



Sarah Mayberry on

Creating Strong Inner Conflict for your Characters

It may sound crazy, but creating believable reasons for your hero and heroine to NOT fall in love with each other is essential to creating a successful romance. Without some kind of block in their way, watching your hero and heroine fall in love would be pleasant, but not very entertaining. We all want to be happy, but we want our heroes and heroines to go on a journey to find love. We want them to earn it, and that's where internal and external conflicts come in. I'm only going to touch lightly on external conflicts in this article, because, in my experience, coming up with the external block for your hero and heroine is the simpler of the two conflicts to generate since it's the aspect of the novel that is usually easily summarised on the back cover of the book, and it's usually the thumbnail we use when we describe the initial scenario of our story to a friend or colleague.

External Conflict - Plot driven

The External Conflict or External Block, as it's sometimes called, is any situation, event or person outside of the character's control that blocks or opposes the character's desire/goals. So, essentially, this is the plot's reason for the hero and heroine to not get along. In my first book, *Can't Get Enough*, Claire was forced to take on playboy Jack as the editor of her magazine in order to appease an old-fashioned client. In the first of my Daytime Diva books, *Take On Me*, Sadie returns from holiday to find the man who humiliated her in high school has been hired as her temporary subordinate.

In both of the above scenarios, it's easy to see at least one reason why these people are going to have trouble getting it together. Either they have very separate, even opposite, ambitions, or they're worried about the professional repercussions of giving in to their attraction for one another.

Once your characters' attraction to one another has overcome the external reasons for them not to be together, it's time for their personal issues to get in the way. Which is where internal conflict comes in.

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Internal Conflict - Character driven

The Internal Conflict or Block is the struggle that goes on within a character that makes them vulnerable or stops them taking risks or reaching for what they want. In other words, this is the character's reasons for why falling in love is a scary thing for them.

In *Can't Get Enough*, Claire was afraid to make herself vulnerable to Jack because her troubled, distant relationship with her father had left her feeling she was intrinsically unlovable. Jack was afraid to allow himself to fall in love because he'd lost his twin brother and had never really dealt with his grief.

In my recent *Blaze*, *Below The Belt*, Jamie refuses to allow herself to be vulnerable to love because a past lover took terrible advantage of her and her family during a time a crisis. Jamie is also subconsciously punishing/seeking redemption for herself in the boxing ring because she believes she let down her father, and is therefore responsible for his subsequent suicide.

Both of the above situations resulted in my heroes and heroines conducting fierce internal battles between their fears, wants and needs. And, in the end, deciding to be brave and take the leap of faith into trusting their lover and making themselves vulnerable.

Finding your characters' inner conflict

In my opinion, tapping into a character's vulnerabilities is what makes them a real and empathetic person for the reader to engage with. It also, handily, provides my characters with reasons why NOT to fall in love.

So, how do you make your characters vulnerable? I think you need to find their fear. What is this person more afraid of than anything else in the world? Are they:

- Afraid of being rejected?
- Afraid of being abandoned?
- Afraid of being ridiculed?
- Afraid of being wrong?
- Afraid of letting someone down?
- Afraid of hurting someone?
- Afraid of being hurt?
- Afraid of being weak?
- Afraid of being trapped?

Once you have a fear nailed down, you need to come up with a reason for that fear. What happened to this person to make them fear being rejected/abandoned/ridiculed? Do they have issues with one of their parents or a sibling? Did they have a formative childhood experience? Were they bullied at school?

Overlooked by boys? Laughed at by girls? Did they lose a loved one? Have a terrible accident? Or have they suffered a painful betrayal? Were they fat or scrawny? Did they have terrible acne? A limp? A speech impediment?

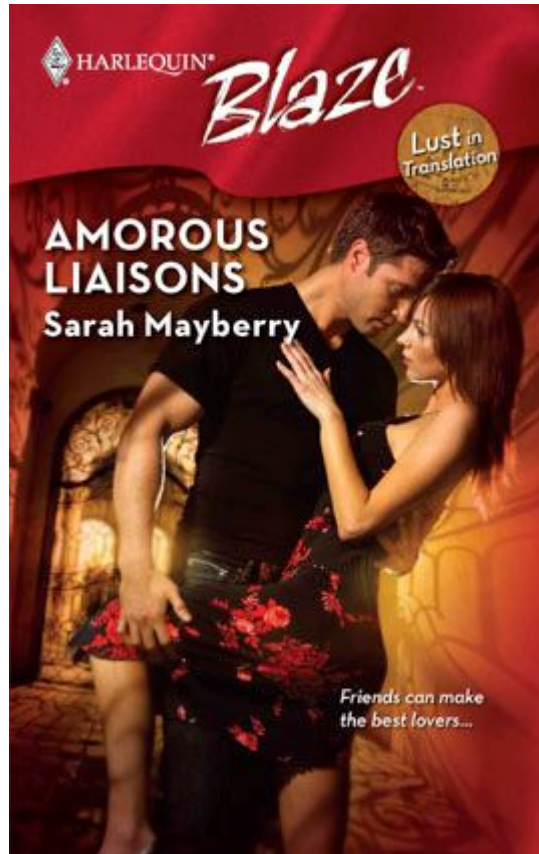
Once you have your character's weak spot, or fear, and the reasons for that fear, suddenly you also have backstory and history. Half the battle is won.

