the time Myra suggested that she drown her child, this homeless woman was not her best self. She cursed Myra. And since she was actually a powerful goddess in disguise, just checking up on humanity, the curse was a doozy:

"All your wealth will not save you from what is to come.

By the time you are home, your end will have begun.

You are rotten inside and the whole world will see it.

You'll drown *yourself* in the river; I guarantee it."

Myra stepped back from the doorway. A shiver ran down Myra's spine and she pulled her fur coat tight around her shoulders. The soft fur stroked her cheek. "You're nothing," she spat as she turned from the doorway and marched home.

That night, Myra had a terrifying dream in which she was lying in bed in her gorgeous white fur when something sinister slid through its lining. It wormed its way around the collar of the coat, out of the dead tiger's skin, and along to the very tip of the dead tiger's fur, where it brushed against Myra's face. It was a tiny ancient creature, a cross between a bacteria and a slime mould, so small you'd need a powerful microscope to see it. It was looking for a home, and it burrowed

into Myra's cheek to find one. It liked it there. It liked it there so much that it began to multiply.

Myra woke with a cry. She had a very bad feeling that this was no ordinary dream.

Myra stared at herself in the mirror and saw a tiny spot on her cheek. It was just a little nub of a thing high on her cheekbone, a small raised dot that you could barely see unless you looked hard. It wasn't a clogged pore or a pimple, just a dot like a red pen might leave. But it wouldn't wash off, and when she brushed her finger over it, she felt a tiny scab. She put a dab of makeup on it, grabbed her tiger-coat, and hurried to work.

That night, Myra had another nightmare: all the white mice in her office escaped and attacked her. She woke with a pounding headache. Her face ached as if mice really had been nibbling it in the night. She wiped the sweat from her face and felt the dot on her cheek. And there, half an inch beneath it, was another one. And another one.

Myra made an appointment with the dermatologist.

The parasite had been slow to get going, but once it multiplied a thousand times in Myra's face, its spread grew rapid. It mushroomed across her skin and rooted through her muscles. It spread down to her jawline and up to her eye and across the bridge of her nose. It became the centre of Myra's life, the only thing that mattered, the only thing she thought about—and the only thing anyone else thought about when they looked at her.

Her dermatologist had never seen anything like it. Nothing he prescribed had any effect.

Myra's cheek looked like roadkill. Her employers asked her not to hold any

more meetings until her face cleared up. Her French acquaintances wouldn't kiss her hello anymore. Strangers gossiped and cringed. There was no one at all to feel superior to.

The left side of Myra's face had the texture of ground beef. She began to wear a bandage over it, though the pressure was excruciating.

She took a barrage of allergy tests but all of them came back negative.

"It's not flesh-eating disease," the latest specialist told her.

"Then it's some new disease!" she screamed hysterically.

The doctors prescribed every sort of antibiotic cream. They scraped and peeled and even burned it. But nothing worked. The disease kept spreading, down Myra's neck and shoulders, across her scalp, inside her ears.

One month after she was cursed, Myra peeled her face from the pillowcase and thought, "I'm falling apart." Then she called her psychiatrist.

They met online because he no longer wanted to see her in person. He tried not to look at the computer screen. But when he did, he couldn't look away. "I'm afraid my patient load is overwhelming these days. This will be our last session."

Her face hurt with an agony that penetrated every part of Myra's mind. She was rotten, just like the homeless woman who'd cursed her had said.

She found an enormous Halloween mask that covered her head and shoulders, that she could wear outside. In desperation, Myra wore her mask to church and listened to a sermon about loving your neighbour and helping the downtrodden, and she thought, "This is no help at all." So she filled the collection plate with cash and prayed for God to cure her.

But nothing happened.

Myra ran away to a cabin in the woods. She packed up her jewels and furs and cash and carted it all to a lake in the middle of nowhere. She thought that one day, when the pain got too bad to take, she'd drown herself in the river, to put an end to this curse. But she hoped it wouldn't come to that. She hoped that maybe this curse was like the one in “Beauty and the Beast,” and it could be broken if she made a friend who loved her. Because her curse *was* a lot like the one in that story – only the Beast was strong and healthy and totally cool, whereas Myra was literally rotting. Still, they were both greedy people with lessons to learn. So she prayed very hard to make a friend and be cured.

