How Much of You is in Your Fiction Characters ?

As fiction writers, we create characters who have specific purposes in our stories. They create conflict and tension – necessary ingredients for fiction.

So, are characters just an extension of the author, or are they free and independent persons within the story acting and speaking on their own? Do the characters reflect the author's political viewpoint, religion, race, sexual orientation, and such? Or are characters free to be whatever they need to be?

A fellow author writes war stories with great plots. He is a Christian believer, so the hero of his stories is a Christian believer who is careful about his language. And the author has kept graphic language from all his characters throughout his books. He does not want his characters' language to reflect badly on him.

When I create characters, I let each character speak and act consistent with his (or her) personality. Each one has a voice and none of them seem to care that I'm writing down what I hear them say and even what they think at times. Rather than carefully crafting each word of conversation, I observe their actions and listen to the words that flow from their lips in each situation. Some of my characters never speak an off-colored word, while others can barely speak a sentence without a foul word or offensive phrase. To restrict a character's language would rob the story of everyday realism and the emotional expressions of excited utterances found in stressful situations that are at the heart of action / adventure novels.

Apart from clues in the brief biography at the back of the book, the author's personal beliefs and views should be a mystery to his readers. The author should not be judged by the language or the actions of his characters. Dark and evil villains who commit violent crimes do not indicate the author is a dark and evil person capable of violent acts. Nor do heroes who are kind and compassionate mean the author writes from only a pure heart.

Fiction writers are like parents when it comes to their characters. Some are helicopter moms hovering over and tightly controlling every move of her children. Others take a more hands-off approach and wait to see what happens. There is no right or wrong way to create and develop fiction characters. Each author must decide how much of "you" that you want to put into your characters.

Marshall Ginevan