

Creating Your Cast of Characters

By Craig “Hackin’ Boo” Harrison

The richness of your stories derives, in part, from the richness of your characters. The way they walk and talk, the ways they act and react, sets them apart from each other and sets up the action to follow. How do you create and inhabit vivid characters for your listeners to experience?

Who are your favorite story characters? Why do you love them so? Which characters do you most revile, abhor or detest? And why is that? The best characters, be they protagonists or antagonists, inspire us to love them or loathe them, to know them and to help imagine the world through their eyes. How will you create compelling characters for your stories?

Getting Into Character

Apart from our own voice, it can be daunting creating different characters from scratch. Where to begin? Do you create your character’s name first and flesh out their details thereafter? Or perhaps you create your character’s stance first. Often the physical characteristics inform your character’s voice and speech patterns and help you keep them distinct from each other when telling your story.

Long ago but not so far away I created a character specifically to help me add vocal variety to a presentation assignment in Toastmasters. I wanted to give a sermon and so I created The Very Right Reverend Verbal T. Toastmaster. The absurd name became my springboard. From there I affected a Southern accent and sketched out a rhythmic pattern for my sermon, full of rhyme and wordplay. I exaggerated my cadence, elongating key words to embellish my words. Instead of saying “I am the very reverend Verbal T. Toastmaster” I would bellow “ I AM...The VERRRRRY Reverend...Verbal-T-Toastmaster!

Props to Propel the Character

Next I obtained a yellow gown, a scarf and a tambourine to help me get further into character. I delivered this sermon at a story swap and received great feedback. After giving several local renditions I nervously gave my presentation in Houston. There I was admonished for not pushing it to the hilt! Thereafter I jumped on tables, crawled on the floor and literally went over-the-top, for the desired comedic effect. Hallelujah!



Show, Don’t Tell

This is far from the only way to create characters. According to storyteller and humorist Kelly Swanson <<http://kellyswanson.net>> of High Point, North Carolina, there are other ways. “I don’t ever dress up as my characters. I simply become them.” This marvelous storyteller also helps others put more character in their characters. She should know! She’s created so many characters she decided to populate a fictitious town with them, Prides Hollow. (The one just past Critter’s Creek!).

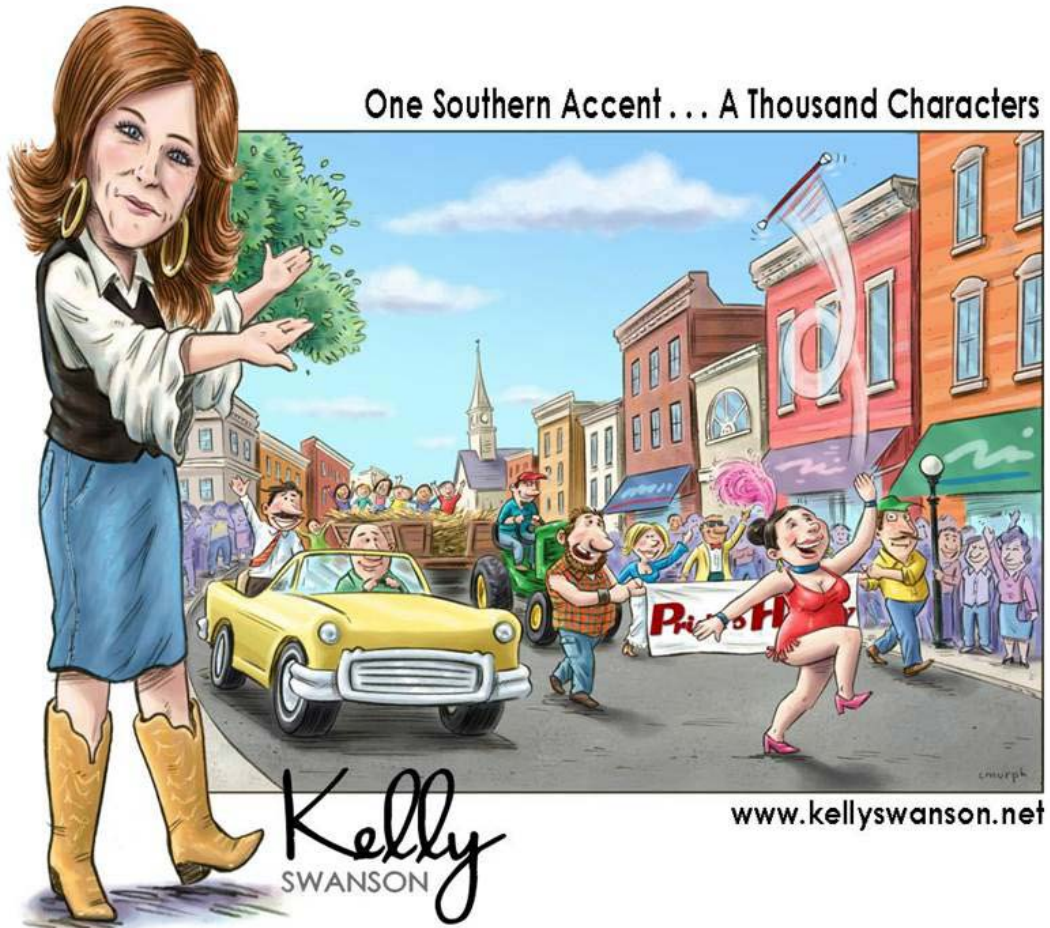
One Southern Accent . . . A Thousand Characters