She put an add in the paper to rent out the guest cabin next to hers, and she was full of hope when a family answered the ad. She left them a fruit basket and a box of chocolates in hope of buying their love. But the moment Myra stepped out of her cabin to meet them—a father, a mother, and twelve-year-old twins—they screwed up their faces and laughed and shouted, “What’s with the mask, old lady?” And Myra lost all hope of finding a friend and lifting the curse with these people. “I’m not old!” she muttered.

The family had rented the cabin for a week. Every time Myra stepped outside, the mother and father ran away screaming and the brother and sister yelled, “It’s the witch!”

The kids really wanted to know what was behind Myra’s mask. So they hid among the trees and filmed her through her cabin windows. That’s how they discovered all the treasure inside Myra’s cabin—rhino horns and crocodile skins and a floor-length fur coat that called to them.

The next day when Myra went for a drive, the kids broke into her cabin to rob her. They took her ivory, her gold, her trinkets. The sister paraded around in

the Sumatran tiger coat, wrapping it tightly around herself, raising the collar against her cheek.

"That was probably the last albino tiger on Earth!" her brother shouted. He took the cuff of the coat in his hand and pressed it to his cheek. "So soft."

The children took all the best things Myra had and packed them in the trunk of their car. When their parents saw the jewels and furs and cash, they ransacked Myra's cabin for anything the kids might have overlooked, like bearer bonds and Gucci bags. They filled the storage bin on their roof rack with all the stolen loot. Then they drove off down the driveway.

"Hurry," the boy said. "She's due back any minute."

The father cleared his throat. "Now, you kids know that stealing is wrong, and we'd never do it normally. But that hideous woman is going to rot away and she has to leave her money to someone, so why shouldn't it be us?"

The mother nodded. "That disgusting rich lady would want her stuff to go to someone who can use it—especially this diamond tiara and this rare Sumatran tiger coat I'm wearing." She stroked her face with the soft sleeve of the cursed coat.

The father leaned his cheek against his wife's shoulder, burying his face in the white fur of the dead tiger. "I'd say we made a killing on this cabin rental."

"Don't you feel a little sorry for the ugly lady we robbed?" the girl asked. There was silence in the car for a moment, then the whole rotten family broke into laughter.

When they reached the end of the long driveway, to their surprise and discomfort, Myra idled in front of them, blocking their path.

She stared at their car packed up with her belongings. She stared at her

white gold and pearls shining around their necks. She stared at her rhino horn gleaming on their dashboard. And she stared at her albino Sumatran-tiger coat which they’d all smushed their cheeks into. She grabbed her binoculars from the glove compartment and peered closer at their dirty rotten faces.

They sat in their car laughing at Myra and daring her to challenge them. Laughing, laughing, laughing. So superior and so happy—just like Myra used to be. And every one of them—the mother, the father, the sister, the brother—all of them had small red dots on their cheeks, almost too small to see. *Ha, ha, ha!*

Myra snorted with laughter, too. She pulled her car alongside theirs to give them room to leave. Just before they drove away, she rolled down her window and took off her mask, tearing a chunk of damp flesh from a cheekbone, and showed them her hideous smiling face.

Aaaaahhh!

The thieving family screamed and drove away to their doom.

And Myra Markham, realizing this was the most superior she would ever feel to anyone again, drowned herself in the river and broke her curse.

[crickets]

And that’s today’s cabin tale. Thank you, Manny.

[applause]

[14:35] Commentary: Introducing characters

When Manny began his story, he knew he wanted a villain. And he tells us right away that Myra is monstrous. He doesn’t say much about what she looks like. We get enough of a gist of Myra to form an image. The Myra I see and the Myra you

see might look nothing alike, but that’s okay. We both picture an arrogant, wealthy woman towering over the homeless woman on the street.

Manny doesn’t describe how Myra looks in detail until it becomes important to the plot, when her disease affects her appearance. Then he talks of her skin with the texture of ground beef and such assorted gruesome details. And he shows other characters reacting to her appearance – they cancel meetings and run away from her.

Describing the important aspects of someone’s appearance, showing how they act and speak, and having other characters react to them, is a class mix for portraying a character.

It’s a mix that’s used to introduce us to one of the most memorable villains in literary history: Count Dracula. Here’s an excerpt from that 1897 novel by Bram Stoker. This is from the point of view of Jonathan Harker, who has travelled to Dracula’s castle to settle some legal business and, after a tense journey, he’s greeted at the door.

