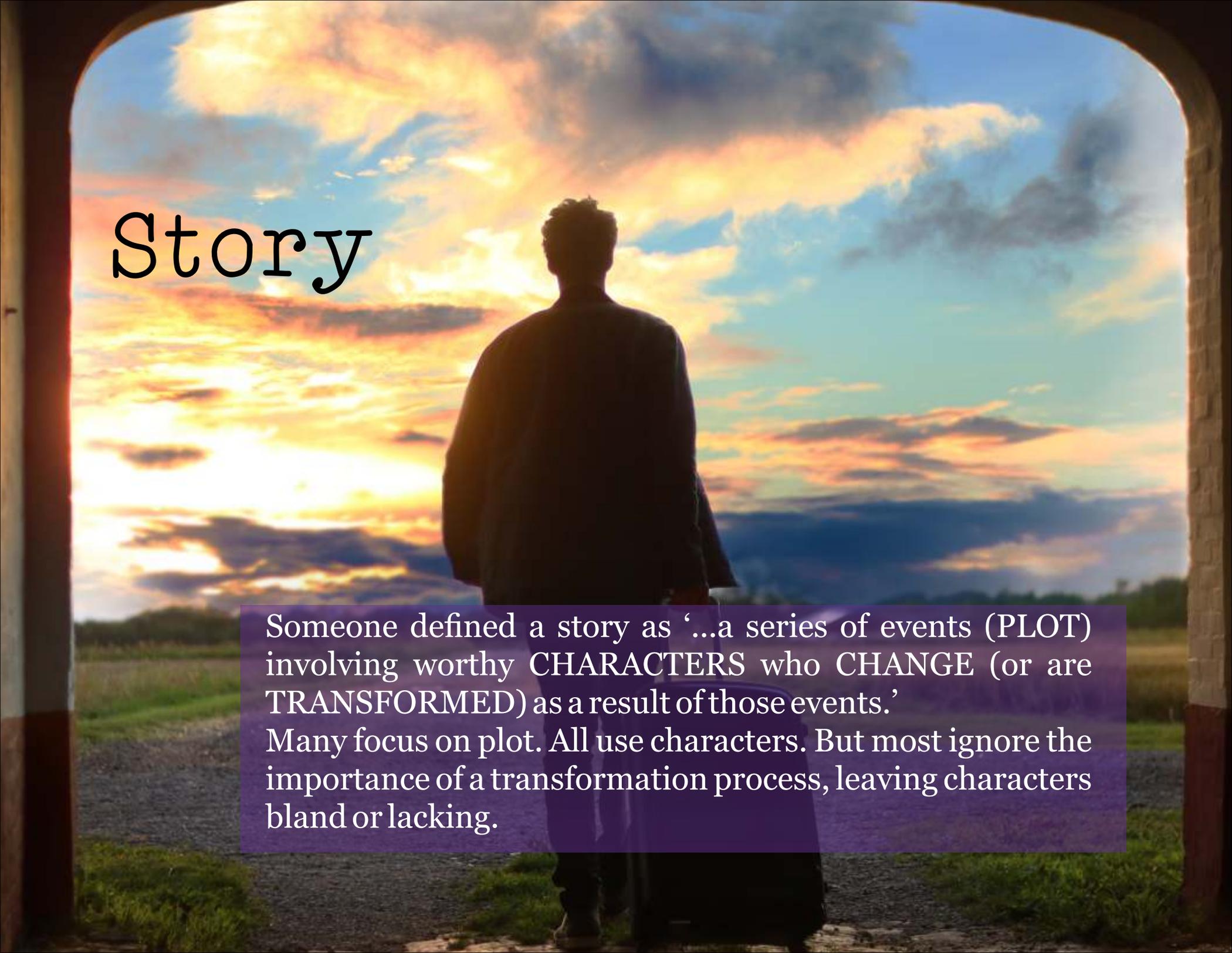# CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT
in fiction writing

A Creative Writing Workshop
by Emmanuel Onimisi
for Christian Literary Hub (CLH)

July 2020

Story

Someone defined a story as '...a series of events (PLOT) involving worthy CHARACTERS who CHANGE (or are TRANSFORMED) as a result of those events.'

