

# Secrets of Romantic Suspense: A Series of Eight Lectures

By Lisa Gardner

*This continues this series of eight lectures, which started with the first installment, "Introduction."*

## **Lecture IV. Develop Those Characters**

If there is one element that can make or break a book, character development is it. Romantic suspense is about impending danger and blossoming romance—and none of it is meaningful if we don't care about the characters. Moreover, not just the protagonists need to be interesting in romantic suspense, but the villains should be compelling as well. Otherwise, you're pitting tough, clever protagonists against slow, stupid villains, leading to contrived conflict and tension. The best suspense books break new ground with their villains. Think Lex Luthor, Hannibal Lector, Cruella de Ville, etc.

Obviously, a whole class could be taught on character development. For more information on villains, check out the article, "The Villain: Developing the Diabolical Prima Donna," also available at [www.LisaGardner.com/TricksoftheTrade](http://www.LisaGardner.com/TricksoftheTrade). Otherwise, here are some key points to keep in mind for properly populating your romantic suspense novel.

### **The Importance of Goals**

Every character—including the villain—should have a goal. In fact, each main character should have two goals: an external goal and an internal goal.

#### *External Goal*

The external goal is generally something simple and obvious—catch the homicidal maniac, or keep from getting killed by the homicidal maniac. If you're the villain, your goal might be to wreck havoc on the world or to exact revenge upon the evil police officer who put you in jail, etc. A nice, life-affirming goal. This external goal drives the

plot of your novel, and obviously your protagonist's external goal is going to directly conflict with the antagonist's external goal, or your book will lack of conflict.

### *Internal Goal*

The second kind of goal is internal. This is generally an emotional goal, anchored in the hidden depths of your hero or heroine. For example, the hard-working female cop's external goal is to catch the bad guy, but her secret, internal goal is to finally win her demanding father's hard-sought approval. The internal goal reveals an area of vulnerability in your protagonist. It's also a universal goal, something relevant to all of us. Thus, why we personally don't have to catch bad guys, we do understand the desire to impress our fathers. In that sense, we are bonded with the heroine, we feel for her, we want her to succeed, and not just because we don't like bad guys, but because we understand her secret ache. If she is affirmed, then we are affirmed. When the going gets rough, it's the internal goal that takes over and drives your hero and heroine to the finish line, generating the emotional pull to go with your plot's intellectual twists and turns.

Now, the villain can also have an internal goal, but it's harder to pull off. In *Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal Lector gets about as much stage time as a villain ever has, and you still can't say he has an internal goal. I think it's the nature of a psychopath. He already feels perfectly superior and thus is hardly a candidate for self-actualization. I'm open-minded though. In some scenarios, it might make sense, and it would certainly take your villain beyond the normal cardboard-cutout crazy.

By the way, the best book written on character development through character goals is Deb Dixon's *Goal, Motivation and Conflict*, available through Gryphon Books, [www.GryphonBooks.com](http://www.GryphonBooks.com).

### **The Importance of Having Something to Lose**

Every major character must have something at stake in your novel. For the protagonists, this is pretty simple. Most suspense novels sooner or later become about life and death. You can hardly have anything more at stake than that, which is why it's such compelling reading. The villain may also have his life at stake, or his freedom. In *The Perfect Husband*, my heroine and the villain, her ex-husband, actually have the same thing at stake—their daughter. Tess is desperate that her ex-husband never get their little girl, and Jim Beckett is equally determined to reclaim his daughter so that she may be raised properly. As the book reaches the final climax, the extreme stakes for both the winner and loser contribute to the growing drama. This makes for compelling conflict and is one of the ways good characterization helps create a “page-turner.”

### **Everyone has a Strength**

Every major character should have a few key strengths that mold and form them, e.g., the genius, the athlete, the military man. Don't give them too many assets or they will become unbelievable. Also, while you don't want to incorporate too many clichés, everyone is a basic personality type, and referring to this up front helps us immediately understand your characters. Oh, she's the tough, corporate type who's secretly vulnerable. Oh, he's the dark, brooding male who secretly wishes the world did have more love. You should be able to introduce your character and his or her goal in one paragraph. Then through the course of the book, you expand this introduction through your character's actions and interactions. Thus, while you may start with a "generic" personality type, by the end of the novel you have added the layers and depths that make your character a unique person on a compelling journey of love and hate.

### **Everyone has a Weakness**

Every major character should have some area of vulnerability. In *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris, one of the most riveting scenes is the killer falling in love with a truly wonderful, generous woman, not something he had planned. Likewise, the hero's battle with alcohol throughout the same story makes him approachable and sympathetic. People are flawed and those flaws make them genuine. When it comes to characters, we admire their strengths, but we are bonded by their weaknesses. Again, as the characters struggle with their individual Achilles heels, we sympathize with their pain, and their triumph becomes our triumph. Except for the villain, of course. While we may like him in some ways, his evil doings are still reprehensible enough that we cheerfully embrace his demise. Think of it as novel therapy for readers who spend their days battling morning commutes and corporate cubicles with no hope of victory in sight.

