

# Creating Character Sympathy

---



from the blog series

by Jordan McCollum

<http://JordanMcCollum.com>

## Introduction

Have you ever found yourself reading a book and thinking “Seriously, is this character from another planet? How could s/he do this? This book sucks!” Or have you ever gotten your writing back from a reader, only to find that they don’t like or even understand your characters and their actions?

I think we all have this experience at least once. Until it happened to me, I kind of assumed that people automatically just identified with the protagonist of a story. Not true. Creating character sympathy—and sympathetic characters—is a careful art.

After much research, I’m ready to share that careful art with you. At the end of each section, there are some questions for thought. If you’d like to join in the discussion on the blog, please do. Just click on the heading of any section to jump to that post.

I hope these articles and questions, as well as the recommended resources, help you in creating characters your readers identify with!

Cover images by [Michal Zacharzewski](#) and [Sanja Gjenero](#)

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Creating sympathetic characters.....	4
Strong characters, sympathetic characters.....	5
Struggling characters, sympathetic characters.....	6
How to pile on the pain.....	9
Perfection isn't appealing.....	11
Not by Strength Alone.....	12
Techniques for sympathetic characters.....	15
Sympathy.....	15
Identification.....	16
Empathy.....	16
Inner conflict.....	17
Creating sympathetic characters - techniques in action.....	18
Making readers love (or at least understand) unlovable characters.....	21
Why I love Burn Notice.....	25
Sympathetic characters: more resources.....	28

## Creating sympathetic characters

Once upon a time, I wrote a novel where the main character wasn't likeable. Well, she was—I liked her. But the way I'd written her made her come off as disdainful and arrogant—not qualities I really meant for her personality to convey. So I read everything I could on sympathetic characters and tried very hard to fix her. (One critique partner was adamant that I had not, but no one else objected.)

*What does it mean to have a "sympathetic" character?* It means that **the reader can relate to him/her**. The reader feels the things s/he feels, and the reader understands the difficulties that character is going through. (It *doesn't* always mean, however, that the reader likes the character, though that can be helpful.)

It often seems like sympathizing with main characters (who aren't villains or anti-heroes, at least) is automatic—but **anyone who's ever written an unsympathetic character quickly learns that it's not**. Sometimes we writers think we're doing something avant-garde by creating someone as alienated/sarcastic/cruel/apathetic/distant as a "real" person—but most of the time, we learn that this "cutting-edge" technique has been tried before. Without success.

I didn't really think I was being avant-garde or even cool when I created my unsympathetic character—I accidentally focused too much on characteristics or behaviors that made my trying-to-keep-her-cool character was all but condescending.

Months after all my research to fix her, all that information suddenly crystallized. There are only two things that make a character sympathetic: **strength and struggles**. The character must have both in some form.



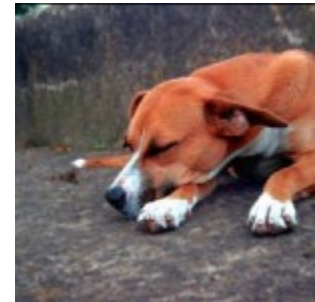
So we're going to be talking about *strength, struggles and sympathy for characters!*

Photo credit: [Michal Zacharzewski](#)

## Strong characters, sympathetic characters

**All characters must have some strength.** I'm sure you know that doesn't mean they have to be able to benchpress a Beemer. Instead, there has to be some *strength of character*, some inner resource, some poise—*something* to show us why we would want to sympathize with, or look up to, or just flat out BE this person.

Kindness to small children and animals isn't enough—just about anybody but the absolute worst psycho- or sociopath is nice to his mother and his babies. Saving orphans from a burning building isn't going to be enough on its own, either.



Then what does count? **Something indomitable within the character.** What makes him get up in the morning? What is her ultimate goal in life? What does he do when his wife is in danger and all hope of saving her is lost? How does she react when someone comes between her and the man she loves? What does he do (or want to do) when his boss/his mother/the woman he loves says, "Take a hike"?

The answer isn't going to be the same for every character—but how many of us really want to read about someone who would answer "nothing" to any one of those questions? While we do understand someone who struggles, someone with a sad past, someone facing a difficult choice, letting your character just roll over and take it is intensely frustrating to a reader (hello book-hurling!).