Many focus on plot. All use characters. But most ignore the importance of a transformation process, leaving characters bland or lacking.
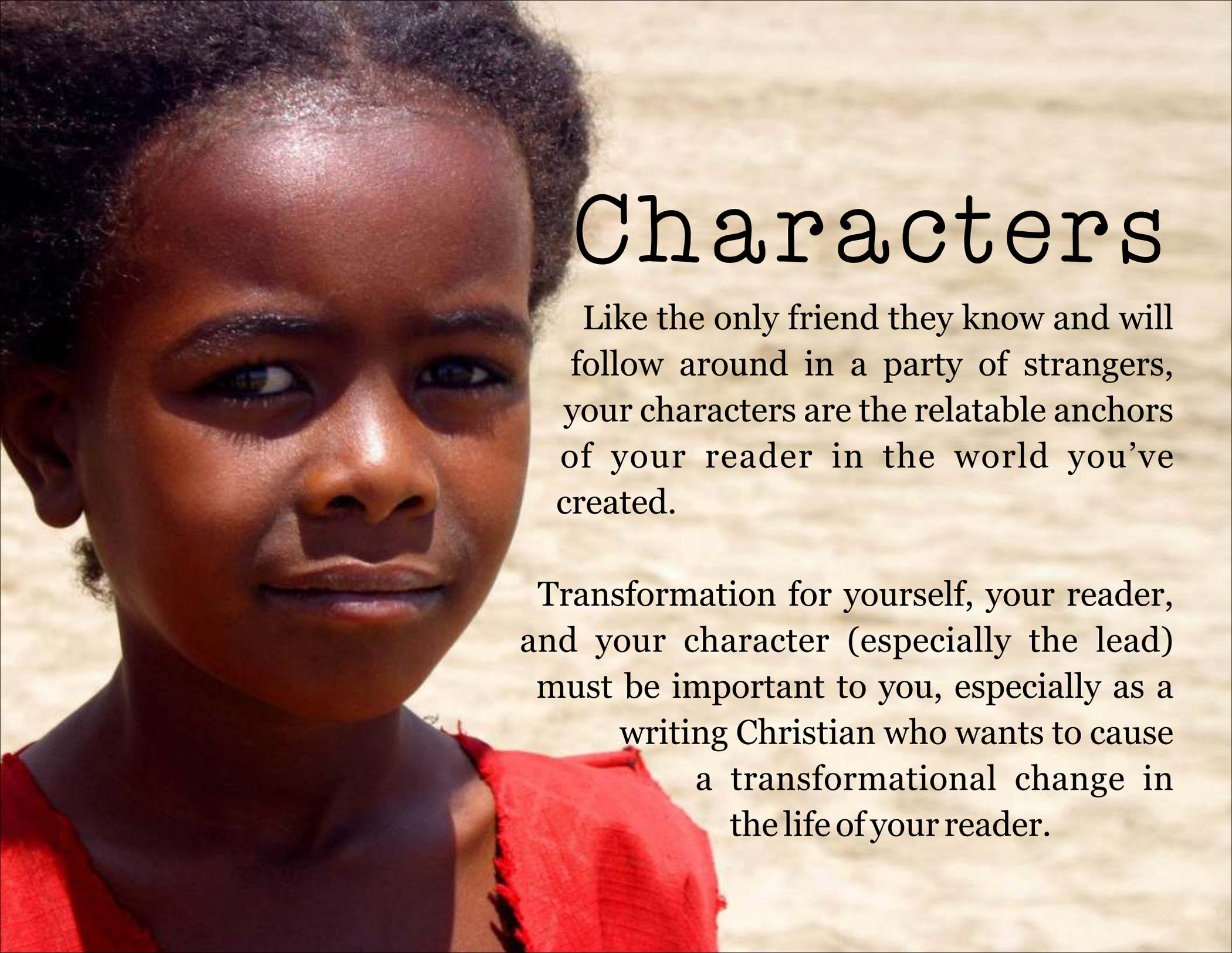
Characters

Readers are looking for change in their own lives; an escape from the one they've known and experienced. Without knowing, they seek transformation.

At the same time, they still anchor to what is familiar.

