Villains are a crucial part of a great story. Without conflict, there is no story. Unless something terrible happens to your main character or protagonist, the tale you tell is boring and won’t hold the interest of a reader. On my blog, Fiction Notes (www.darcypattison.com), I’ve written often about the necessity of a villain and how to master a great villain. This eBook collects some of the most popular posts about villains.

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Evil is live spelled backwards. The protagonist of a novel represents life; the villain, anti-life. How do you develop, strengthen and revise this important character?

**COUNT OLAF AS THE ULTIMATE VILLAINOUS CHARACTER**

Harpercollins editor Susan Rich, who edited the *Lemony Snicket* series of fiction for children, comments about the villain in these books. “Count Olaf is reprehensible. He has barely any redeeming qualities. He’ll do anything to get what he wants. He reaps joy from his endless pursuit of the Baudelaire children. He’s thoroughly villainous.”

Among all the possible characters to populate a novel, the villain is one of the most interesting. The protagonist, or main character, receives the most attention in character development articles and books. But a good villain can bring a dull story to life. Francis Foster, publisher of Frances Foster Books, an imprint of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, says, “A novel needs conflict. A good villain can make that conflict clear and strong. Villains add interest, excitement, edge.”
Darcy Pattison

David Lubar, author of eleven novels and story collections, including *Hidden Talents* and *True Talents*, takes it a step farther. “There are both internal and external reasons to use a villain. Externally, this helps map the real world, which affirms the reader’s suspicion that there are unpleasant people out there. Internally, it raises the stakes. The hero can’t reason with a villain.”

**VILLAIN OR ANTAGONIST?**

If nothing interesting happens without a villain, then we need to know what a villain is. Foster says, “Thinking of villains in the most basic, childlike language, he is the bad guy in the novel. The people that do evil things. They come in many different sizes and shapes.”

Rich says, “The villain is the nemesis of the protagonist, a no-good nick with ill intent. He’s nasty for the purpose of being nasty.”

How does a villain differ from an antagonist? An antagonist is a general term for the person who opposes the protagonist and villain is a sub-category of antagonists. Foster says, “An antagonist is someone that is against whatever is happening. They aren’t all villainous. You can be an antagonist, but still be good. On the other hand, a villain concentrates on bad deeds, on evil.”

**ARE VILLAINS LIMITED TO FOLKTALES AND MOCK-VICTORIANS?**

It may seem that the term villain is outmoded. It applies only to folktales (monsters, witches, ogres, evil wizards) or to Victorian (Snively Whiplash) or outdated
stories (outlaws like Jesse James). Contemporary antagonists tend to be more rounded, less patently evil. But editors insist that villains still populate contemporary books.

Rich says, “I edited Homeless Bird, by Gloria Whelan, which is contemporary fiction set in India. The mother-in-law in the story has much in common with Count Olaf. She’s wholly villainous, wholly self-absorbed. She holds the power to undo the hope for the life of our protagonist.” Adding a villain character to a novel does help make the story more powerful: Whelan won the 2000 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature for her novel, Homeless Bird.

Foster says an example of a contemporary villain is in Suzanne Fisher Staples’ novel, Dangerous Skies, which is set in Chesapeake Bay area. “The antagonist is pillar of the community, in that he gives money to the library and is from an old, respected family. He’s a bad character even though he isn’t generally recognized as this. What makes it so agonizing in reading and hard for the protagonist is that none of the adults see him as bad. They see him as a good man, but he’s not. He’s a villain.”

CREATE ANTIPATHY INSTEAD OF SYMPATHY FOR YOUR VILLAIN

Villains are bad guys who function in novels to escalate the conflict. But how do you create a convincing villain?

Lubar says, “Pure, unrelenting evil gets boring. That’s why Bond villains have pet cats. Give your villain a bit of depth and variety. In his excellent pamphlet, ’12 Things
I Wish I had Known When I Started Writing,’ Ben Bova points out that, ‘No one actually sets out to do evil.’ This is a brilliant observation that has served me well in all my writing. (People who spend far too much time with books might recall the issue was also hashed around a bit by Socrates and Protagoras.) The bad guy isn’t doing bad stuff so he can rub his hands together and snarl. He may be driven by greed, neuroses, or the conviction that his cause is just, but he’s driven by something not unlike the things that drive a hero.”