In short, when it comes to sympathetic characters, **no sad sacks need apply.**

One of the greatest types of strength is **the courage to go on in the face of adversity**. And every main character should be facing adversity. Next week, we'll take a look at making our characters struggle.

**What kind of strengths do you like to see in characters? What kind of strengths do you give your characters? What are your favorite characters' strengths?**

Photo credit: [Andrea Hernandez](#)

## Struggling characters, sympathetic characters

While [sympathetic characters must have strength](#), they need more than just moral or physical perfection to get us, the reader, on board. For readers to truly identify with them, **all characters need to struggle**. (I doubt I need to clarify this, but just in case: *struggling with how incredibly awesome s/he is doesn't count*.)

These struggles can (and should) be tied to the plot—the character should work against the antagonist, whether a person or an impersonal force. The antagonist, especially at the beginning, should actually *win* sometimes. Why? Well, for one thing, we're cultured to side with the underdog, the Cinderella story, the strong person who has been wronged. As editor/author Alicia Rasley points out, quite frankly, "We sympathize with struggle."

So what kind of struggles should we give them? Like I mentioned, they should be facing some sort of antagonist—and *possibly losing*. In her article "[Sympathy without Saintliness](#)," Alicia uses the example of the famous heroine Scarlett O'Hara:

Whether we like Scarlett O'Hara or not (and we probably don't early in the book), we sympathize with her when her impassioned declaration to Ashley (and his wussy rejection of her) turns out to be overheard by, of all people, the arrogant Rhett Butler. The

anguish... the embarrassment! We know just how she feels, and somehow we feel even more because our sympathy is unwilling, because we don't WANT to identify with this snotty little flirt. And we don't identify with her... that is, until something bad happens to her that we can actually imagine happening to us.

The key is— we have to know what it's like, or be able to imagine what it's like, to be in this situation.



But there's more. The character has to squirm. The character has to be in difficulty. The character has to care.

However, the most sympathetic characters aren't saints struggling solely against (obviously evil) external antagonists—**they also have internal conflict**. Some of the greatest, most compelling characters are those that struggle against some part of them that doesn't want to do what we all know they should—for reasons we know and understand (it's hard, it risks life and limb, etc.).

But, as Alicia says, **"it's the STRUGGLE that makes the difference."**

Amen!

**What kind of struggles do you give your characters? How do your favorite literary characters struggle? What do you struggle with in creating sympathetic characters? ;)**

*Photo by [Kat Jackson](#)*

## How to pile on the pain

One of the first techniques we master in creating sympathetic characters is knowing that [characters have to have problems](#). And they have to be major problems—**something that they'll really struggle with, things that appear insurmountable**.

The temptation, then, can be to take that to the extreme. If some suffering makes our characters sympathetic, doesn't a lot of suffering make them even more sympathetic?

Not always. Sometimes, as they say, *more is just more*.

One of the ways we try to show characters suffering to help build sympathy is *through their backstory*. We show them growing up, or use flashbacks and memories to show the injustices they've suffered. His father was always at work, his mother denied him jelly on his peanut butter sandwiches, his first girlfriend dumped him for a jerk, his first wife cheated on him, his boss doesn't recognize his work, even his dog doesn't appreciate him.



But this simply isn't enough. In [How to Write a Damn Good Novel](#), James N. Frey puts it strongly:

A character can be fully-rounded yet be too passive, too mamby-pamby. Characters who can't act in the face of their dilemmas, who run away from conflict who retreat and suffer without struggling, are not useful to you [as a writer]. They are static, and most of them should die an untimely death before they ever appear in the pages of your novel and ruin everything. (6)



“A passive victim doesn’t struggle– just suffers,” as Alicia Rasley [puts it](#). “Defeat isn’t sympathetic. It’s pathetic. . . . While we want to sympathize with the characters, we don’t want them to be victims so battered by past events that they don’t actually live in the present.”