Compelling and relatable characters transformed by and through the story are what make stories memorable.
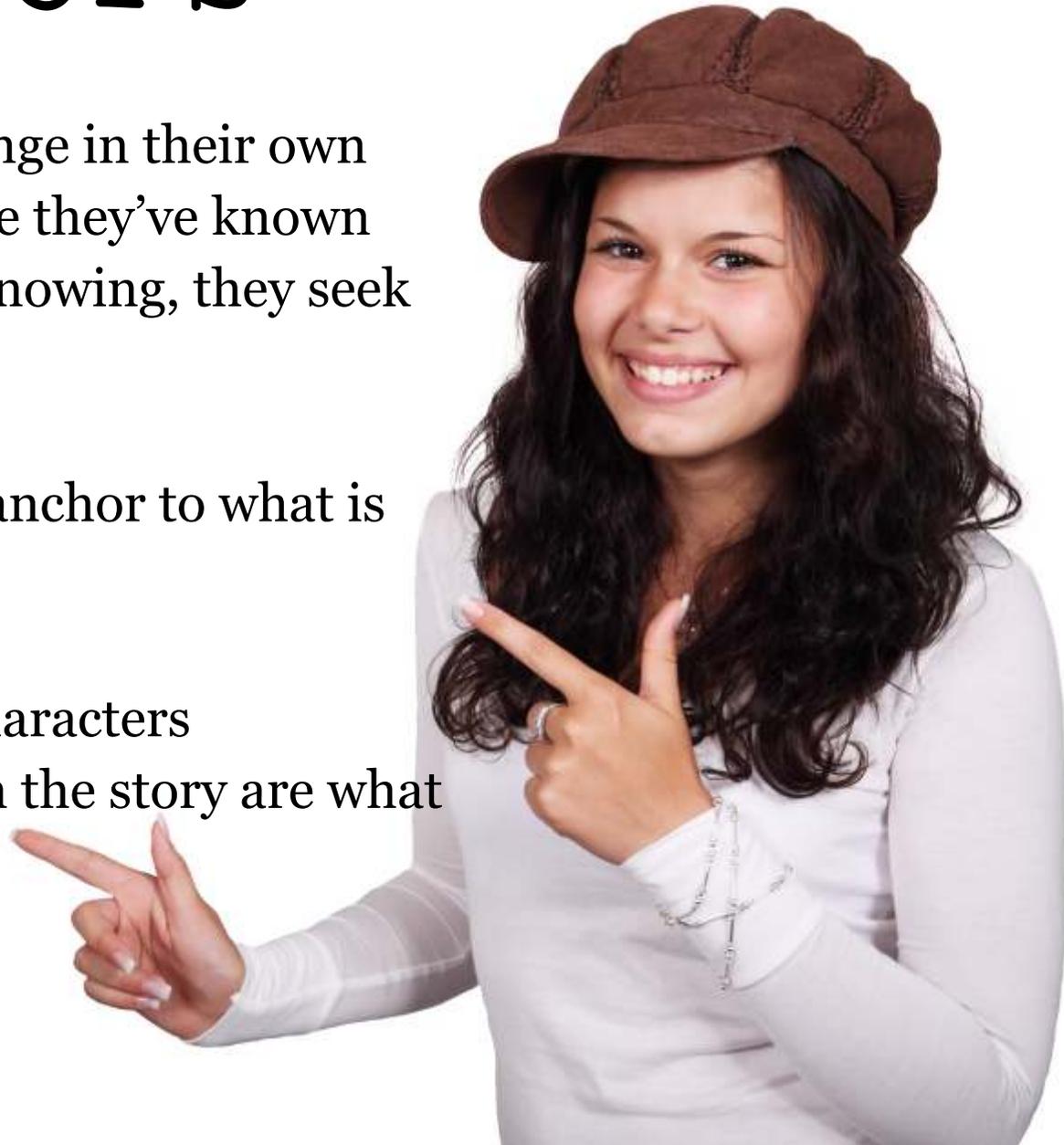
Characters

Like the only friend they know and will follow around in a party of strangers, your characters are the relatable anchors of your reader in the world you've created.

Transformation for yourself, your reader, and your character (especially the lead) must be important to you, especially as a writing Christian who wants to cause a transformational change in the life of your reader.

Character Archetypes

Character archetypes are typical characters we have encountered in the stories we've read or seen. We've laughed at them, hated them, cried for them … all in all, they held up the stories we've engaged with.

Tami Nantz, in her article "12 Character Archetypes You can Use to Create Heroes Your Reader Will Love' outlined some examples such as:

THE ACHIEVER

THE SAGE

THE PROTECTOR

THE VILLAIN

You can read more about these and many other character types and their qualities in the article I referenced in the previous page.

<<< CHECK IT OUT

While it's important that you use your imagination, it's also good to know the rules so that you can paint in your own way.

Like G.K. Chesterton said, *"Art, like morality, consists in drawing the line somewhere."*

Know the line, so that you know where to draw.

PRO Tip:
After watching a movie you love, search for its character tropes on TVTropes.org.
It gets you used to the archetypes so you can identify them anytime.

Transformation!

Transformation is key!
A story that takes your reader on a journey and leads them somewhere will stay with them forever. They will literally not leave your book the same.

When your character goes through a journey of change, internally and/or externally, he/she is leading the reader.
If you are not going through your own journey of transformation, you cannot lead others with sincerity. So no matter how you feel, start from where you are. Your heart position is the best place to start.
Like Maria sang in *The Sound of Music*, "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start."

The Transformational Arc

Act I   Act II   Act III

Resistance

Exhaustion   Known

Midpoint

Unknown

Release

Renewal

1st Turning Point

Push to breaking point   Grace

Fall

Moment of Enlightenment

2nd Turning Point

Transformational Moment

Call to Action

Inciting Incident

Awakening

Death Experience

Climax

Descent

Defining Moment

Resolution

Dara Marks
Inside Story: The Power of the Transformational Arc
805-640-1307 / dara@daramarks.com / www.DaraMarks.com

Character Roles

The protagonist is the MAIN CHARACTER. The friend of your reader. They deserve the most development so that they are relatable enough for your character to recognise and attach to.

The SUPPORTING CHARACTERS are usually bit players in the life of the protagonist, reacting and acting around her. They may not be as developed as the lead. However it's usually a welcome surprise when they are also affected by the events of the plot. Like in real life, it's not only one person's story.

Let's make a Character!

