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When I was about as tall as my father's elbow as he judiciously bent it in the nine taverns of our town, I saw a lot of character on display. Among his distinctive western aspects--he'd been a homestead kid, broncbuster, sheepherder, short-order cook--my father was a haymaker: a haying contractor, a kind of free-lance foreman, who would hire his own crew and put up ranchers' hay crops.

Those small-town Montana saloons where I was lucky enough to tag along with him were his hiring halls, and as he would sound out a hayhand on whether the man had ever handled the reins of WORKHORSES, QUITE A RITUAL OF SIZING UP WENT ON.

The talk may have been of haystacks and summer wages, but the undercurrent was character--my father always having to gauge whether the man sipping beer with him was going to be reliable or a drunk, a good worker or, as was said, so lazy he would starve to death in bed in the bunkhouse. Of course, from my point of view as an eight- and nine- and ten-year-old, the more my dad made bad guesses about the character of the person on the bar stool next to him, the better. What kid wouldn't rather be around a breezy faker whose team of horses runs away with him two minutes after he climbs onto the hayrake/ than a good solid silent workman probably named Swede?

2A follows

So, you can^{see} that it was back there that I developed an abiding interest in the trait
called character and, for a guy who has ended up making up stories about people,
its even more seductive flowering into a plural form, characters.

2B follows →

~~workhorses, quite a ritual of sizing up went on. So, it was back there as I subversively hoped for my elder to make a rare bad guess and hire some breezy faker whose team of horses would run away with him the instant he climbed onto the hay rake, rather than signing up a solid silent workman probably named Swede, that I developed an abiding interest in the trait called character and its even more seductive flowering into a plural form, characters.~~

→ I shall always envy the advantages of imagination-stretching that my ~~dad~~^{FATHER} had by operating there in beerstool reality. There was the time he could not resist hiring a guy known as Raw Bacon

Slim, / the type of moniker which no editor will ever let me invent
for one of my fictional beings. Nonetheless, the realm of each
novel I attempt has to be populated from somewhere. By rough
count, I figure I've now employed 360 characters in seven works
- SOON TO BE EIGHT.
of fiction. I grant that there are scenes in *War and Peace* and
Moby Dick where there seems to be a cast that size occupying a
single page / (and that doesn't count the armies and the whales), /
but my bunch have been sorting themselves out, down through
their generations and across landscapes from New Zealand to
Sitka to Harlem, as steadily as I've been able to foreman them for
the past quarter century. Fathering and for that matter mothering

entire populations of books probably is beyond reasonable
explanation even for someone who earns a living by making
 everything up, but now that I am ~~starting~~ ^{IN} the novel-making
 process for the eighth time, in my case I can delineate ^{FOR YOU} that I begin
 by handing out names, noises, and noses.

First, names. Or as I go about it, first names before last, way
 before.

What to call each of them, the sudden new citizens who need
 passports onto my pages? The literary slate is not permissively
 blank. "Ishmael" of course is taken, "Emma" the shared property
 of the long-established firm of Austen and Flaubert, and so on up

to the perils of trespassing into the spooky Kingdom of "Carrie."

The mouth magic, though, that gives each of us identification to the rest of humankind constantly flourishes and renews there in the alphabetic combinations we are forever tinkering with, in the inexhaustible prop shop called language. And so, to an extent that seems to startle academic questioners, my characters' names tend to be determined more by linguistic chimings than, say, mythological implications or the nearest phone book.

"America. Montana. Those words with their ends open."

Thus mused my narrator, Angus McCaskill, in *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* as he and a lifelong chum set forth from Scotland in

1889 to take up homesteads in the American West. Not
 accidentally, the same aspirant vowel of promise, hope, boundless
 prospect, characterizes the romantic prospects whom Angus and
 other yearning hearts meet up with in that book and its successors:
 Anna, Marcella, Leona, Lexa, and to add a slightly chestier note
WITH AN 'H' ON THE END,
 of unconformity, Mariah, The men of these women's lives tend
 to come with conclusive consonants: Isaac, Jick, Alec, Mitch, and
 another round of unconformity, Riley.

Naturally, generational attention must be paid in this naming
 game. The lovestruck young couple I married off beside the
 splashy waterfall in the lobby of the Holiday Inn in Billings, in the

course of the 1989 doings of *Ride With Me*, *Mariah Montana*,
had to be Darcy and Jason--not, say, Anna and Isaac.

Except for Jick McCaskill, who narrates two of my novels and
fairly cheerfully accepts having been “dubbed for the off
card...the jack that shares only the color of the jack of trumps,”
nicknames are a spice cabinet in my fiction rather than a raw-
bacon larder. Mostly I sprinkle them on minor characters. Good
Help Hebner, whom you may bet isn't. Birdie Hinch, reputed
chicken thief. But who knows, there may yet be a further story in
ONE OF THOSE ODD TRICKS OF CHANCE
~~a~~ ~~Borgesian fact~~ observed while hanging around my dad's
hayhands: that in a crew of eight to ten men, two or three are

likely to have the same first name and nicknames therefore become primary. Waiting somewhere is that Double W ranch crew I long ago created in *English Creek* which boasts Mike the Mower, Long Mike, and Plain Mike...