So it’s not really just that our characters struggle—with past or present events. What really matters is **how the characters react**. They’re not indifferent to their struggles—they definitely need to feel the pain. But they’re also not self-pitying or whining about them—or, worst of all, passively dwelling on and submitting to them and even more injustice for no apparent reason. As Frey puts it:

Whenever a reader experiences profound empathy with a character, it is because the character is in the throes of intense inner conflict. A character may be in the most pathetic straits in the history of literature, but if he has no inner conflict, the only emotional response the writer can expect from the reader is pity. (36-37)

And pity is *not* our goal! **Our characters have to show that [inner strength](#)** that we’ve admired from the first. They have to be able to lift their heads after the wickedest defeat and say “I’ll never go hungry again!” (Or, you know, something original and pertinent to your story ;) .)

**At what point do you say too many struggles are just too much? Have you ever stopped reading a book because the hero/ine was too fixated with the past, or too passive, or just an all-around sad sack?**

Photo by [Margarit Raley](#)

## [Perfection isn’t appealing](#)

Sympathetic characters are absolutely vital to good (readable!) fiction. We’ve already mentioned that two things combined make characters sympathetic: [strength](#) and [struggles](#).

But if a little strength and a little struggling are good things, then why not a lot of strength or a lot of struggles? Isn't a super strong character going to be even more sympathetic than one who has some problems? Or maybe [piling on the pain](#) endlessly will make a character even more sympathetic?

Okay, you guessed it—just like a character who just gets more and more bad stuff piled on, **a character who's easily and confidently stronger than every challenge he faces isn't really sympathetic.**



### **Not by Strength Alone**

A character who's just a bundle of strengths has no struggles. He takes everything in stride, and everything continually works out for him. Here's why:

Jeremy stared at the flames leaping from the third-story windows. There were three children unaccounted for. He took a deep breath and barreled through the open doorway, up the stairs, around corner after corner. The distant cries for help finally reached his ears over the cacophonous crackling. The children—trapped behind a locked door.

He threw his full weight against the door—it splintered at the massive force. He scooped up the children, two in his right, one his left, and ran back down the stairs.

Jeremy gasped for a cool breath as he burst through the doorway to the outside. The headmistress held out her arms for a child and he held out one of them, smudged and bedraggled but *alive*. She clutched the boy to her chest, her eyes shining with admiration. "You're our hero," she said.

Is Jeremy strong? Brave? Courageous? Yeah, he'll be getting a key to the city for his heroism. But interesting? Sympathetic? Kind of—but I think most people would like to think they'd be willing to help someone in danger.

**Everything works out really easily for Jeremy.** He's strong enough, he's brave enough, and doggone it, people like him. I mean, um, he's fast enough, and he never really doubts his ability to perform an extraordinary feat.

Ever notice how much dang kryptonite there seems to be floating around Superman's story world? It's almost more prevalent than air. Why do movie makers and screenwriters always dig up more of this stuff? *Because watching a totally invincible man of steel defeat a dastardly enemy is entertaining for about four seconds.* After that, it's predictable—heck, it's trite.

Try this one instead:

What was he doing in here? He was no hero. And now the heat and the smoke made it impossible to walk, to see, to think.

He crawled up the stairs, ducking his head down to the treads to catch a breath of oxygen as he groped along through the smoke. He could hear them screaming—for *him*, for anyone who could save them.

Could he?

Timothy reached out for the next riser, but found nothing—the second floor. With one hand on the wall, he made his way to the first door. The doorknob was cool. Safe to open. He pushed the door, but the child's cries remained distant.

He clambered across the hall, gasping in the inch of hot airspace above the carpet. Another door—another cool doorknob. He opened the door and the screams for help grew louder. With a last breath of the burning oxygen, Timothy launched himself toward where the bed should be. He felt the sheets and seized a tiny wrist.

The child clung to his chest, Timothy supporting his weight with one hand whenever he could as they stumbled back to the stairs. But Timothy miscalculated—that first step was so much further than it seemed, but suddenly there was no floor beneath him and they tumbled, father and son, down the staircase.

Sprawled in a heap at the base of the staircase, he couldn't take time to inventory their injuries. It couldn't be that much further—when had their house gotten this big? Yanking the boy to his feet, Timothy willed his unwilling limbs to push back through the black and the heat, promising his protesting lungs fresh air if his body could just get them outside.

And then they were falling—falling? The front door—the front steps. The heat still blinded him, but suddenly his coughs were punctuated by gasps of cool night air as he landed on the pavement.