Hello my name is
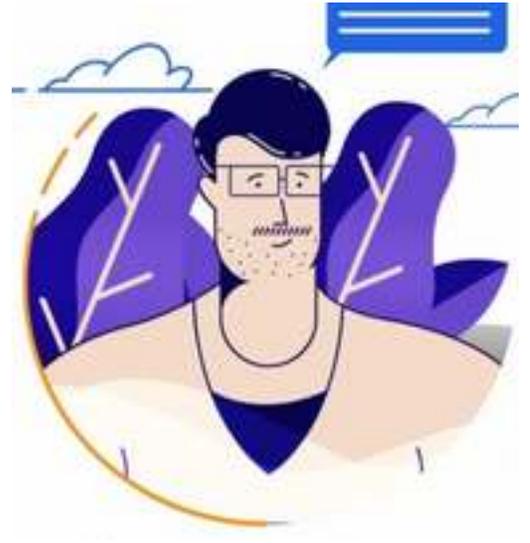
??? Give her a Name!

Give your character a name! Unless, of course, it's a saga about a nameless figure seeking identity ... now, that's an interesting concept too!

In allegories (symbolic stories) some names are may be on-the-nose, e.g. Christian, Pliable and Interpreter in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Character names could also be based on puns as an in-joke for your reader, e.g. Barb Dwyer, Justin Case, etc.

More often than not, base the names on the character's ethnicity.

The backstory is everything that has happened to your character before Chapter 1

You don't have to show everything at once, but give your character a backstory, and know it. It may be revealed gradually if it is necessary to the story

The backstory will leak through in your writing, inform the character's actions, and give them life. This answers the question: *What has shaped them into the person they are by the story's beginning?*
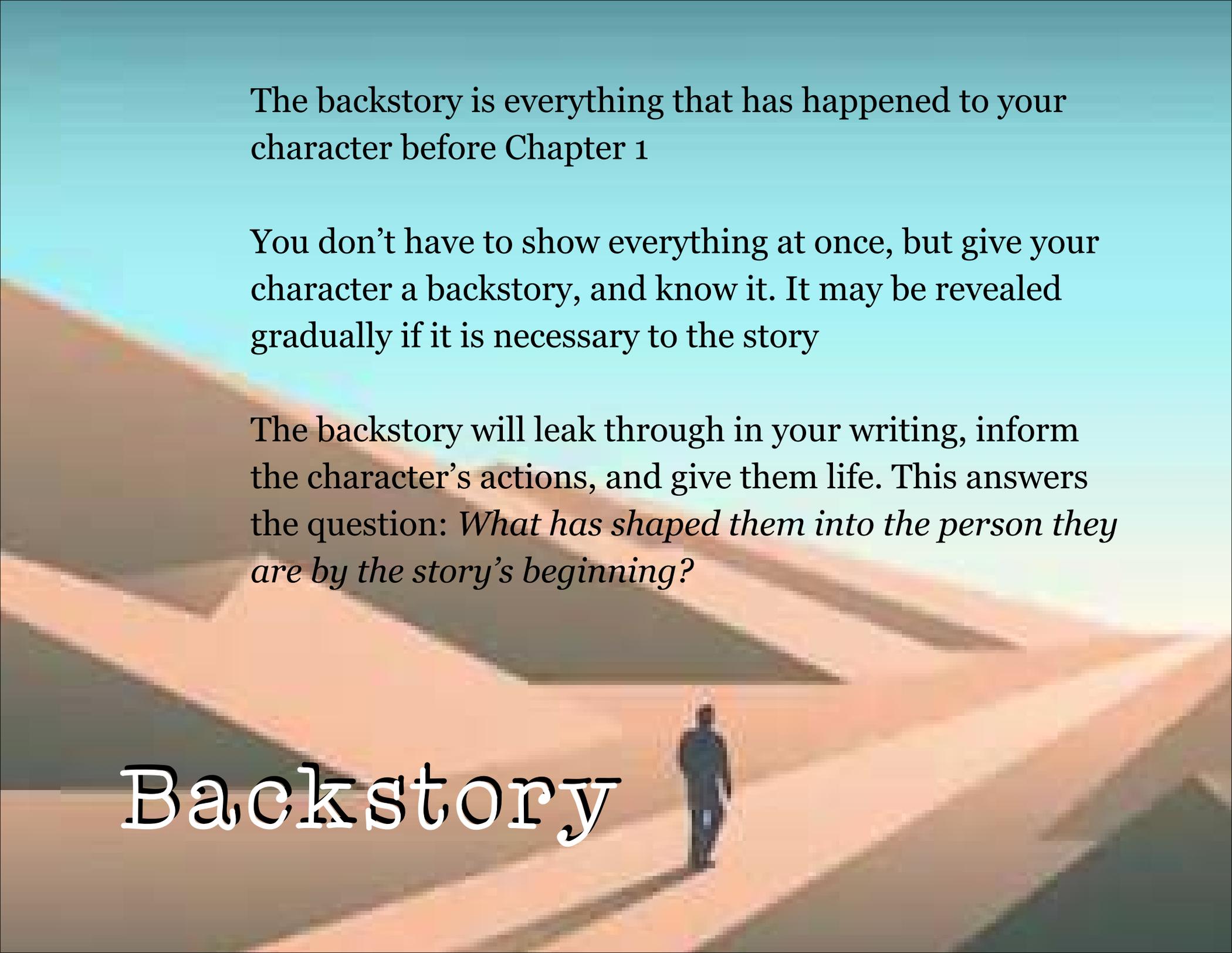
Backstory

