Lesson Three

Layer 3: Getting to Know Your Character(s)

In the last lesson, we spent time honing in on the decision to write in Deep POV. If it's the right choice for your story or not. However, you may not feel ready to make the ultimate decision yet until you've explored all the layers of Deep POV.

That brings us to our third layer of Deep POV: Getting to Know Your Character.

In order to properly write in Deep POV, you need to know your character intimately. Because if you don't, your reader won't, and then unfortunately the depth of that POV will struggle to shine through.

I'm not one of those editors who believes you need a full backstory, interview, and astrological sign and Myers-Briggs test reference for your character in order to know them intimately. I believe there are four main elements that create the basis for a well-developed character. And thus, the basis for a compelling character arc.

Recall in last lesson that I asked, "Whose story is this?" Whoever you wrote down for that needs a full character arc/journey. Otherwise, it's not *their* story. And all stories are by far the most engaging to readers when it's framed within at least one character's journey.

What are the four key elements for a well-developed character?

Goal, motive, flaw, and stakes.

The first time I taught this class, I didn't have a fun acronym for this, like Deb Dixon has with GMC (goal, motive, conflict), then one of my students gave me the perfect one: Write a Good Manuscript for F^'s Sake! I actually have an entire course built on this concept alone but I will still try my best to break these elements down for you in as much depth as I can.

I believe these four elements directly lead to a truly compelling character journey that can brightly shine with the use of Deep POV.

In this case, think of Deep POV as the way your character is heard. Your story features them for a reason. *This* is their life story. Don't they deserve to share it in as intimate a setting as possible? Don't you want you readers to get lost in their journey?

That's one of the reasons I love Deep POV so much. I love getting lost in a character's mind, world, and view point.

Before I get ahead of myself, let's go over these four elements:

Goal – What your character wants/is working toward.

Motive – Why the character wants this goal. What is their reason for pursuing it? If you feel like you are touching on a surface level reason, go deeper. This is their driving force. The goal is what they are driving toward, but the motive is what fuels them.

Flaw – The character's deep rooted way of viewing life based in fear, a specific memory, or something they've internalized. Something that gets in their way often—a view/fear/issue they need to overcome.

Stakes – What your character stands to lose on an external (world) level and internal (personal) level if they fail to reach their goal.

Many of us will receive feedback at some point that says, "I need more voice." Maybe the reader doesn't feel like they know your character well, or they don't really "hear" them in the writing.

In my opinion, adding voice does not come from picking out characteristics of a character. It comes from knowing their character journey so completely that if you tried to put another character in that same journey it wouldn't sync up because another character would make completely different choices for completely different reasons. There'd be no way the story would turn out the same. The plot wouldn't be the same.

In a plot-based story, especially mysteries or crime fiction, there ultimately would likely be some plot points that happen no matter who the character is. However, it's *how* the character responds and interacts with those plot points that keeps readers invested in the outcome.

In order to show this to you, I'm going to pull from one of my own WIPs.

This is from a contemporary romance in which I have two main POV characters (dual POV)—the hero and heroine—and each of them use Deep POV.

Here's the brief tagline so you get the gist of the story:

Con-artist Lizzy is on the run and flees the country via cruise ship. But undercover FBI agent Carter is on board, investigating the same criminal escape ring that got her a ticket to freedom. When she's found out, she must work with Carter to take down the ring, or she'll be in cuffs by the time they dock.

Heroine: Lizzy
Hero: Carter

Lizzy is determined to escape the country [**goal**] because one, she needs a ticket to freedom since she is a wanted felon, and two her husband, aka her latest mark, has found out her secret and he's even more dangerous than jail time [**motive**]. Lizzy has a chance at freedom working aboard a cruise ship, but she won't have that chance [**internal stakes**] if she can't overcome her desperate desire to con sexist men aboard the ship [**flaw**]. But Lizzy befriends many of the other "criminals" on board—many who are like her; who made the wrong choices for a chance at living a halfway decent life—and by helping to take down the crime ring, she'll ruin the lives of others she cares about [**external stakes**].

Carter goes undercover on a cruise ship that's running a crime ring to get intel and gather evidence to take them down [**goal**], and by doing so, he'll finally get that promotion he's been aiming for [**motive**]—the role that will finally get him out of the undercover gig [**internal stakes**]. To Carter, continuing work as undercover FBI is bound to lead to the death of more innocents [**external stakes**], just like last time. Deaths that rest entirely on his hands [**flaw**].

This is still a work in progress, so it may be a tad messy, but by sharing this I'm hoping how you can at least see that the goals have deeper internal motives behind them which strengthen the need to reach the goal. However, the flaws of these characters consistently keep them from reaching their main goals. And the stakes are what they stand to lose if they can't reach their goals.

If I were to change the motive for Lizzy's goal, say for example she was determined to escape the country because it was the only way to protect her unborn child from living a life of crime (or living growing up with a mother in prison or dead), then Lizzy's actions in the story would be very different. How she'd react to FBI, how she would interact to others, how guarded she would be, etc. There would be a different tone to her and her actions. The course of the story might change, even if the main plot points didn't. How she'd worked through every obstacle would have a different approach than the original version I wrote.

The deeper the motive for a character's goals, the more their "voice" will come through because every action and piece of dialogue will be with that main goal/motive in mind.

Also, having a specific flaw/fear is what will shape a character as well. In my story, I have it that Lizzy cannot, no matter what, stop herself from conning terrible men out of their money to teach them a lesson. This means she doesn't know when to stop, how to stop, and what her life would look like if she did stop. It gets her into bad situations (i.e. her dangerous husband who is after her, then later on the ship when FBI catches her in the act). Her flaw puts her at risk. By the end of the book, she needs to learn how to back off when necessary and not commit crimes in order to get a message across. If she can't overcome this flaw, she'll never be able to live the "free" life she wants, and she *will* end up in jail or dead.

Consider how the example of Lizzy's flaw is so intricately tied to everything else. **Those four elements don't function properly without each other, nor do they function well if they aren't fully fleshed out. All pieces intertwine. <u>And with it, your character is born.</u>**

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Homework

For your homework, I want you to apply Goal, Motive, Flaw/Fear, and Stakes to your Deep POV characters. If you plan to write a character in Deep POV—or even just limited third without diving fully into Deep POV—write out these four key elements for **each one.**

<u>Main Character/Protagonist:</u>

Goal –

Motive –
Flaw –
Stakes –
Then, use this template as a general guideline to piece it all together:

MC wants [goal] because [motive], but their [flaw/fear] gets in their way. If they can't overcome their [flaw] to reach their goal, they will lose/fail/etc. [internal and external stakes].

Character 2 or Antagonist

Goal –
Motive –
Flaw –
Stakes –

Then, use this template as a general guideline to piece it all together:

Character 2 wants [goal] because [motive], but their [flaw/fear] gets in their way. If they can't overcome their [flaw] to reach their goal, they will lose/fail/etc. [internal and external stakes].

Continue to do this for all POVs characters in your book.

Then, if you are comfortable, share your responses with the class.