[music]

[15:50] Excerpt from *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897)

Within, stood a tall old man, clean shaven save for a long white moustache, and clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere. He held in his hand an antique silver lamp, in which the flame burned without chimney or globe of any kind, throwing long quivering shadows as it flickered in the draught of the open door. The old man motioned me in with his right hand with a courtly gesture, saying in excellent English, but with a strange intonation—

"Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own will!" He made no motion of stepping to meet me, but stood like a statue, as though his gesture of welcome had fixed him into stone. The instant, however, that I had stepped over the threshold, he moved impulsively forward, and holding out his hand grasped mine with a strength which made me wince, an effect which was not lessened by the fact that it seemed as cold as ice—more like the hand of a dead than a living man....

[music]

CA: And the count carries Jonathan's bags to his room, and invites him to dinner, and Jonathan continues:

[excerpt from Dracula]

... I had now an opportunity of observing him, and found him of a very marked physiognomy.

His face was a strong—a very strong—aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils; with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion. The mouth, so far as I could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel-looking, with peculiarly sharp white teeth; these protruded over the lips, whose remarkable ruddiness showed astonishing vitality in a man of his years. For the rest, his ears were pale, and at the tops extremely pointed; the chin was broad and strong, and the cheeks firm though thin. The general effect was one of extraordinary pallor....

[music]

CA: And Jonathan does record his own reactions to the count.

[excerpt continues]

...As the Count leaned over me and his hands touched me, I could not repress a shudder. It may have been that his breath was rank, but a horrible feeling of nausea came over me, which, do what I would, I could not conceal. The Count, evidently noticing it, drew back; and with a grim sort of smile, which showed more than he had yet done his protuberant teeth, sat himself down again on his own side of the fireplace....

[music]

[18:30] Copy the technique

Note the combination of appearance, speech, and mannerisms given to us from Jonathan's point of view. And that's an exercise you can do: Go visit your main character at their house. Have them open the door to you. And then write down one salient detail about their appearance. Are they wearing pyjamas at 2:00 in the afternoon? Write down something they say. Are they polite or impolite, or do they simply wait for you to speak? And write down their behaviour. How do they open the door? Do they just crack it open and peer out suspiciously? Or do they swing it so far that it bangs against the wall? Write these details down in a letter to yourself, introducing yourself to this marvelous new character you're going to write about.

[music]

[19:15] Introducing a character from an omniscient point of view

In "The Spot," the description of Myra is from an omniscient narrator's point of view, a narrator who knows everything about her, even her dreams and wishes. Which brings up a key point about characters: how you describe them depends on who you have describing them. Myra would describe herself in glowing terms.

People she fired would describe her as a monster. And a third-person omniscient narrator can describe her however the storyteller wishes the reader to see her.

Manny had a terrible fate awaiting Myra, so he didn't want you to like her. She's just rotten. If you're introducing characters you want your reader to like, then you can choose likeable, relatable, intriguing things to show about them.

Here's how Lemony Snicket describes the Baudelaire children in the first book of the *Series of Unfortunate Events*:

[20:10] Excerpt from *The Bad Beginning* by Lemony Snicket

Violet Baudelaire, the eldest, liked to skip rocks. Like most fourteen-year-olds, she was right-handed, so the rocks skipped farther across the murky water when Violet used her right hand than when she used her left. As she skipped rocks, she was looking out at the horizon and thinking about an invention she wanted to build. Anyone who knew Violet well could tell she was thinking hard, because her long hair was tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes. Violet had a real knack for inventing and building strange devices, so her brain was often filled with images of pulleys, levers, and gears, and she never wanted to be distracted by something as trivial as her hair. This morning she was thinking about how to construct a device that could retrieve a rock after you had skipped it into the ocean.

Klaus Baudelaire, the middle child, and the only boy, liked to examine creatures in tidepools. Klaus was a little older than twelve and wore glasses, which made him look intelligent. He *was* intelligent. The Baudelaire parents had an enormous library in their mansion, a room filled with thousands of books on nearly every subject. Being only twelve, Klaus of course had not read *all* of the

books in the Baudelaire library, but he had read a great many of them and had retained a lot of the information from his readings. He knew how to tell an alligator from a crocodile. He knew who killed Julius Caesar. And he knew much about the tiny, slimy animals found at Briny Beach, which he was examining now.