Backstory Tips

Create a personality profile. They could be based on the following, for example

- Place of Birth
- Family and Siblings (does she have any)
- Education (where she schooled)
- Qualification (what she studied)
- Worldview and Mind-set
- Relationship/Marital status
- Personality Type
- Joys and Pleasures
- Anger triggers and deal-breakers

- Languages and accents (distinguishes characters from the writer's voice)
- Life desire
- How does she react when in shock? (It says a lot about her thought pattern)

Make her human
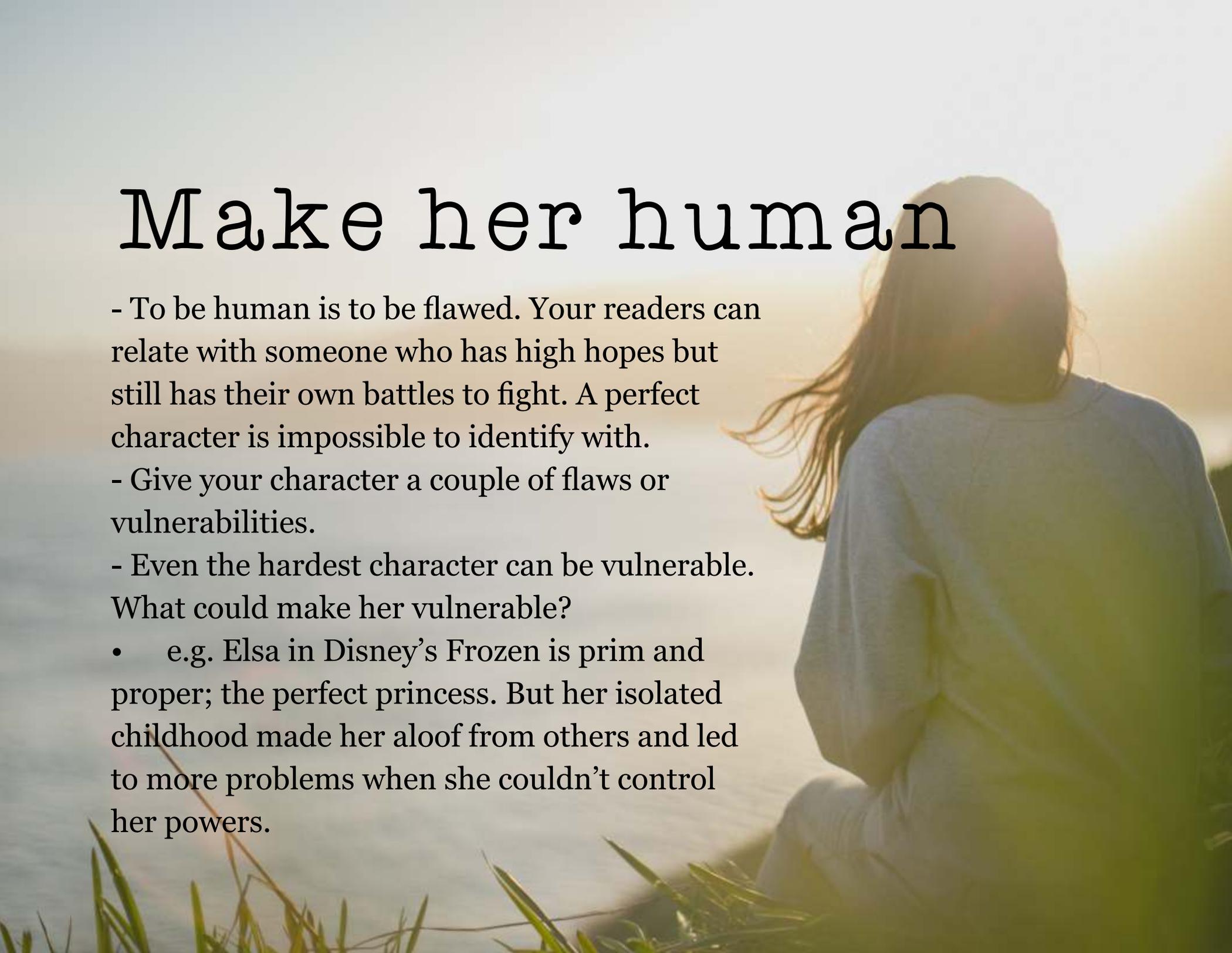
- To be human is to be flawed. Your readers can relate with someone who has high hopes but still has their own battles to fight. A perfect character is impossible to identify with.
- Give your character a couple of flaws or vulnerabilities.
- Even the hardest character can be vulnerable. What could make her vulnerable?
- e.g. Elsa in Disney's Frozen is prim and proper; the perfect princess. But her isolated childhood made her aloof from others and led to more problems when she couldn't control her powers.