Do you feel the triumph now? Are you rooting for our hero to get through his difficulties? Note that *Tim's challenges aren't as physically daunting as Jeremy's were*. Timothy doesn't have to break down a door or carry out three orphans to impress us—he just has to overcome difficulties and insecurities.

Just like a character who's all struggles is static, **a character who's all strength has nowhere to grow**. We read to see that character growth—and that character growth is where we become sympathetic with those characters.

**What do you think? Have you ever read (or written) a character that was just too strong? Or is there no such thing?**

*Image credit: [Stefanie L.](#)*

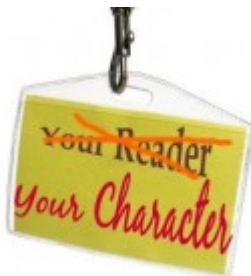
## Techniques for sympathetic characters

As I mentioned before, I've been using the term "sympathetic characters" as shorthand for "characters whom the reader can identify with." Creating reader identification is the ultimate goal here, because, as James N. Frey says in [How to Write a Damn Good Novel, II](#), a character the reader can identify with is the key to creating the fictive dream—to immersing the reader into the world of the story (not to mention the mind of the character). And in that book, Frey outlines specific techniques to create that reader identification.

### Sympathy

Frey goes so far as to say that you have to make the reader feel sorry for the character. I don't know that I'd say that—but I would say that you have to **let the reader see your character struggling**. That essentially what Frey conveys—let the reader see the character as lonely, disadvantaged, put upon, sad, confused, unpopular, unfulfilled, imperiled, etc. As Frey concludes:

Sympathy is the doorway through which the reader gains emotional access to a story. Without sympathy, the reader has no emotional involvement in the story. (9-10)



And sympathy is a stepping stone to the next technique:

### Identification

The next step is getting the reader to **support the**

**character's goals and aspirations.** While a character doesn't have to be admirable, Frey stresses, the easiest way to get readers to support a character's goal is to make sure their goal is *noble*.

And as a side note, it's good to make that goal clear. It doesn't have to be the character's ultimate goal of the story right off the bat, either—but getting that in there pretty soon seldom hurts.

Once you've got the reader on board with your character's noble goals, draw them in deeper with:

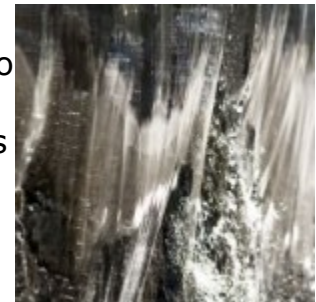
## Empathy

Now we want to get the reader feeling what the character's feeling—we want to instill in the reader the same emotions and responses. And, Frey says:

You do it by using the power of suggestion. You use sensuous and emotion-provoking details that suggest to the reader what it is like to be [the character] and to suffer what he is suffering. In other words, you create the story world in such a way that the readers can put themselves in the character's place. . . .

You can win empathy for a character by detailing the sensuous details in the environment: the sights, sounds, pains, smells, and so on that the character is feeling—the feelings that trigger his emotions. (19)

This doesn't mean that every sad sack character should be trudging through the pouring rain (to the courthouse to try to win his freedom from a wrongful conviction)—though it might help. It does mean, however, that it helps for the character to take notice of his environs, and for them to mirror (or, possibly, contrast or mock) his internal emotional state.



But wait! There's more! And the last step to fully transporting the reader is

one we've mentioned here before:

## Inner conflict

It's not enough to have the characters struggling against some external forces (to gain sympathy)—we must also see them battling internally. This is the last step here because we need the readers to fully support the character's goals and feel what they're feeling before an internal moral debate will *matter* to the reader.

But once we have the readers feeling what the characters are feeling, then we can use internal conflict to fully transport the reader into the character's head and the world of the story.

Frey's book [How to Write a Damn Good Novel, II](#) was the one of the best resources I found for detailing the actual techniques of fostering reader's sympathy for characters (and if this all seems very abstract here, check out the book—it's replete with examples to make his points clearer, as well as his full arguments, which are much better stated than my summaries).