Sunny Baudelaire, the youngest, liked to bite things. She was an infant, and very small for her age, scarcely larger than a boot. What she lacked in size, however, she made up for with the size and sharpness of her four teeth. Sunny was at an age where one mostly speaks in a series of unintelligible shrieks. Except when she used the few actual words in her vocabulary, like "bottle," "mommy," and "bite," most people had trouble understanding what it was that Sunny was saying. For instance, this morning she was saying, "Gack!" over and over, which probably meant, "Look at that mysterious figure emerging from the fog!"

[music]

[22:15] Copy the technique

What likeable children. Note how he describes general and specific things about them, but sets each character in this particular scene. He wants us to like these characters and feel them come alive here on Briny Beach. And that's an exercise you can try, too: Write about your characters from an omniscient perspective, and write about them first in a way that you want the reader to like them and care about them and hope that all their problems are solved. And then write that character again in a way where you want the reader to love to hate them and to look forward to their getting their just desserts.

[music]

[23:00] First person narrators as characters

If your story is in first-person, then everything your narrator says and notices and includes in the story helps build the narrator’s character. And everything they say and notice about others says as much about themselves as the other characters. A narrator who only has bad things to say about everyone is showing off his own judgmental nature. A narrator who makes excuses for characters who treat him badly is showing his own timidity.

Here’s an excerpt from *The Universe versus Alex Woods*, a young adult novel by Gavin Extence. The narrator, a teenager living with a brain injury, is taken to a police station at the beginning of the novel, and left alone in a room with his own thoughts.

[23:50] Excerpt from *The Universe versus Alex Woods* by Gavin Extence

Luckily, I’m very happy in my own company, and pretty adept at keeping my mind occupied. I have about a million different exercises to help me stay calm and focussed.

When you’re tired but need to stay alert, you really need something a bit tricky to keep your mind ticking over. So I started to conjugate my irregular Spanish verbs, starting in the simple present and then gradually working my way through to more complicated tenses. I didn’t say them out loud, because of the CCTV camera, but I voiced them in my head, still taking care with the accent and stresses.

[music]

CA: And the narrator goes on a little bit with the details of this – that attention to detail is part of his character – until two policemen walk in. And he says:

[excerpt continues]

I’m not going to bother describing Chief Inspector Hearse or Deputy Inspector Cunningham for you at any great length. Mr. Treadstone, my old English teacher, used to say that when you’re writing about a person, you don’t need to describe every last thing about him or her. Instead, you should try to give just one telling detail to help the reader picture the character. Chief Inspector Hearse had a mole the size of a five-pence piece on his right cheek. Deputy Inspector Cunningham had the shiniest shoes I’ve ever seen.

They sat down opposite and gestured that I should sit down too. That was when I realized that I’d stood up when they walked in the room. That’s one of the things they taught you at my school – to stand up whenever an adult enters the room. It’s meant to demonstrate respect, I guess, but after a while, you just do it without thinking.

[music]

[25:20] Copy the technique

Now with that last line the narrator says, without saying it, that he did not stand up to demonstrate any respect for these officers. He just did it out of habit. First person narrators say a lot without saying it. There is always an element of unreliability with first person. It’s not that the narrator is consciously lying or keeping information from you, like a classic “unreliable narrator”. But it’s that no one sees themselves as others see them. You might have a monstrous person who thinks their great, or a kind and creative person who thinks they’re worthless.

So that’s an exercise you can do with character, even a character you haven’t developed at all in a draft. Write a paragraph from different points of view showing the character doing or experiencing something. First an omniscient narrator, like in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*; then a witness—another character meeting or watching or reporting on them, like in *Dracula*; and then the character herself or himself narrator the event in first person, like in *The Universe versus Alex Woods*. And see which narrative voice shows the character in the way you want a reader to view them.

[music]

[26:30] Interviews

Now Alex Woods and the Baudelaire children are not villains. But Count Olaf is one of my favourite modern villains from children’s fiction. He’s superfun. I do like fun villains. I like writers who portray their monstrous characters in a fun way.

I asked some other authors about their favourite villains. Here’s Karen Krossing. She’s the author of 7 novels for kids and teens. You met her last week talking about settings, and here’s what she had to say about villains and other favourite fictional characters.

[27:05] Karen Krossing’s favourite characters

CA: Do you have a favourite fictional villain?