So, name affixed, what noise in the world must a character make to not only stand up over time but continue to march, cavort, and sing rowdily in the reader's mind? Which is to say, what is the voice, the characteristic sound or memorable mannerism, of the person talking on the page?

Please meet, ~~as I am only now doing~~, Oliver, widower father of three in my next book. ~~All I know of him so far~~ is what my

THE FIRST THING I EVER KNEW

narrator tells me on the second page of manuscript: "Father had a short sniffing way of laughing, as if anything funny had to prove it to his nose first." That's a start, though, in giving readers a ~~couple of~~ year from now something to remember Oliver by.


Occasionally all the organ stops can be pulled out: the aforementioned Good Help Hebner has a bray that "would blow a crowbar out of your hand." But generally small auditory touches count most effectively toward larger character dimension, I believe. Perhaps a word that a character owns, unobtrusively but consistently, throughout the story. Monty Rathbun THE BLACK RANCH HAND TURNED SINGER IN MY MOST RECENT BOOK, *Prairie Nocturne* still says "piana," bunkhouse style, when he is standing

next to the swank instrument in Carnegie Hall. And to all practitioners of fiction, there is forever the example of that first draft of *A Christmas Carol* in which Scrooge scoffs at the holiday with a mere "Humbug!" and then ^{CHARLES} Dickens reconsiders and dabs on the single-syllable bit of voice polish that has kept his crotchety naysayer alive and unforgettable for 160 years, "Bah!"


// THE PERSONAL MANNER OF A CHARACTER
 If ~~voice~~ comes out on the page as vocals, physical appearance perhaps presents the melody line. As the example of Oliver indicates, problematic as they are for the novelist who has already reached into that bin several books' worth, noses have to be faced.

Also eyes, ears, hairline, the whole physiognomy, and beyond that, lo, the soul.


Sheer economy is sometimes best. In *Typhoon*, all we ever know or need to know about the waiting wife of the magnificently phlegmatic sea skipper MacWhirr is when Joseph Conrad tells us: “The only secret of her life was her abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good.”

Conversely, in *The All of It*, Jeannette Haien’s compact  marvel of storytelling, the fullness of description is glorious:

“Kevin: with his straight, light, soft hair (the merest breeze would randomly part it); his blue eyes that tended easily to water

over; the mould of his features expressive more of determination than of intelligence; his nimble-jointed body (he could go up a ladder and come down it with a  crazy ease that drew smiles)..."

That's only half of the descriptive paragraph, but already you feel you've known this loosemade Irish farmer for, well, half your life.

12A follows 

Here's a first glimpse of one of ^{my} own all-time favorite characters, and wouldn't you know it, he's an Oregonian. I sometimes dig around in old photos in the dustiest parts of libraries, and on this occasion I hit gold, in a set of photos Dorothea Lange took during the Depression, when she was documenting the lives of migrant workers and other poor folk for the Farm Security Agency. Her eastern Oregon series was not as famous as some of her iconic photographs taken in the American South, but it's potent stuff. I was instantly taken with this kid--identified only as "Boy of the Cleaver family, Malheur County, October 1939"--and if any of you would like a closer look, I'll have this during the conversation and book-signing afterward.

The wonderful mug of this boy, I borrowed to put on Ray Heaney, the best friend of my teen-age narrator, Jick McCaskill, in English Creek. Ray Heaney is a mid-range minor character in that book, but Jick found him unforgettable from the moment he saw him, and here he comes:

12 B follows →

"He was a haunting kid to look at. His eyes were within long deep-set arcs, as if always squinched the way you do to thread a needle. And curved over with eyebrows which wouldn't need to have been much thicker to make a couple of respectable blond mustaches. And then a flattish nose which, wide as it was, barely accommodated all the freckles assigned to it. When Ray really grinned-- I didn't see that this first day, although I was to see it thousands of times in the years ahead-- deep slice-lines cut his cheeks, out opposite the corners of his mouth. Like a big set of parentheses around the grin. His lower lip was so full that it too had a slice-line under it. This kid looked more as if he'd been carved out of a pumpkin than born."

12c follows →

12c
/ Call me analog, but I believe memorable fictional creation is
usually best served by physical magnitudes rather than minimalist
such as this Dorothea Lange treasure,
digits of dis and data. Archival photos, turns of phrase ("slim as a
was how I described a Harlem Renaissance figure in Prairie Nocturne
clarinet") that simply pop to mind, revelatory glimpses across a
room--the supply of characteristics leading toward character is as



broad as a writer's experience and as deep as he cares to delve.

Of course, some rules or at least strictures of common sense apply. I never use my friends; and relatives, I say, are best saved for memoirs. Nor, except in minor roles, do I employ actual historical personalities--in most cases, they carry too many

awkward truths to wear a fictional guise convincingly. But

virtually all else is fair game. Case in point: ^{A YEAR OR SO AGO} ~~recently~~ I was in a

Montana establishment not unlike those my father frequented on

his hiring forays, when in came a startlingly long-faced leathery

rancher. As soon as I was decently out of sight of him, that face

entered my notebook: "long thin nose, wrinkles running down

cheeks; like a copper coin a bit melted."

I leave you with one guess as to what Oliver now looks like.

Thanks for listening, and another fine evening in Portland.