## What do you think? How have you striven to create characters your readers can understand and cheer for?

*Photo credits: Name tag—[Sanja Gjenero](#); "Rain" (waterfall)—[Flávio Takemoto](#)*

## Creating sympathetic characters - techniques in action

Can I tell you a story?



Once upon a time, there was a young man who was a habitual thief. Even though his family was perfectly capable of providing for him, and even though he was perfectly capable of working to support himself, he stole everything he owned and stole from anyone he could. He even subjugated

innocent animals to make them steal for him.

In the same kingdom, there was a beautiful princess. Rich, powerful, handsome, kind men traveled from all over the world at the mere hope of winning her hand. Her doting father gave her everything she could ever want, and all he asked was that she marry, so that he could rest assured that she would be taken care of when he was gone. (Well, okay, he also would have liked to play with his grandkids before he went, too.) But the princess spurned and humiliated every suitor that came her way and simply refused to marry.

I know exactly what you're thinking—you can't wait for these two to get together for their happily ever after, huh? (Well, you have to admit, this does sound like it could be a prequel to *The Great Gatsby*, and then they could retreat into their money or their power or whatever it was that kept them together. . . . Anyway.)

But I'll bet that **you know and love a story with highly similar characters**. This princess and this *\*ahem\** street rat got a few new attributes in this retelling to make them a little less sympathetic. But in the hands of masterful character builders, by the time you know all the characters' names, you're rooting for them to find one another and fall in love.

How do we make these wretched people likeable? Here's how it was done in the story I drew this from:

- Start off with a framing story to **set up how important the hero is**, how legendary he is, and hint that great things will happen to this "diamond in the rough."
- He steals out of *necessity*—he's an orphan, and he has to steal to eat.
- He is *persecuted*—the city's guards catch him stealing quite regularly and chase him through the streets.
- He is [smart and charming](#), and evades the guards through trickery.
- After working hard to get away with a single loaf of bread (and sharing



with his animal sidekick), when he sees two hungry orphans **he gives them his whole meal.**

- A rich, haughty guy tries to tell our hero off completely without justification, and the crowd laughs. But our hero will have none of that and throws haughty guy's words back in his face.
- But **rich, haughty guy gets the last word**—he says to our hero, "You are a worthless street rat. You were born a street rat, you'll die a street rat, and only your *fleas* will mourn you." Then the palace doors slam shut, making sure our hero can't retort and reinforcing just how destitute he is—and in his heart of hearts, we can see he worried that rich, haughty guy is right. ([Very like Scarlett.](#))

And that's the first seven or eight minutes (and I didn't even mention how he saved the orphans' lives). The heroine, of course, **wants to marry for love**, and all her suitors are only interested in power and money. Her father could easily be cast as a bad guy—the evil tyrant forcing her to marry against her will—but in this treatment, he keeps those nice sentiments that we gave him before.

Okay, if you haven't guessed it by now, I'll just tell you: **our hero is Aladdin** from the Disney animated film. And yeah, it's a kids' film, so the characterization can be a little . . . well, strong. (How do you convince a five-year-old that the guy stealing on screen is actually the good guy?) But at the same time, it's done fairly (or at least relatively) believably.



**What do you think? What movies or books do you see good characterization of otherwise yucky characters?**

*Photo credit: money grabber—[Steve Woods](#)*

## **Making readers love (or at least understand) unlovable characters**

*By Julie Wright*

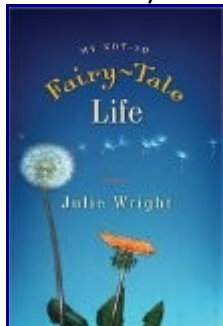
There is a song by The Smiths where the first line is, "I know I'm unlovable. You don't have to tell me . . ."

**Sometimes we write characters like that, characters who are hard to relate to, hard to like, hard to care about.**

Hi. My name is [Julie Wright](#). I write those kinds of characters. The problem is that I never feel like I'm writing those kinds of characters. I happen to love the unlovable. I think sarcasm is funny. I think bitter people sometimes have a right to a good rant. And I think the flaws in each person—the flaws we all have whether we admit it or not—make us wonderfully human.