KK: I adore villains who are complex and layered and somewhat monstrous. Like Gollum in JRR Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. He’s literally at war with himself, and he’s capable of great villainy but we also understand how and why

he became a villain, so we feel for him. I like that opposition within villains like that.

CA: And have you created a villain?

KK: Yeah. My character Bog from the middle-grade novel titled *Bog* is a cave troll who is also at war with himself. He discovers that he is part human, but he hates humans, so it's this internal struggle. And I find villains like that are really interesting.

CA: Do you have some other fave characters from children's books?

KK: I really like Death as the narrator in Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. He's that same sort of thing. He literally takes life, but he's not doing it in a mean vicious way. It's something that must be done. That's just really interesting. I love monster characters a lot. So I guess they all have a sort of similar feel to them, the ones I'm drawn to.

[28:40] Monique Polak's favourite characters

And Monique Polak agrees that the gray areas are the most interesting. Monique is a teacher of English and Humanities and the author of 29 books for young readers. You met her last week talking about settings, and here she is talking about characters.

[music]

CA: Do you have a favourite fictional villain?

MP: I have a hard time thinking of one. The first one that came to mind was from *The Silence of the Lambs*, the evil guy.

CA: Hannibal Lector.

MP: Yeah, because he’s so smart. And so devious. But I don’t really like villains. You know, I’m not really into villains. I don’t really like a scary story. Things that interest me most are like internal. You know, I was thinking about Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Like what are our different sides that we grapple with. I really believe in that. It’s like a Jungian concept, anima-animus, the dark-the light. So I’m more interested in the internal than the external villain.

I was also thinking of the book from the Manitoba writer, *Story of a Heartless Girl*—I hope I’m getting the title right [*True Confessions of a Heartless Girl*]. Martha Brooks is the author. What’s interesting is that she’s heartless, she’s an unlikeable character. So that fascinates me. Because of course, in reading the story, you understand better. Too much good vs bad, doesn’t appeal to me, like the “bad guys” and the “good guys.” I’ve always been more interested in gray area.

CA: And do you have any favourite characters from children’s or YA fiction?

MP My specialty is *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. That’s what I did my university research on, and that’s my specialty in terms of teaching. So yeah, I really, I like Alice. Because she’s so curious and she’s so open. “Open” appeals to me, and it’s also what appeals to me about teenagers in general. I teach at Marianopolis in Montreal. I’m hooked on those kids because of the openness.

[30:35] Tim Wynne-Jones’ favourite characters

And here’s Tim Wynne-Jones talking about some of his favourite characters. You met him two weeks ago when he was talking about settings. He’s the author of 35 books for all ages, and he taught for 16 years at Vermont College in their “Writing for Children and Young Adults” MFA program.

CA: And do you have a favourite fictional villain?

TWJ: I think Mrs. Colter from *His Dark Materials* is splendid. I loved her in the book, in Philip Pullman’s trilogy. I loved her in the movie. She was one of the maybe two or three good things about the movie. I know that Philip Pullman thought that too. We’ve talked about it. And he said when he would be on the set, watching, if they were going to be shooting a scene with her, everything would be made ready, and he said she’d walk into the scene and the temperature would drop ten degrees. That’s a perfect definition of who Mrs. Colter is.

CA: Are there other favourite characters from children’s books?

TWJ: Well, I love Tommy in Brian Doyle’s *Angel Square*. That book hugely influenced my life as a children’s writer because I think when I read it, I thought, “Yeah, this is what I want to do. I want to write like this.” You can’t write like Brian Doyle. Only Brian Doyle can. But I love that book, and I love Tommy, who appears in other books as well.

And I love Ratty from *Wind in the Willows*. I think I just want his house, his bijou riverfront house, just sitting on the side of the river with a little rowboat to go out in. And he’s just a jolly character. He’s the opposite of me. He’s just jolly and packs really good picnics – gotta love that. He has a very small role in that book but I really love him.

[32:35] Karen Krossing on empathizing with monsters

Now, Manny’s villains don’t come in shades of gray. They’re all pretty despicable. But he’s telling a campfire tale. If you want to write something more literary, that probes the gray areas in which we really live, then you might show more of your

villain than just a silhouette. Empathy with your characters – even the unlikeable ones – is key to creating a story with impact. Karen Krossing agrees.