Emphasize her inner life

The outward transformation of the adventure or thriller or drama or comedy is given more depth when there is an inner transformation in the character as well.
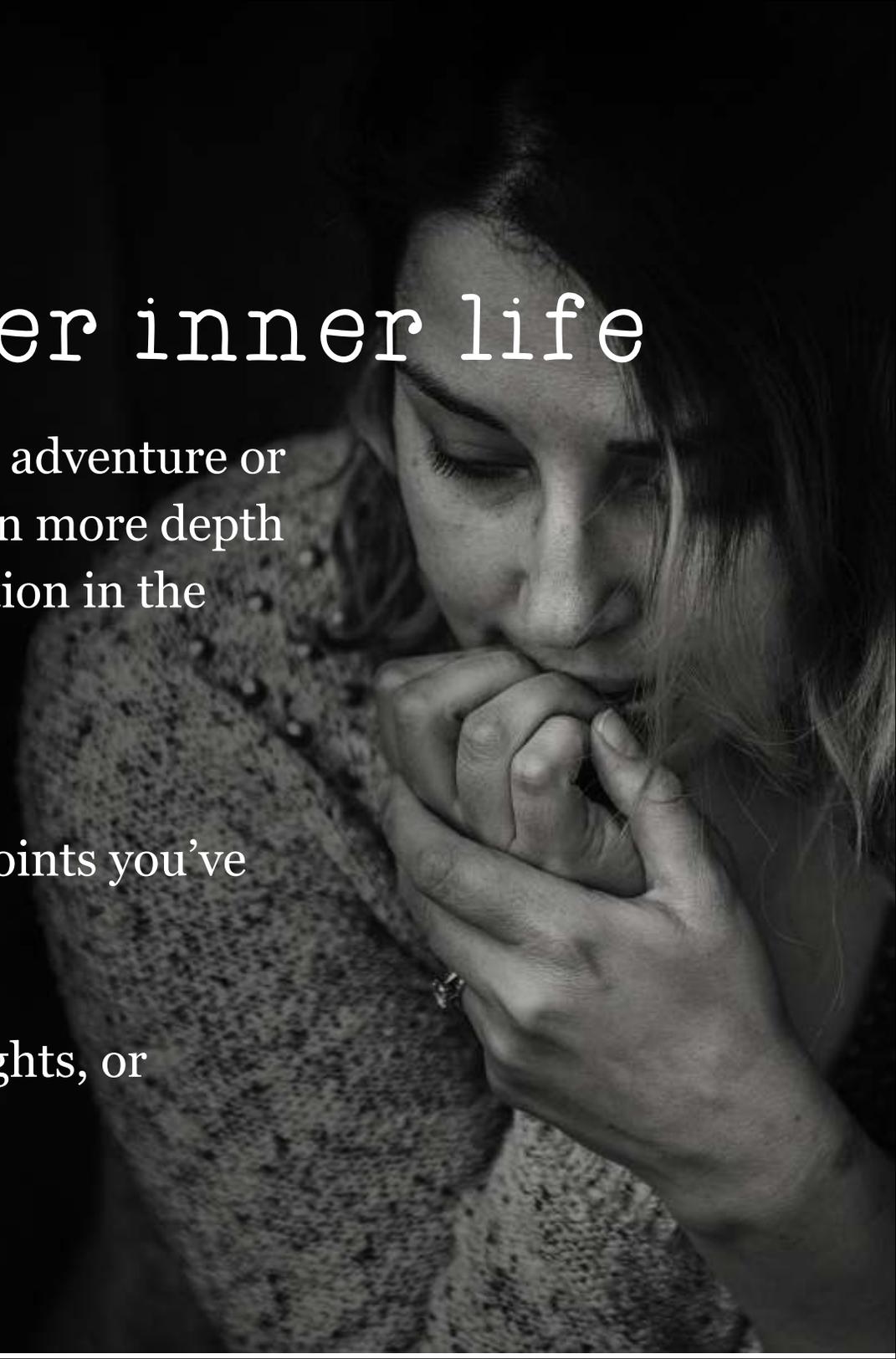
How does she react?

How does she see the world?

How is she experiencing the plot points you've thrown her into?

What keeps her awake at night?

We can do this in writing her thoughts, or implying through reactions.

Draw upon your own experience

One of the best and easiest way to create an authentic realistic character is to base them on yourself or someone you know.

Or, whichever character you eventually create, think, *What would I do if I was the person experiencing this?*

As you get better at this, you can embody characters you've never met in real life through practice.

