

Notes from the Whole Novel Workshop

Desire. Belief. Wound.

Novel Writing 101 says that characters have to want something, so they can fail to get it, so there can be conflict. At the May Whole Novel Workshop focused on fantasy, Franny Billingsley gave a terrific lecture on character analysis, and it stated with not with *want*, but *desire*.

Desire. Sometimes writers use the word *want* in this context. We've all heard this reaction in workshop, "So, what does your character want?" I love Franny's use of the term *desire* instead. It automatically ups the stakes. What does a character desire most in the world? What is the desire that can drive the narrative of a 200+ page novel? Ultimately, the desire should be bold and difficult, maybe even impossible, to obtain. It can also change as the story progresses. That's what keeps readers turning the page.

Belief. I originally heard this term from writer Kathi Appelt several years ago, and Franny

followed up with this same idea. It's a good one! Belief, or controlling belief, is the single belief that rules a character's worldview. In my own novel *The Adventurous Deeds of Deadwood Jones*, the main character's controlling belief is that people are not trustworthy. Every decision or choice a character has is then filtered through that controlling belief until something happens to change it. Again, this gives more opportunity for wrong decisions and poor choices, and hence heightened tension for a character.

Wound. Related a bit to controlling belief, a character's wound is self-image or emotional vacuum in his or her identity. In Franny's novel *Chime*, the wound is that Briony believes she injured her sister in a fit of witchy rage. She spends a good part of the book trying to atone for her actions, which drives plenty of choices in the book.

Desire. Belief. Wound. Do your characters have all three?

Giving a Reading?

This month *Poet & Writer's* offers a good article on how to give a reading. It's not as simple as it sounds. I was once on a panel at a book festival, and one guy was pitiful. Not feel sorry for him pitiful. *Why did you even bother* pitiful. I had the unique position of watching the crowd's faces. Wow. Turns out the guy's book was pretty good, but the reading? A sleeper. So how do you give a good, entertaining reading?

Limit the introduction and set up.

The audience, like the reader, can follow along pretty easily with just the slightest information. Keep it on a need to know basis.

It's all about acting with your voice.

Read your novel using all the voices and expression you can muster. It will only sound weird to you, honest. The audience will like it.

Rehearse. It seems obvious, but you can't do practice too much. Try in front of a mirror or in your car (but don't read and drive). Also, time your reading to know how long it is. Finally, record yourself. You will see immediately what sections need more work and practice.



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For this issue, I thought it would be good to link to some interesting blog posts from past faculty and teaching assistants at the Whole Novel Workshop.

✓ **Karyn Henley** has been both student and teaching assistant at the workshop. In a recent blog post, she writes about accepting rejections. Now I really do think writing and publishing are a lot more about tenacity than talent! [Accepting Rejection](#)

✓ **Janet Fox** writes some terrific tips for authors who want to use Facebook more effectively. Who doesn't? This post comes in two parts and includes lots of great information.

[FB Hints for Authors](#)
[More FB Hints for Authors](#)

✓ **Sarah Aronson**, faculty member for last year's WNW for Middle Grade Readers, writes about knowing your own process. It's a quick post that says so much about getting it done! [Process](#)

✓ **Augusta Scattergood** will be a teaching assistant in November at the WNW for historical fiction. Augusta's been on a busy tour schedule this spring with her debut novel *Glory B*. I love the

names in this book! (Did I mention the main character is named Gloriana Hemphill?) Here's a post about how Augusta works on naming characters. [Naming Names](#)

Doing The Research

Even if you are writing fiction, you have to do the research. Begin by reading around on a topic. Look for books at the library or read online articles. What should you look for?

Vocabulary. Begin to collect, or scrape, vocabulary and slang that might be useful for a character in the novel. Sometimes you can do this just by eavesdropping at Starbucks or at a favorite local coffee shop, but sometimes, particularly if a character has some specific skill or talent, you will want to search for both terms and context. If you're writing historical fiction, go back to primary sources like diaries, letters, and newspapers.

Realistic details. When I wrote *Long Gone Daddy* I had to

know if a full sized casket would fit in the cargo bay of a 1972 Chevrolet station wagon. I called a funeral home, and searched on line for Chevy wagon cargo specs. I never found them. So I called a local car dealer where I live and asked for the service manager. He was very knowledgeable and, in fact, owned a '73 wagon and knew the design of the car hadn't changed from the previous year. He went home and measured the inside of his wagon and called me the next day with the exact dimensions. The casket would fit with room to spare!

Names. Sometimes you can find inspired names from reading newspapers, encyclopedias, comic books, or other research texts. In this case, odd or unusual sources are best.

Inspiration and ideas. The fun part about research is you never know what you will find. If I'm writing historical fiction, I always want to know the weather of the time period that I'm writing. This helps open up plot ideas and setting details, plus it immerses me in the world of the book.

Even if you're writing fiction, research is key!