[music]

KK: I love writing monsters. I have a lot of empathy for monsters in movies and books. And for me they represent the other, the outsider. And I’ve felt that way all my life. Maybe many writers feel that way, we step outside and observe the world and write about it. I don’t know. But I’ll tell you a little story.

I first identified with monstrous creatures when I was in high school. So I’m in grade nine. I’m really small—less than five feet tall. I barely weigh 100 pounds. I’m painfully shy. I have this overactive imagination. And then when I hit five feet, I ban short jokes at home. But at school I got called “small” and “cute” a lot. Too much. And my rebellious streak took over and I began to hate being called small and cute, and the assumptions that went with it. And I began to tell everybody that I was actually very very large and hairy, at least on the inside. And that’s when my inner troll was born. And it’s a running joke in my family, “Karen is big and hairy.” So somewhere along the way, I just started associating with monsters.

When I saw *The Lord of the Rings* movie, in the mines of Moria there’s a troll who comes and attacks them, and I know he’s supposed to be the villain, but I’m just sort of looking at him – he’s got a chain around his neck – thinking, “Who chained you? How have you been treated? Why are you this way? Are you forced to fight? Do you want to fight?” And I tend to identify with those characters in other stories. So yeah, I write monsters.

CA: I like monster movies but I always feel sorry for the monster. Even in “Aliens,” there’s no reason to kill that creature’s eggs. Like why would you do that? Just leave that planet.

KK: Exactly.

CA: And it's right from the beginning, like when Gilgamesh and Enkidu go into the forest and kill the guardian of the forest, why? Why do you have to go kill somebody?

KK: Yeah.

CA: Heroes are generally just marauders in classic myth and monsters are just creatures living.

KK: Yeah. Maybe it's got its roots in colonialism and that sort of invading and overtaking. Yeah.

CA: And I'm sure it feels—you're scared to go and kill this monster. And you do it anyway, so you feel brave. And then you say, "Well, since I'm brave, I must be a hero." But no. You're just killing somebody that was minding their own business. ... Nonetheless, I do love monster movies.

KK: Oh yes. Zombies. Zombies are favourites these days. I don't know, all of them.
[music]

[35:45] Monique Polak on empathizing with characters

And Monique Polak agrees about probing the monstrous in ourselves when we write monstrous characters.

[music]

MP: I'm really interested in dreams. So I read a lot about dream theory and teaching about dreams and working creatively with dreams. And I remember reading that all the characters in a dream are part of you. I loved that when I read it, and I immediately made the connection to, yeah, just like when you write, all the characters are part of you. So if you write about a monster, you know, it's not

just the monster out there. It’s like, where’s the monster in us? You know, to know it’s not just—there’s a few exceptions like, okay, Hitler, right? That’s a monster beyond monsters. I don’t want to claim that’s alive in me. But there’s destruction, we’re capable of destruction, we’re capable of hate. I think that’s important to be aware of. It’s not just what’s out there.

[music]

[36:45] Tim Wynne-Jones on empathizing with characters

And Tim Wynne-Jones agreed that you must empathize with all your characters if you wish to write them well:

[music]

CA: It’s amazing how you love your characters.

TWJ: And actually, I love bad guys too. You kind of have to. It’s an old saying – I don’t know who first said it – but your protagonist can only be as good as your antagonist is bad. So if you make an antagonist who’s just a cypher, who’s just evil, villainous, mwa-haha, you know, that kind of stuff, that’s fine in a comic story, but in real life, your bad guy has to have as much motivation for what he or she is doing. Mrs. Colter, just to use that example, believes strongly in what she’s doing. And she does love her daughter. But she believes there’s a certain thing that she should be. And that makes her really frightening because she is very strong and very clever. And that makes for an extraordinary character.

But yeah, we live with these characters, don’t we? When I’m writing a book, when I’m in the thick of a book, my characters—all of them—are with me all the time. Like if I go shopping, they’re with me in the grocery store. They

couldn't go right now because of COVID. You're not allowed to go into stores with a bunch of people. [laughter] You have to go just by yourself.

[38:25] Advice for young writers on developing characters

Take the advice of my guest authors and probe the lives of those we consider monsters. Are they really? Are humans the good guys to anyone but us? We're monstrous to all the animals we eat, and to most of the creatures who are simply in our way.

Now, I might say, I'm going to retell the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu from the perspective of the Guardian of the Forest. Maybe I'd try to develop my characters first and see if a new plot will come to me.