Do my bits match your bits?

Once you've found your characters' internal conflicts/fears, it's good to put your hero and heroine beside each other to see how their particular problems are going to rub up against each other. Sometimes you might find that you've created two characters who are afraid of the same thing, for different reasons. This is not

necessarily a bad thing - you just have to figure in their common fear to each step in the story. Imagine the lack of communication and game playing that would take place between two characters who are both afraid of letting someone down, for example.

Sometimes when I start thinking about a book, one character and all their messy flaws will come to me more easily than the other. In those cases, I like to really look at that known character's fear and use it against them to find the perfect heroine/hero to stimulate their fear as much as possible. For example, if I had a playboy character whose deepest fear was to be trapped in an unhappy marriage in the same way that his father was, pitting him against a woman whose greatest fear was abandonment would create excellent internal conflict for both of them. Both characters are each other's worst nightmares - seen through her eyes, he's a serial abandoner; seen through his eyes, she's a ball and chain. But in finding each other and falling in love, these two characters challenge each other to overcome their deepest fears. If you can create two characters who help each other to heal in this way, I believe you're on to a real emotional winner.



The journey of self-discovery

A last but very important point - obviously, while these fears and motivations are working subconsciously within your characters, fuelling their behaviour, their internal monologues, their reactions, etc, they are not consciously aware of them at the beginning of your story. A character who knows their own fears is an actualised character and he or she isn't going to be much fun to play with. At the start of your story, your characters have problems but they believe they're coping just fine, thank you very much. It's going through the ins and outs of your plot, dealing with the external blocks to their attraction to the hero/heroine that brings them up against their internal blocks and forces them to discover/acknowledge the fears that have held them back from life and love. In dealing with their fears - or deciding to take the leap of faith into love and trust - they become whole.

Resources for building flawed, real characters

Over the years, I've found a handful of great tools that are helpful when I'm exploring my characters. They are, in no particular order:

www.personalitypage.com/portraits.html

This website describes Jung's 16 different personality types. I find the shorthand descriptors for each type particularly helpful in deciding which one might suit my hero or heroine. Who better than The Guardian to be a cop hero in a book? And wouldn't the failed actress in your story perhaps have many of the characteristics of The Artist? There are little gems in all the personality descriptions, but I find the section under the love heart icon, which is about relationships, has some great stuff. When you go through to this page and click on each personality type, it delivers a list of strengths and weaknesses for that personality. Here are the weaknesses for The Guardian:

- Tendency to believe that they are always right
- Tendency to need to always be in charge
- Impatient with inefficiency and sloppiness
- Not naturally in tune with what others are feeling
- Not naturally good at expressing their feelings and emotions
- May inadvertently hurt others with insensitive language
- Tendency to be materialistic and status-conscious
- Generally uncomfortable with change, and moving into new territories

I don't know about you, but that list really gets my brain ticking over... What would a person who behaved this way be afraid of? And why? Find the answer, and you have their fear, their backstory and the way they behave. Now you just have to find the perfect heroine to butt up against their issues...

www.emotionaltoolbox.com

I was lucky enough to attend a seminar Laurie Hutzler did for the Neighbours team a few years ago. Her Character Map exercise is an excellent kick start for building characters.

You'll find the link to the Character Map pages on the left hand side of her home page. Laurie asks you to answer a list of questions about your character, and then explains how the answers feed into how they operate in the world. Laurie's very big on knowing what your characters are afraid of, also, which is why I find the Character Map so helpful.

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The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes and Heroines: Sixteen Master Archetypes

Cowden, LaFever, Viders (Approx \$12 US from Amazon)

This book catalogues 16 archetypal characters commonly seen in novels and movies. Some might call them stereotypes rather than archetypes, since the authors refer to them as The Librarian, The Bad Boy, etc, etc, but I find this book helpful to kick start me into thinking about what sort of characters might deal well (or badly!) with each other in certain situations.

Sarah has two books available locally in April: *A Natural Father*, HMB SuperRomance Duo, and *Amorous Liaisons*, a HQ Blaze in the Mother's Day Gift Pack. Read excerpts at her website www.sarahmayberry.com/. Most of Sarah's backlist, including *Take On Me* and *Below The Belt*, are available as eBooks from <http://ebooks.eharlequin.com/>.

