



Those Who Forget History
Using Backstory to Enhance Your Novel
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Lesson One – What is Backstory?

“In the writers mind, even a backstory has a backstory.”
— *Terry O'Neal*

According to Merriam-Webster, backstory is “*a story that tells what led up to the main story or plot.*” More simply put, backstory is everything that happened to your characters before the story began.

Think about your closest friends, the people you know best, the ones you grew up with. They all have a backstory, and chances are you know at least some of it. It’s what shaped them as a person, what made them the way they are, for better or for worse. Their sense of humor, their seriousness, their recklessness, all stems from their backstory.

You may not know every single detail of your friends’ lives, but when you’re creating a character, it’s best to know as much about their past as possible.

No matter how important your story’s plot is—and let’s face it, where would a story be without plot?—it is the characters who live it. And the more backstory you know about the characters, the more depth he or she has.

Begin the process by creating a master list of all the characters in your novel. This includes your main characters, secondary characters, minor characters and walk-ons. Once you’ve chosen names for them (names can affect backstory too), divide them into two categories, those with significant backstory and those with more trivial backstory. Obviously, those with “significant backstory” will be your hero/heroine and any secondary characters who will play a major part in the story.

The ones with less backstory include walk-on characters and minor secondary characters. Their backstory need not be as extensive as that of your main characters, but you may want to explore it nonetheless if it helps immerse the reader more fully into the story.

Once you decide who your character is (e.g., an auto mechanic, a Wall Street tycoon, a shy young debutante or a dishonored duke), think about *why* he is who he is. What experiences made him that way? Was he raised in a big, loving family, or was she an orphan? Who are his friends, and how did his contemporaries see him? Was he exposed to trauma as a child? Was she pampered and spoiled by doting parents?

How did these experiences shape your characters? No matter what happened to them in the past, there are different ways they might have reacted to any experience. It might be positive or negative, surprising or expected. It might make them stronger, or it might devastate them so severely they never recover.

For example, a woman who behaves recklessly, going from one man to another, taking foolish risks, might have grown up in a strict, religious family. A man forced to take responsibility for his mother and his many siblings, might look for a mate he can take care of. On the other hand, he might avoid marriage and children altogether. A man who was physically abused as a boy might grow up to be an abuser himself, or he might be so afraid to hurt anyone that others might easily take advantage of him.

Once you've decided on your characters' backstories, you're well on your way to creating an in-depth character your readers will care about.

Assignment: Create a backstory for one of your characters.