Jordan has been doing a blog series on [creating sympathetic characters](#). She's already mentioned the "[street rat](#)" and the [princess](#). So you understand already that *flawed does not have to equate to evil*. But sometimes we writers forget to add the details of our thief sharing his entire meal with a few beggar children. **Sometimes we writers know those details, but never get them on the page.** For example:

In my novel [My Not-So-Fairy-Tale Life](#), my heroine is horrible. She is sarcastic, bitter, angry and rebellious. She is angst personified. I love her.



But not everybody loves her right at the beginning. She's one of those characters you have to learn to love. While submitting the book in the beginning, I failed to put in those details about her past and present that made her lovable. I knew those details, but it took me a couple of edits to get them down on the page *so the reader knew too*. Once those details were there, even if you started out not liking her, you couldn't help but at least understand her by the end.

To start out with someone who is reprehensible and then grow to love them makes for a fun journey for the reader as well as the character. It allows the reader access to understand other people, other motives, other walks of life. **It allows the reader to grow and find compassion and comprehension within themselves.**

I don't write the unlovable as a moral object lesson for readers. I think I write them because I was so unlovable for so many years of my youth and I can relate to the unlovable. I am horribly flawed and yet I feel like I have worth—value. If I feel that way, then surely others do as well.

But how do you write snarky, ill-tempered characters and keep readers from throwing your book across the room, or worse from writing you and demanding a refund?

[Daphne Atkeson](#), someone I know from an online writer's group for YA novels, created what she calls a "cheat sheet" of ways to establish early empathy (not sympathy, if we feel sorry for our characters, we end up making their journey too easy) for a character. She gathered this information from several craft books by Billy Mernitt, Michael Hague, Donald Maass and Orson Scott Card.

In *My Not So Fairy Tale Life*, **I had to incorporate a lot of these things from her list in order to make her relatable to the reader.** She was violently abused and neglected as a child so much of her thorny personality was built on purpose as her way of defending herself from getting hurt (undeserved misfortune). Her brother, who is a really nice guy, loves her irrevocably (liked or loved by someone else). She is actually incredibly intelligent (good at something).

When she finds out she's pregnant and goes to abort the baby, she recognizes she is on a path she can't continue down so she doesn't go through with the procedure and works hard to make sure the baby is healthy through the rest of her pregnancy (trying to improve or be good). She VERY sarcastic and has a comeback for just about everything (wit or boldness). She is painfully aware of her flaws. In spite of the abuse she learns to forgive her parents (shows forgiveness). In the end, she gives her baby up for adoption because she knows she isn't ready or grown up enough to raise a child. And even though it hurts, she gives the baby to a family who is ready for it (self sacrifice).

Lots of books incorporate the flawed character. [Janette Rallison](#) did a smashing job with her book *Just One Wish*. The character breaks a ton of rules, gets into all kinds of mischief, but she's doing it all for her little brother who has cancer. *You can forgive her the lunacy because you understand the motive.*



**Never forget motivation.** Motivation is the driving factor behind everything we do. Along with motivation, a character must have:

1. PURPOSE—most important—what he wants, must be specific
2. CREDIBILITY—believable
3. EMPATHY—not sympathy, don't feel sorry for him, identify with problem.
4. COMPLEXITY—inner conflict, more than one side, surprise us with unseen aspects, contradictions and quirks

**To the degree that your character feels passionately invested in his own life, the reader will feel invested, too.** We need to be able to root for the character, to care whether or not the character wins the prize. To do so, we need to make sure the character **DESERVES** to win. In the original movie [Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory](#), we realize that even though Charlie stole a little Fizzy-Lifting Drinks, he still deserved to win because he was a good kid.

**The reader also needs to know what is at stake.** For Janette's character in *Just One Wish*, her brother's life was very literally at stake. In the book [The Hunger Games](#), the main character's own life was at stake. She needed to get all of her primal needs met (food, shelter, means of defending herself). In the book [Sun and Moon, Ice and Snow](#) by Jessica Day George, the life of her beloved is at stake.

Something has to be on the line and it has to be a big something. Your character needs to stretch and grow and they cannot accomplish that if they have silly, paper-thin conflicts to deal with. **When you inflict pain and trouble on your hero, you reveal him for who he is.** You learn what

motivates him, what is important to him. When you inflict pain and trouble on your hero, you discover what exactly it is that makes him the hero.

