

Character Acting out of Character Is Just Wrong ☺

By Rita Award-winning author Dianna Love Snell

Consider a forty-five-year-old widow who had been a stay at home for the past 22 years, baking cookies for her school and volunteering for charity work. Her two sons are grown and have moved away. Add to the mix that she's five-foot-six-inches and average weight and favorite past time is tending her roses.

Would you expect a story to open with her dodging bullets in a gunfight? And doing a pretty awesome job of handling an AK-47? No?

Then you just stereotyped that woman in your mind. We all do it at any given time no matter how open minded we are. It's natural to make assumptions based on appearances and general information.

So was this woman "acting out of character?"

Not if the situation has been properly set up and the character has true motivation for her actions. This gives us a couple things to think about. First – the character must stay in character. So if this woman has never handled a gun in her life, she is way out of character on two accounts – she's shooting a weapon and with professional expertise.

But what if this woman had a life no one really knew about before she met and married her husband? What if she'd been in undercover work and had a traumatic situation that caused her to "disappear" from that world permanently – or so she'd thought? She goes on to become the consummate mother and wife, but not a meek one. Notice I never said she was meek, just gave her "exterior" description. Someone has found her and wants her dead, casting her in a dangerous situation she is actually trained to handle.

Something sent her on this path in life. To say she just woke up one day and decided to be a special ops agent is flimsy. So first figure out who your character is then look at the interesting ways you can use her abilities.

When creating a character, dig deeper than just how difficult her childhood was and why she has a chip on her shoulder. Find out what it was in her personality that became a "core belief." Does she like people to stop by unexpectedly because her parents had an open home filled with family and visitors or is she wary of anyone who shows up unexpectedly because she never knew what kind of person would come looking for her criminal father?

I joke sometimes that I "take my characters out with me" when I leave the house. But it's actually true. When you're grocery shopping, ask what your character would buy that's different from your tastes...and why? When you run into a strange person who either amuses or angers you, ask how your character would react to the same person.

When you plan a trip, ask if your character would be anal about every detail, prefer no schedule or a mix of both ways. The next time someone comes to your door soliciting, ask if your character would turn down the offer outright or decide to purchase. If she did purchase, what made the decision for her? What if the sales person had been a different gender or age?

The more you ask, the deeper you'll go, the better the character. Ask the same question time and again until you hit on something that feels real. And if you plan to put this person in two conflicting environments, make sure this person would react the same regardless of the situation.

Keeping a character in character means consistent reactions.

Now go shopping and find something fun for your character. 😊

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