Start Writing Fiction

Ways of developing characters

NARRATOR:
As we've already discovered, learning about the approaches other writers take can be helpful.

Here novelists discuss how they develop their fictional characters using a mixture of methodical research, accident and empathy. As you're listening to Tim Pears, Monique Roffey, Alex Garland and Louis de Bernières make a note how you might develop main characters and how much work goes into differentiating between relatively minor characters.

TIM PEARS:
My first book was written from the point of view of a 13 year old girl, and I never felt when I was writing it that I had to make some kind of special effort, you know, to get into the mind of a female, or a young person whatever. I think I just thought how I would think about things, and with a little bit of sympathy, empathy towards somebody else and that was it.

MONIQUE ROFFEY:
I think it's very much a mixture of accident and design. I think your characters find you in the same way that your ideas find you. I think they settle on you – snatches of people you've seen in the street sometimes or snatches of someone you might have met, someone you might have, you know, have had a brief encounter with, and they tend to kind of morph, they tend to kind of mix. You'll have somebody's hairstyle with somebody's height and somebody's vanity with somebody's nose, you know, so you kind of have a mixture come to you, but once that's happened I then absolutely treat him, treat it in a research like, a sort of scholarly way – I use a character outline and I, I work on, on that and develop and, so that I've got sometimes 7, 8, 9, 10, 15 pages, so that I

know everything about that character, I know what his, what the character's grandmother's maiden name was, whether they're good at dancing, whether they like Marmite, you know, I know everything about that character by the time I've worked on it. So I use both, I use conscious and the unconscious to sort of, to make someone.

ALEX GARLAND:
Characters came from all sorts of different places. There's this gangster in *The Tesseract* called Don Pepe who was sort of based on a guy I ran into in a very remote part of the Philippines who came from Spanish ancestry and had never been to Spain but was obsessed with Spain and he'd lost all his money, he didn't have a hacienda or anything, but he still somehow clung on to that colonial past even though it was a long, long time ago. And there was something about that that just interested me and I kind of lifted him out and dropped him in there and some you just invent.

LOUIS DE BERNIÈRES:
There seem to be two different types of character. There's the type that just turns up at your shoulder like a ghost and insists on being written, it's rather spooky, it's a bit like being a medium. The other kind of character is the sort that you, you invent more or less from scratch or create as a composite of various people that you've noticed or come across. And the one thing that does happen though is that as soon as the character begins to become real, is, he or she starts misbehaving, and they don't do what you tell them to do. You often find yourself altering the story to accommodate your characters. Your plans always go wrong. It's partly good old fashioned empathy, with a certain amount of effort you can imagine what it's like being somebody else.

If these characters are conveniently nearby you can always go and ask them and listen to them talking. And quite often with a character, all you've got to do is start them talking, like yakking in your head – it's a bit like being a paranoid schizophrenic but it's under control, you know, you've got all of these voices going on in your mind – you just let them talk. And, and they develop quite happily on their own.

ALEX GARLAND:

I did have a problem with some of the minor characters of losing track of them. I remember when I was copy editing the book, finding that people switched nationalities half way through and having to sort of make a little list, you know, this guy's from New Zealand, this one's from Israel. But I think in the case of *The Beach*, often what I did was a kind of cheap trick in a way which was, you pin a particular characteristic on a character so there's this guy, Bugs, who is the boyfriend of the woman who runs the Camp and his thing was that he's stoical but he's also a bit of a bullshitter, that stoicism is his thing that he gives out an impression of being a terrific stoic but actually he's not, and then everything just follows from that. Yeah, you find a little peg to hang them on and leave them on it.