### **The Imperative of a Moral Code**

Every character should have their own moral code, the things they will and will not do. Your heroine will do anything to catch a murderer, but put her child in jeopardy. Your killer suffers from a homicidal rage, but refuses to stoop to theft. Your tough guy hero beats up punks, manipulates desperate women, but still wouldn't dream of saying a contrary word to his grandma. Everyone has boundaries and they should shape your characters and the emerging battle. Consider your characters' moral codes as the ground rules for the emerging conflict. You establish these rules up front, and by following them through the course of the novel, you not only remain true to your characters, but you add to the emerging conflict. Your heroine must escape the villain, but lugging a five-year old kid is slowing her down. Of course she can't abandon her child, however, so what will she do? Moral codes give your characters depth, as well as create plausible conflicts in your novel.

### **The Imperative of Evolution**

Everyone must evolve. Conflict and love are like fire, breaking down your characters and forging better, stronger people in their place. Cynics learn to love, loners to trust.

The heroine and hero unite, not just in bed, but in spirit. They impact each other, bend each other, and reshape each other permanently. By the end of the book, the hero and heroine could not go their separate ways and still feel complete. When that happens, you know you've done your job well. Remember, people read popular fiction for entertainment. So regardless of how much romance you have in your novel, versus how much suspense, you want to end your novel with your characters appearing better off than they were at the start of the novel. Maybe you don't want them to be magically marry, but you should at least end with the feeling that they love each other and have found new meaning in their lives.

All right, so following the above criteria, you can establish who your characters are. You've given them goals, figured out their conflicts, given them a personality type, some strengths, some weaknesses. In other words, you have a lot of information about these people. Now how do you gracefully weave character information and backstory into your fast-paced novel?

### **Books are Like Cocktail Parties**

One of the fundamental mistakes a writer can make in a novel is to dump every little detail about the hero or heroine in the first ten pages of the book. We learn about the horrible day the hero accidentally shot a kid on the job, the wife who dumped him shortly thereafter, the father who is disappointed in him, and the bottle of Johnny Walker that keeps calling his name. Sure, this is all relevant to your set up, but it's too much, too soon. Hey, we barely know this guy's name. If you'd met him for the first time tonight, and he started with this much information, you'd run from the building. Go easy on all the dirty laundry. Books aren't school reports; you don't have to prove everything you know up front. Instead, you have 300-400 pages to dole out information, peeling back the layers of your character slowly as we get to know this person better, and care about him that much more.

Which brings us to character development mandate #2:

### **Start by Showing, Not Telling**

Personally, I think it's always best to start a book with action—let your character establish his personality by how he conducts himself, and make simple one-sentence references to the rest. For example, when I wrote *The Third Victim*, I started with a school shooting, not my heroine's savage past. When we first meet Rainie, all we know is that she's a bored small town cop with a questionable past. Then bam, word comes in about the shooting and for the next sixty-five pages we meet professional Rainie—a serious cop, an earnest cop, a tough cop doing the best she can. Only after all that, when I've broken her heart and mine by describing a mass murder, do we learn what happened to Rainie when she was sixteen. And we learn it mostly as a rumor heard by the villain. This allowed me to get in Rainie's backstory, while still maintaining the pacing—and the inherent mystery—surrounding my heroine.

In a romantic suspense novel, where you are juggling both character and plot, you can't afford to waste space. Opening with a scene that simply introduces your character, say the classic hero/heroine at a gravesite making a vow, is static. You've spent ten pages setting up character, but haven't done a thing to advance plot.

The far superior trick is to use your plot to develop your character. By watching your character grapple with conflict, conduct an investigation, inquire into a mystery, we learn about the type of person your hero/heroine is. We can learn sense of humor through the dialogue, we can learn values, we can learn goals, we can learn strengths and weaknesses. Then periodically, particularly after extremely tough/dramatic sequences, you can have a "resting moment," a quiet interlude where your characters—and your reader—catch their breaths. This is the perfect place for romance to develop or for your characters to reflect upon themselves and their lives.

And thus slowly but surely, you can dole out the full thread of your character's personality, weaving in backstory, secret hurts, and the deep down desires that make your character come alive.

### **Conclusion**

Take the time to properly flesh out your protagonists—and villain—up front. Whether that's writing out a character profile, or simply putting the pieces together in your head is up to you. But think about your characters as people, then consider their values and goals and how they will contribute to the conflict in your novel. If you're afraid you don't have enough conflict in your story, definitely revisit your characterization and not just your plot. Character profiles should be an implicit source of drama and tension for your story.

Finally, don't rush character development in your book and don't be afraid to delete. Often the writer's instinct is to dump in all information up front. If you have to do it, then do it. But when the novel is completed, revisit your beginning. You'll be amazed at how much of that information isn't necessary anymore—you covered it in other areas of the novel, or you've demonstrated those character traits enough that you don't need to flat out say that the heroine is conflicted by her relationship with her father, etc.

The nicest thing about writing is that nobody has to see the first draft. ☺

Next up, plot, plot, plot!