Research

Don't let the word scare you.
To better understand the character you're creating, do a bit of research on what the people or the settings of those characters are like.
For example, you don't have to be an astronaut to be able to write an authentic story about an astronaut. A simple Google search and a couple YouTube videos on the subject will open your eyes to what their world is like.
It adds to the authenticity of your story.
Search.
Like Jesus said in a different context, "Those that seek, find."

Show, don't tell!

Beth felt very sad. "I feel terrible," she said.

Compare the sentence above to this.
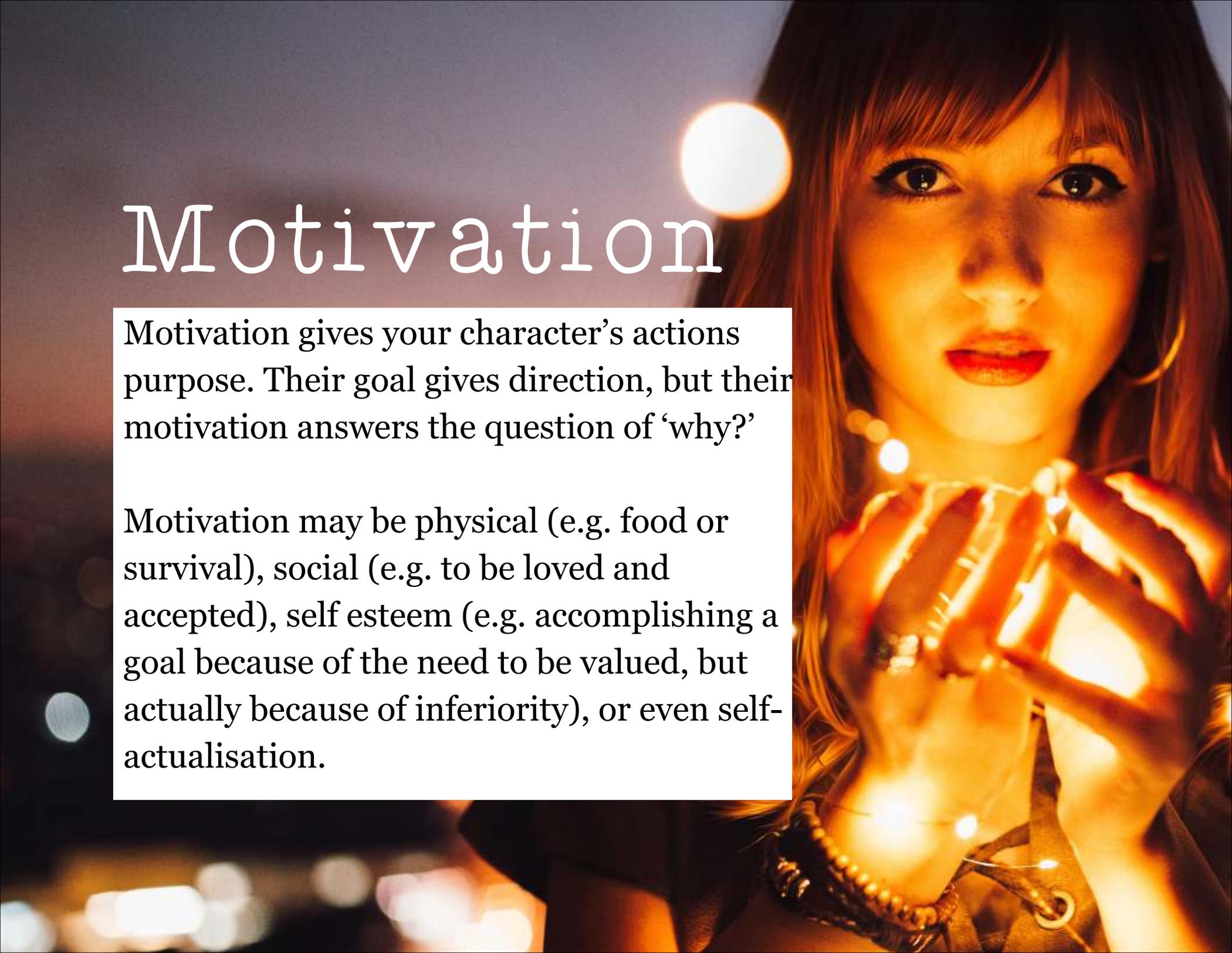*Betty shut her eyes, desperate to hold the tears back. But they still came.*

The latter appeals more because we gave credit to the reader. The theatre of the reader's mind was activated with a few words as they just watched a video clip. We didn't tell them what to experience.
They saw it themselves.
Practice painting scenes with words, and get better at it.

Motivation

Motivation gives your character's actions purpose. Their goal gives direction, but their motivation answers the question of 'why?'

Motivation may be physical (e.g. food or survival), social (e.g. to be loved and accepted), self esteem (e.g. accomplishing a goal because of the need to be valued, but actually because of inferiority), or even self-actualisation.