When you create a villain, you want the reader of your novel to feel antipathy toward that character, rather than sympathy. To do this, you use the same tools that you use to characterize any character. Give the character a convincing backstory that explains motivations, then personalize them with depth and variety.

Foster edited Louis Sachar’s book, *Holes*, which won both the 1998 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature and the 1999 Newbery award. She says, “One thing about Sachar’s villains is that they are nuanced characters. He has a sort of darkly humorous approach, so his villains – even in *Holes* – aren’t cartoon characters.”

Foster discusses how Sachar creates both antipathy and sympathy for the villains. “You need enough explanation so you can understand the novel. In *Holes*, when you realize what the Warden’s history is, or when you look at Kissing Kate Barlow, you have examples of characters who seems justified in their actions. You understand why Kate turned bad. It makes the novel richer if you can follow the line of thinking or reasons for someone’s behavior. That doesn’t mean you always spell it
out. But within the needs of the story, you need to know.”

**BELIEVABLE CHARACTER MOTIVATIONS FOR EVIL CHARACTERS**

Sid Fleischman, author of numerous books, including the Newbery award-winning novel, *The Whipping Boy*, says, “I do think you have to lay in, at least in a single broad stroke, a motivation for villainy. In the Three Little Pigs, we assume the wolf is hungry.”

Why is this character ignoring society’s standards of morality and doing something that is considered evil? Without this information, you run the danger of losing credibility in the story.

While most agree that the villain’s motivations need to be clear, some novels get by without this. Rich says, “Lemony Snicket never gives Count Olaf redeeming qualities. We’ll never learn that Count Olaf was mistreated as a child, or he is lonely, or needs a friend. He won’t be redeemed. He’s thoroughly villainous. I find that a redeeming quality; he’s likeable because he is so outrageously horrid.”

Because of her experience editing Count Olaf, Rich doesn’t agree that you must include specific motivations in every novel about a villain. “Resist the temptation to make him or her sympathetic. It’s not necessary. We don’t need to learn that the villain has a soft spot for puppies. That waters them down, rather than strengthens their character.” Count Olaf is a pure villain, through and through. And that is precisely what makes him a wonderful character.
Darcy Pattison

The decision to include specific motivations or not must depend on the type novel you’re writing, and the specific needs of that story. Lemony Snicket’s stories are sort of mock Victorian and following the Victorian tradition of melodramatic villains, he gets by with a pure villain. But even *Holes*, a modern-folktale story, requires a more developed villain.

**DEPTH AND VARIETY FOR YOUR VILLAINS**

After the broad strokes laying out the evil intentions and motives of the villain, it’s time to make him or her more specific. Look to the needs of the novel and the milieu of the story for ideas on specific villainy. For example, the Warden in *Holes* has rattlesnake venom nail polish. On his website, Sachar says, “It’s hard to remember where different ideas come from, but I think it first started when I originally thought the Warden was going to be the granddaughter of Kissing Kate Barlow. And Kissing Kate always killed the men she kissed. At the time, I may have even considered that her lipstick might be poisoned. So, I wanted to do something along the same lines. Instead of poison lipstick, the warden had poison nail polish.”

Often writers have a difficult time creating specific evil in a novel. The writer is non-confrontational themselves, and it just feels wrong to include such bad things in a story for kids. Lubar says, “To do it right, I think you need to move beyond your own comfort level. If I create a villain who is basically just me at my worst, I’ll end up with a guy who jaywalks and maybe drinks milk directly out of the carton. Real villains do things I’d never do. (On the other hand, they obviously do things I’m
TIPS TO WRITE A BETTER VILLAIN CHARACTER

“I think the main danger with a villain,” Fleischman says, “is going over the top. It’s easy to have him twirl his mustaches too much and chortle and sneer too sneeringly. You gotta make him believable. The villains in my novels chew up the scenery a bit more than others. I get away with these touches of whimsy because my novels are comedies.” In other words, avoid clichés and melodrama.

Often writers face critiques of their villains and the recommendation is to soften the villain’s evil ways. Foster says, “That usually means that the villain isn’t coming off as quite believable. The writer has put so much energy and emotion into creating the character that the writer has lost sight of how the villain is appearing. Usually, when a writer is asked to revise a depiction of a character it is to make it fit the needs of the novel better. It’s not because the editor is afraid of including an evil character in a novel.”