### About the author

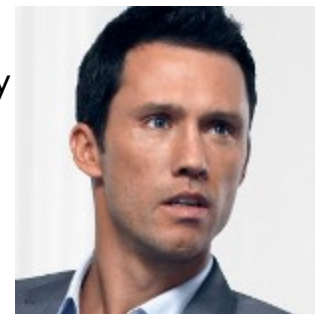
*Julie Wright is extremely busy as a wife, a mother of three, a rural grocery store owner, and an author of or contributor to six novels and books on writing craft. She blogs at [Scattered Jules](#) and [Writing on the Wall](#). Her latest book, [Eyes Like Mine](#), is available for pre-order now.*

## Why I love *Burn Notice*

Yes, it's cool and it's glossy and it's filled with attractive people. And guns and explosions and spy work and secret undercover coolness. And hilarity.

But that's not why I love [Burn Notice](#). (Those things don't hurt, mind you.)

**I love *Burn Notice* because of the characters.** Namely one Michael Westen. (And no, I don't mean Jeffrey Donovan, though he is quite attractive. I mean Michael Westen.) When USA says "Characters welcome," they mean it.



Michael is a complex character—he's terrible at interpersonal relationships. He does bad things. And though he wouldn't talk about it and takes no pleasure in it, he has killed. He's not above blackmail or letting the bad guys kill each other.

Though he'd prefer not to have to deal with them, Michael loves his mom and his brother and does all he can to protect them. In a recent episode ("[End Run](#)"), Michael was blackmailed into working for a bad guy because said bad guy threatened his brother. The writers even made it so that working for **the bad guy wasn't all that bad**—he didn't want a nuke, just a particular electronic interface. "People will go on killing each other in little

wars all around the globe, whether or not you steal it," he says. "The only difference is how much money I make while they do it." To show he'll make good on his threat, *the bad guy even shoots Michael's brother in the arm.*

**It wouldn't be so wrong, then, would it? It would save his brother's life (before he bleeds out, too), and it wouldn't cost the world much.**



Michael breaks into the office, gets the weapon and—sees a photo of a family. With kids. While that reminder helps him put together some of the scant evidence they've compiled about this bad guy, I think it also **reminds him of the greater good.** "I'm not handing over a nuke to save one life," he tells the bad guy, "even if it *is* my brother's."

Michael is a great character because he's *strong*—physically, yes, but more importantly, he's extremely smart/savvy (mental strength, if you will). He even verges on too strong—as a blacklisted spy/former black ops soldier, he knows just what to do in any given situation. But he has weaknesses—the classics: children; his family; oh, and the fate of the entire world. Most importantly, he *struggles*.

And this time, he struggled because the choice was **hard**—it wasn't save or destroy the world (or save the world, sacrifice integrity), it was save his brother or some small number of unknown people—possibly no one. The talented writers **made it seem no great sin** if Michael had decided to trade the weapon for his brother's life. And he almost did.

But in the end, he didn't. And that's what I love most about *Burn Notice*.

**Who are your favorite television characters? Why?**

## Sympathetic characters: more resources

In this booklet, we've learned about [creating sympathetic characters](#)—giving them [strength](#) and [struggles](#), [balancing each](#) of [those elements](#), and [specific techniques](#) for making our readers identify with [even unlovable characters](#).

If you want to read more on creating sympathetic characters, here are the absolute best, most useful resources I've found:

- [Sympathy without Saintliness](#), an online article by author/editor Alicia Rasley. Alicia takes us through some of the most beloved **characters in literature capture our sympathies**, as well as dispelling some common authorial misconceptions about how we can make our readers like our characters.
- [How to Write a Damn Good Novel, II](#) by James N. Frey, specifically chapter one, which shows **internal and external techniques** to create deeper and deeper sympathy in your readers (which we've discussed here [briefly](#)).
- [The Unlovable Character](#), a blog post on Writing on the Wall Blog by Julie Wright with an **exhaustive list of techniques and characteristics** to make readers love even unlovable characters (which she graciously [expanded with more examples](#) for us here).



*Image credit: [Svilen Mushkatov](#)*

## Conclusion

I hope this booklet helps you understand the techniques authors use to create character sympathy. Having characters that your readers identify with is the first step to creating good, memorable fiction.

Good luck!