Some authors develop a character in advance of drafting. That's not usually how I work. I get a feel for a character. Then the characters change as I write them – and they'll often change the plot I planned, which is very annoying. I've been writing a horror story and my characters are all telling me they don't want to die, so I'm having a very hard time killing them off. This happens. There will be arguments with your characters as you write.

I asked all my guests about the work they do to develop characters. Here's what Tim Wynne-Jones had to say:

[39:15] Tim Wynne-Jones on drafting to discover a character

CA: Before you begin drafting, do you do any character development exercises?

TWJ: Yeah, I was really interested to see that question because it's a favourite topic of mine. I know so many people develop a character in a notebook or in their journal, and I just don't understand that at all. To me, the primary way we

get to know a character is by what they say and what they do. I don't have to ever know what they look like, myself. They become an image in my head, but if you asked me a detailed question about that image, I wouldn't be able to answer it. If there's something very important about the character being diminutive or tall, if that's part of the story, then of course you have to say that. But I don't care what they look like. They come into existence for me by what they say and what they do.

The way I start on any novel I've ever started, I start with a scene that I just can't wait to write. Enough of it's there that I know I'm going to love sitting down and finding out exactly what happens in that scene. And of course it will include the protagonist. And what they say and what they do in that scene begins to be who they are. How do they respond to a given challenge? So I really love, as I'm starting a book, to give the character challenge upon challenge. A difficult conversation with a relative, a run-in with somebody they like or don't like. And what do they do? What is the way they handle that kind of stress? And if I like what they do or say, then I know that person just one more bit.

[music]

[41:00] Monique Polak on stealing characters

And Monique Polak had this to say.

[music]

CA: Do you do character outlines? Or, you know, some people write as their character in a diary or interview their characters...

MP: What I really do is steal. I steal people. People that I know, I take kids from my classes. Yeah, as one of my friends said, "All you do is rub out the serial

numbers." [laughter] I change a few major details so they won't sue me. Most of them never recognize themselves anyhow. But yes, I love people. I love observing people in every way, and small details about them. And I... I steal.

[music]

[41:45] Karen Krossing on observing setting as a character

Monique has been keeping a journal every day for 30 years. And all of my guests love to people-watch, to go places and write down their observations. Last week, Karen Krossing spoke about standing on street corners writing down observations about setting, and she'll do that sometimes from a character's point of view.

KK: When you've got that personal experience with a setting, it just makes it come alive. And the way the characters interact with it. And then the setting interacts with the characters and influences them, and so on. Yeah.

[music]

[42:20] Character Exercises to find plot

Next week you'll hear from other authors who do specific character development exercises. I do believe that those exercises can be very useful, for instance if you want to turn a short story into a novel or a novel into a series or a draft into a revision, and you need more plot. Then interviewing your character or writing their journal or making a character profile – all those exercises are very handy not so much to get a feel for your character but to give you plot ideas to challenge them. You might find out that your character is afraid of spiders. So then make them use the spider-filled outhouse at the creepy cabin. Or you might find out

that your character is the youngest of six. So you can have a family gathering scene where everyone treats her like a baby. Or you might find out that your character believes the world is fair and just. So you can have someone else take credit for his great idea.

We'll talk more about that in September on an episode getting ideas. For now if you don't have any ideas for characters at all, take Monique Polak's advice and steal a little. If you want to create a villain, start with someone you know, someone who's maybe aggressive and bossy, and exaggerate their qualities. Or start with someone you know who's meek and would never hurt a fly, and then put them in a situation where they think they have to fight for their life. Even better, start with one aggressive character and one timid character and put them together in some isolated setting. How one character reacts to the other will propel your story forward.

[43:45] Story Prompt: "The couple at Swimmer's Graveyard"

I had a friend when I was younger, Cora, who was very timid. And her boyfriend John was very aggressive, and together they were like the protagonist and antagonist in a story, usually a sad and repetitive story because life is like that. But things got a little more interesting when we all went to my cabin. This was long ago. I invited Cora, and John just kind of invited himself. And the whole time, John just kind of sat there while Cora fetched his dinner and his drink and his book. To be fair, he had his arm in a cast because he'd recently fallen off a bicycle. And he was really milking that. And he insulted the cabin a lot. "It's so small." Which it was, small, and it was really small with him in it.