The Villain

It could be an individual or an abstract challenge and obstacle, but in all cases, a story rises or falls on the strength of its villain.

The challenge the villain presents amps up the level of heroic courage the protagonist needs in order to overcome and/or complete his/her arc.

At their core, every villain believes they are doing the right thing. To illustrate them authentically, you may have to develop the character and give him/her emotional depth.

It raises your story, and your protagonist, more than you can imagine.

Adapt

Don't be frustrated if developing your character means altering your story.

Adapt.

It builds you as a storyteller and is so much worth the effort of producing a better fleshed-out character.
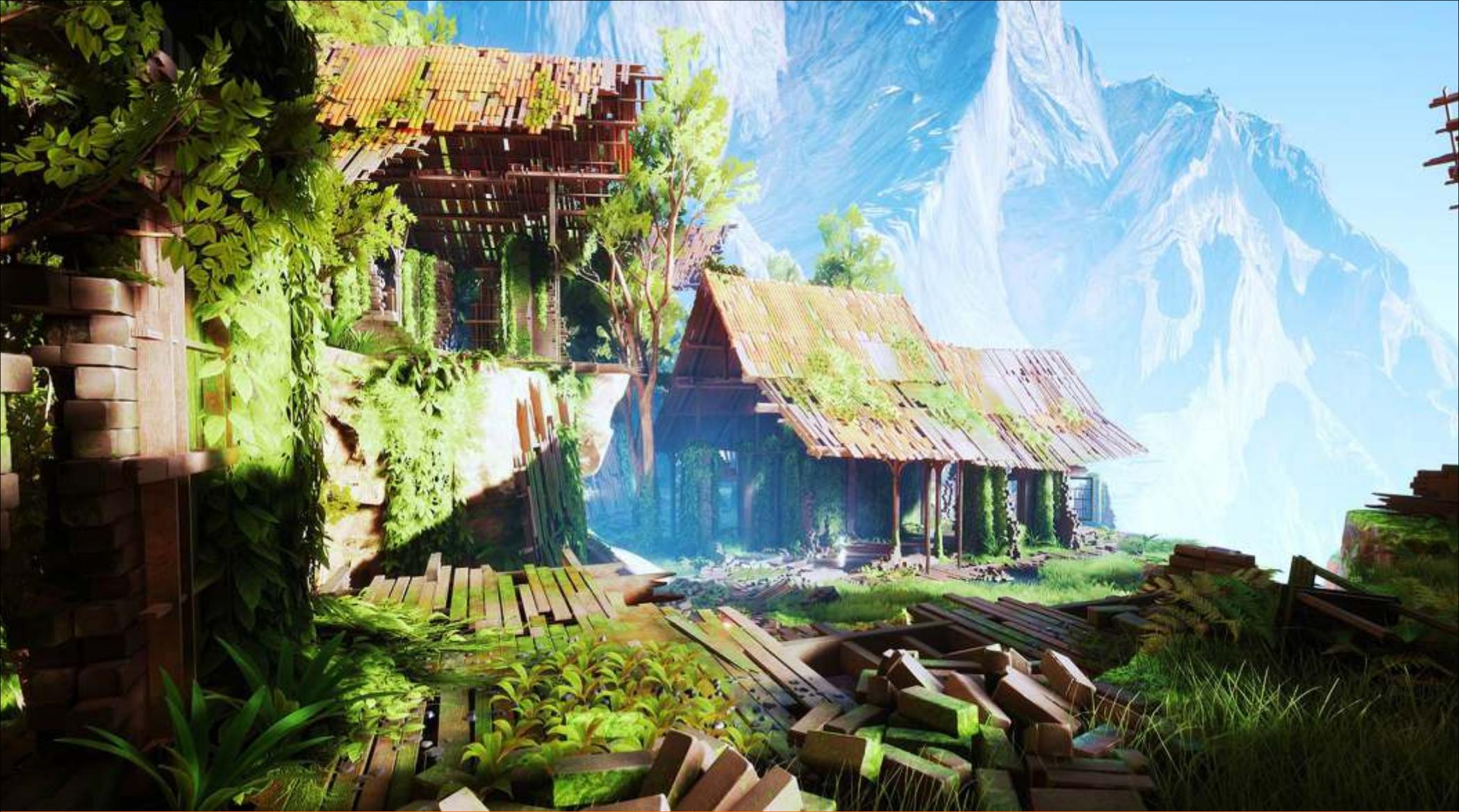
Suggested Reading

Jerry Jenkins, *Character Motivation: How to Craft Realistic Characters*

Jerry Jenkins, *Masterfully Showing Emotion in Your Characters*

Jerry Jenkins, *What Makes a Great Villain? Your Checklist for Writing a Good Bad Guy*

Thanks for going through these short notes. I look forward to what you create as well.
Got more questions, ask me at eonimisi@gmail.com
And if you haven't already, join the Christian Literary Hub for a community of believers who are writers and doing awesomely too.

THANK YOU