Foster gives an example. “When I worked with Louis Sachar on, There’s a Boy in the Girl’s Bathroom, the teacher seemed too harsh to believe in the first draft. He was modeling her on real life experiences, but the depiction wasn’t working. Sachar did soften the teacher character a bit, not because I was concerned about being politically correct, or teachers who might read the book or reviewers. But it was important that the character was strong and credible. By going back to look at her again,
Sachar took the raw passion of the first draft and refined what he was doing.”

Above all, credibility is the key to creating good villains. Within the story being told, this villain’s evil ways must be appropriate.

“Believe in your villain,” Rich emphasizes, “as much as you believe in your heroes.”
STRENGTHEN YOUR VILLAINS

Your villain can be strengthened in several ways. Wait. Do you HAVE a villain, don’t you?

DO YOU NEED A VILLAIN?

One question I often hear is, “Do I really need an antagonist/villain” Usually, these writers have the main character struggling against something like a storm, or an evil empire, or something more abstract. In these cases, no, you don’t have to have a villain; but if you can embody the evil from that abstract opposition in a character, you’ll have a stronger story.

Create a single storm or give the reader a military general to hate (think Darth Vader). Your story will be stronger with a strong antagonist, because it will focus the main character’s efforts. Let’s assume you have a good villain and in the next revision you want to strengthen your villain. In general, you’ll want to look at what you’ve already done and push it to a more intense level. Because villains are a different sort of character, there are some clichés that work when creating them. But be sure to work against these clichés and make your villain fresh and interesting.
PHYSICAL APPEARANCE—TWO OPTIONS

1. UGLY Their ugliness outside mirrors their evil inner nature.
   • dirty—hands, clothes
   • eyes—pale, blue, cadaverous, sinister, stone cold, blazing, uncanny, narrow, oblique, filminess, sharp, strange, awful, flaming with passion, keen, piercing, dark, bold, brilliant, black
   • rank breath
   • voice—sharp, cruel, think, harsh, often breaks into falsetto
   • deformed in some way—hunchback, missing leg (Long John Silver), scars
   • fleshy or fat from over-indulgence of fleshly lusts
   • hands—short stocky fingers, fat/fleshy, large, white, ruthless, sharp nails, hair on palms
   • facial hair—queer whiskers, cruel mustache
   • bony
   • skin—sallow, sunburned almost black
   • physically strong—strong, but not intelligent
   • laugh—hyena-like, laughs at odd times

2. BEAUTIFUL Their outside contrasts with inner evil nature
   • movements—graceful, catlike
   • intelligent—a worthy foe
   • sexy
   • hero-like, often tries to imitate a hero, a king, a warrior of old, etc.
   • voice—melodious, husky, sexy
• hair—thick, beautiful, long
• clothes & accessories—splendidly horse, impeccable taste in clothes, dashing appearance

CHARACTER QUALITIES

These are some character qualities to consider as you define your villain.

• All villains must enjoy their villainy.
• Cruel.
• established by reputation of past crimes/past corpses
• puts others in position to fail, then punishes when they do fail
• revenge
• no mercy
• Treacherous—no loyalty. Insinuates into positions of trust, then betrays.
• Cunning, sly, conniving
• Bully—physical and mental abuse
• Childhood—unstable, frustrated, unhappy, reform school
• Charisma—mesmerizes the weak (often female)
• Ruthless—gets own way regardless of what it takes
• Frustrated ambitions
• Shrewd business-like sense
• Foul language

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

• Often foreigners or different ethnic group. (Not politically correct these days, of course, but still often done.)
Darcy Pattison

- Often wears black. (Another politically-incorrect notion, but color can be useful in designating groups. Could also use some other visual tag, for example, gang signs, tattoos, etc.)
- Tools/House—Often these are sinister. In other words, make the setting echo their villainy.
- How is this character larger-than-life? What does s/he do, say, think that would totally shock even themselves?

**MOTIVATIONS**

Deepen your character’s motivations and emotions by considering these.

- Give the villain an inner conflict. What do they most want? What’s the opposite of that? How could the character want both at the same time?
- Raise the stakes. Even villains can have the stakes raised! What could happen that would make the villain’s goal matter even more?
- Have you plotted the villain’s character arc? Usually, the villain’s character arc ends in tragedy (s/he is defeated!). Do you show-don’t-tell your villain’s emotions at the climax?