So on the second day, we took the boat out to an island that has some woods and a big clearing and a firepit and a nice sandy beach. John swam a lot. Cora was afraid of water. She wasn't a good swimmer. In fact, I'm not sure she could swim at all. She wore her life jacket the whole time. She'd seen a woman drown in a motel pool when she was little and she never trusted water. She liked to look at it but she didn't like to swim.

And this island was actually called Swimmer's Graveyard by the locals because it has a really unexpected severe drop-off not far from shore and you cannot see it at all from the surface. You're wading happily and then you can take one more step and whoosh, you're suddenly in over your head. And this fact just delighted John. He would tread water just past the drop-off and shout to Cora, "Come on out!" He was just trying to get her in over her head. He was just that kind of guy.

So I just took off on my own after lunch and took some pictures of mushrooms because that's something I like to do. So I was in the wooded part of the island and I didn't really know what was going on in the clearing. And when I got back, they were both standing on shore and the boat was gone. It had been tied to a little birch sapling not far from the sandy part of the beach and there was still rope tied to the sapling but the boat was gone. And it wasn't even visible. Like it was completely gone, as if someone had towed it away.

It was Cora who had tied the boat. She was really good at knots. And John was saying, "You didn't tie it right. You let it get away." But she knew her knots – and this was before you could just look them up on a phone—and she said it had been tied in a rolling hitch, so if the boat had pulled, it just would have gotten

tighter and there was no way it could have come undone by itself. So she said, "Maybe there's someone else on the island."

And that was not a thought I wanted to entertain. Because it was a small island, and if there was someone on it, they were being really quiet. And we would have heard another boat drive up. The most logical conclusion was that the boat had just drifted.

But there were kayaks back at the cabin, so I said I would swim to the cabin and come back with the kayaks. So I gave Cora my camera and I took her life jacket. I'm not a great swimmer.

Cora really didn't want me to go. She looked so worried. But she *always* looked worried. She was a worrier. She kept saying, "I'm sorry," about losing my boat. And John kept saying, "You're always sorry."

It was true. Cora was always sorry. She'd been saying sorry for the whole two years they'd been dating. And I guess – I didn't know this at the time, but I guess while I was out taking pictures and they were alone at the firepit, and Cora was dousing the fire and John was whining about clouds coming in—I guess she had finally found the courage to tell him it was over, that she was going away to do her Masters the next week and she never wanted to see him again.

But I didn't know that she had told him that. I didn't know that when I swam away with her life jacket, and left the two of them alone on Swimmer's Graveyard, in the middle of nowhere, with clouds coming in, and that's your story prompt for today.

Write your own ending to Swimmer's graveyard. That is not a true story, by the way. I've never even met anyone named Cora in my life. But I have known

couples like John and Cora, and so I took that inspiration from real people and completely made stuff up. And you can do that too.

[48:00] Write your own tale

Take an anecdote from your own life and fictionalize that. Keep your eyes open as you walk around your street or your town and when you see someone do something odd or arresting, think, how could this be a character in fiction? You don't have to look far – yourself, your friends, your family, your pets – they all do odd, memorable things. Ask questions about them and their motivation and see what story you come up with.

If you need some help, you'll find a mini-lesson in developing a fictional character and a template for young writers on the website at CabinTales.ca.

And if you do write your own tale, send it to me by email to cabin@catherineausten.com and I'll consider reading it on the show in October.

[48:45] Monster movie line

I hope you enjoyed today's story, "The Spot." That's our second story in a row where fairly wicked people got their comeuppance. That's a classic theme in cabin tales. As a Hollywood monster-hunter once said, "Nasty little fellows such as yourself always get their comeuppance." And if you can tell me what monster movie that line is from, then you have seen it too many times, as have I.

[49:10] Thanks and coming up on the podcast

I want to thank today's guests – Tim Wynne-Jones, Monique Polak, and Karen Krossing. Next week, we'll have Episode 2.5, "Author Interviews about Character."

My guests next week are Caroline Pignat, Rachel Eugster, Amanda West Lewis, Lori Weber, and Jan Coates. I've been so fortunate to have these eight great authors with me all month. You'll hear more clips from them, and from a whole new batch of guest authors, in September.

And that's all for this week. Subscribe to Cabin Tales on Podbean, iTunes, Google Podcasts, or your favourite streaming platform. I'm Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.

[crickets]