About Kelly Swanson

Kelly Swanson is an award-winning storyteller, comedian, motivational speaker, and author of "Who Hijacked My Fairy Tale?" Her career began 23 years ago, as a professional storyteller, where she created and fell in love with a town she calls Prides Hollow, and a cast of characters who make you laugh, motivate you, and delight you at every turn.

When she's not traveling the world making people laugh, she's a frazzled wife and mom, trying to convince her family that chocolate is a food group.

For more about Kelly go to www.kellyswanson.net.



Swanson explains that colorful characters add flavor to stories, infuse them with energy, tension, humor and more. Among her quirky characters inhabiting Prides Hollow: Charlie Just Charlie, Alabaster Cripe and Aunt Vyrnetta! Some were borne of a snippet gleaned from an Oprah show, an observation at an airport or conversations among housewives about their husbands' driving habits. The characters take form from there.

Fatten Up Flat Characters

Many storytellers tell you what their characters do. Swanson encourages tellers instead to show us who the characters really are. When you show your audience the character's essence they really understand the character. Share your character's personality, idiosyncrasies and perspectives on the world. In that way, Kelly assures us we will truly know them.

It's Your Turn

How will you develop new characters for new stories? Will you model a character after someone you know, a stranger you observed or someone you had a brief encounter with?

Will you give them a funny, unique or apropos name to their nature? Or perhaps a name that's incongruous with who they are or how they appear?

To develop your character further: how will they walk, talk, listen and act? Can you embellish or exaggerate their mannerisms for comedic or dramatic effect?

Now, put them in an interesting situation. How will they react? Put them in bizarre situations where they are a fish out of water or in the wrong place at the wrong time. How does that work for them?

To build your story and define your characters further, put two or more of them into relationship with each other. Now it gets even more interesting. Add some tension, drama and intrigue...raise the stakes, add some conflict and voilà...you've got a story!

Storyteller and 16-year NSA member **Craig "Hackin' Boo" Harrison** has been traveling the road from being a character to having character. At age 11 he went door-to-door selling Recycled Jokes, he still preaches the gospel of Toastmasters as Verbal T. and is the chief expressionist of www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com. His tales of humor and humanity feature other compelling characters from his travels. See for yourself at websites HackinBoo.com, SpeakAndLeadWithConfidence.com and ExpressionsOfExcellence.com.

Storytelling Techniques Young Listeners Respond To

By Craig Hackin' 'Boo Harrison

www.HackinBoo.com



Photo: Julie Brown

Are you looking for more traction when telling stories to kids. Here is a checklist of some techniques to help your stories appeal to youth.

Alliteration: the use of *strings of similar sounding* words is pleasing to the ear.
Ex. "She sells Sea Shells..."

Rhyme and Rhythm: Also pleasing to the ear.
Example: Dr. Seuss.

Funny Names: Kids are captivated by distinctive names. Some are funnier than others. Read Craig's article on funny names:
www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com/ARTICLES/funny_names_harrison.pdf

Distinctive Voices: Help differentiate different players in a story. Dialog should be present tense: yell, whisper, whine, roar, kvetch (complain), bellow, etc.

Exaggeration: Whether in voices, feelings, sensations, etc., extremes can be powerful.
"It was sooooooo cold..."

Humor: Kids like funny sounds, surprises, and especially slapstick — physical humor.

Being put into the story: Listeners like to be involved in the story. Put them there! Give them a part to play: sounds & sound effects, movements, etc.

Repetition: Kids anticipate the repetition. The "rule of three" rules in stories. It's a familiar structure for sharing information. Use it.

Call and Response: See Craig's handout on this West African technique for audience participation: www.LaughLovers.us/handouts/Harrison_Call&Response.pdf

Anthropomorphization: The ascribing of human features to plants, animals, things. Giving human qualities to non-humans.

While this list is far from exhaustive, the use of these and other techniques will enhance your telling of stories, whether for teens, small kids or big ones (AKA Adults).



Storyteller Craig Hackin' 'Boo Harrison tells tales of humor and humanity. Visit www.HackinBoo.com for more information about his stories, speeches and workshops. Reach him at 510-547-0664.