**THE POWER OF BECAUSE:**

**HOW I CREATED A DASTARDLY VILLAIN**

I am hard at work on an outline/synopsis sort of thingy for a new trilogy. I wish I could say it’s a true outline or synopsis, but I’m not an outliner. However, I’m not a pantster either, to just start writing and write by the
seat of my pants. I am a plan-ster, a person who halfway plans and then writes a while, and then plans again from the new and improved position halfway through the story.

While I’m outlining (term used loosely, as just explained), I am finding places where I am stuck. What happens next?

One word is changing things: Because.

My character argues with another BECAUSE. . .

By forcing myself to answer the BECAUSE question, I wind up going deeper into backstory, motivations and emotional depth. Why are they doing such and so? BECAUSE. . .

**Backstory.** Some of the because has to do with inventing backstory. This week, I found a villain that way. I knew Character V was acting up, but when I added the BECAUSE and started delving into V’s psychology and backstory, suddenly V took on a new—and much more interesting—role in the story. He became the antagonist, which I knew I needed, but I had been avoiding the work needed to figure it out. So, the BECAUSE work became a shortcut to finding out about a villain.

**Motivations.** For all the characters, the BECAUSE work meant I had to delve into the reasons for actions, the motivations. This deepened the story in important ways, even at this outline level. Partly, I am trying to find connections among characters and how they approach life at interesting tangents. As I worked on the BECAUSE answers, I made sure the answers weren’t clones, but held the possibility of interesting clashes.

**Emotional Depth.** This is saying the same thing as motivations in a different way, but it’s an important variation. Emotion is hard for me to pull into a story and
planning for it up front is essential—or else my stories will be flat and revisions will be deadly. One question that helps here is, “Who hurts the most? X hurts the most BECAUSE. . .”

Fiction is about emotional conflict and how that conflict is resolved (or not). Generally, the person who hurts the most should be the main character. It’s not unusual to have to change the MC to a different character as you uncover and create the characters’ inner lives.

I am still stumbling around inside the ideas for this story. But one word is lighting a path toward actually writing a first draft: BECAUSE. Variation. Emotion is hard for me to pull into a story and planning for it up front is essential—or else my stories will be flat and revisions will be deadly. One question that helps here is, “Who hurts the most? X hurts the most BECAUSE. . .”

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I am still stumbling around inside the ideas for this story. But one word is lighting a path toward actually writing a first draft: BECAUSE
One day, I was working on my villain(ess) and found 39 possible motivations. I’m sure there are more, but these should jump start your imagination. They are presented here with a statement from the villain(ess)’s point of view.

1. Romance: I want to marry the princess.
2. Revenge – ruin a hero: I want to ruin the King.
3. To distinguish oneself: I want the princess to respect me.
4. To fit in/gain acceptance: I want to attend the princess’ coronation and eat at her table.
5. Justice: The king killed my mother, so the king must die.
6. Greed – get rich: I want to steal everything from the King’s treasury.
7. Fear: I am afraid that our lands will be stripped bare by this evil king.
8. Desperation: If something doesn’t change in the next week, I will be executed.
10. Desire to better oneself: I was born a peasant, but I will die a king.
11. Power to achieve a goal: I must be king, so I can change the laws about owning property.
12. Escape destiny: At birth, a prophet said I would kill the king; however, I am stealing enough money to escape to another country and avoid that destiny.

13. Achieve destiny: At birth, a prophet said I would kill the king; and that’s my plan.

14. Persecution: Growing up in a wheelchair has been hell.

15. Rivalry: Prince John wants to marry the Princess, but she’s mine.

16. Discovery: I will find out the king’s darkest secret and use it against him.

17. Ambition: I want . . . everything!

18. Survival (deliverance): In the midst of this civil war, I will survive.

19. Self-sacrifice: Someone must stop this evil king and I’ve decided to step up and do it.

20. Love: The princess has stolen my heart; so, I’ll steal her.

21. Hate: The princess is an evil woman; when she becomes my wife, I’ll make her suffer.

22. Conspiracy: I’ve gathered twelve good men to help me overthrow this king.

23. Honor: Men from my city never back down, even if it costs me everything.

24. Dishonor: Men from my city are idiots; I’ll never do things the “right” way.

25. Unnatural affection: I want to marry the princess and take the queen as a lover.

26. Catastrophe: A volcano is going to erupt and when it does, I’ll plunder the city.

27. Grief and loss: When my mother died, I lost all interest in doing good.
28. Rebellion: I’m the leader of the guerrilla forces.

29. Betrayal: I was engaged to the princess, and then she married Prince John.

30. Spread hate and fear: I love hate. Hate, hate, hate.

31. Corrupt everyone: Come join me as I rob the king.

32. Control the kids: If those kids make noise one more time at midnight, I’ll get ’em.

33. Leave me in peace: I never wanted to leave my home town, but since you’ve made me, I’ll show you what’s what.

34. Recover what is lost: The king took my mother’s locket as tribute, and if it’s the last thing I ever do, I’ll get it back.

35. Save humanity: To save humanity, I’ll have to kill the whole army.

36. serve a master (ex. The Fuhrer): I’ll follow King George anywhere, even if it means killing King Phillip.

37. Destroy: Ha! Ha! Ha! I love to burn down houses.

38. Rule part of the world: I want to be King of the Mermaids.

39. Rule all of the world: I will rule the Earth.
Harpercollins editor Susan Rich’s favorite villain are those in Roald Dahl’s stories. “I have great admiration for Roald Dahl’s villains. Farmer Boggis, Farmer Bounce, and Farmer Bean come to mind, the evil trio in Dahl’s *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. All three are boneheads, are united in their mission, and all three share that villainous trait of being so single minded about accomplishing their nefarious plot that they lose sight of all reason. Such disregard for logic makes them all the more frightening, and all the more fallible.”

Carol Saller, editor for Cricket Books, says, “My favorite villain is definitely Arawn the Death Lord in Lloyd Alexander’s *Prydain Chronicles*. Because we don’t see him directly, but only as he appears in various forms, each reader is left to imagine him as horribly as possible. He is so evil and so powerful that we can’t imagine how Taran will ever defeat him. And his agents the Huntsmen are themselves so unimaginably powerful (since killing one makes the rest stronger), Taran’s task takes on a heroic stature from the start.”

For more examples of villains, study *The Oxford Books of Villains*, by John Mortimer, the author of the Rumpole of the Bailey mysteries. He provides literary excerpts de-
tailing villainy. These tend to be more the Victorian-type villains, but includes everything from Cain to Moriarty to Captain Hook. To study villainous characters in children’s books, begin with the following list. These villains represent a wide range of “bad guys” from the sympathetic Herdmans to the frightening Cruella DeVille.

- Count Olaf in *One Unfortunate Accident* by Lemony Snicket
- Voldemort in *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling
- White Witch in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis
- Wicked Witch of the West in *Wizard of Oz* by Frank Baum
- Judd Travers in *Shiloh* by Phillis Naylor
- Miss Slighcarp in *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* by Joan Aiken
- Archie in *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier
- Cruella DeVille in *1001 Dalmations* by Dodie Smith
- Camilla Capybara in *Hooway for Wodney Wat* by Helen Lester
- IT in *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L’Engle.
- The villains in the *Redwall* books by Brian Jacques: Cluny the Scourge, Badrang, etc.
- The Warden in *Holes* by Louis Sachar
- Charlie Simms in *The Well* by Mildred D. Taylor
- Artemis Fowl in *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer
- The Herdmans in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson
Author, blogger, and writing teacher, Darcy Pattison (www.darcypattison.com) has hiked, canoed and explored the Ozark Mountains, and for years has wanted to set a story there. Recent news reports said that 100 years ago, armadillos were seldom seen in Texas, but in recent years, had pushed as far north as the Ozarks, and even beyond. She began to imagine the Ozarks from an armadillo’s point of view and that sparked this story. In addition to novels, Pattison also writes nature picture books: *Wisdom, the Midway Albatross* (Mims House), which received Starred Review in Publisher’s Weekly; *Desert Baths* (Sylvan Dell), an NSTA Outstanding Science Trade Book 2013; and *Abayomi, the Brazilian Puma: The True Story of an Orphaned Cub*. Darcy Pattison is the 2007 recipient of Arkansas Governor’s Arts Awards for her work in Children’s Literature.