



Belinda Alexandra

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CHERYL AKLE: Do you dream of writing a novel? Or do you just like listening to authors talk. I'm Cheryl Akle from the Better reading *Stories Behind the Story* podcast.

This new podcast springs from many requests we've had from listeners to do more episodes on how to write. We've produced a six-part series where we discuss the craft of writing with some of Australia's top authors and industry professionals. Welcome to *Better Reading On Writing*.

Lee Child

CHERYL: That has never been a character in in, you know, crime literature as well known, I think is Jack Reacher.

LEE CHILD: Yeah, I think that's right, that it's absolutely character base.

CHERYL: It is.

LEE: And I try to make obviously each book exciting and I like to make the plot gripping and suspenseful and interesting. But I don't necessarily do huge plots in the sense that other other

books are, you know, this is the world is not facing nuclear annihilation. In the case of Dan Brown, you know, it's not a huge thing, religious myth stretching back millennia. These are, I hope, suspenseful and exciting plots, but they involve ordinary people in fairly desperate circumstances. And it is the character that carries the weight of the series.

Belinda Alexandra

CHERYL: That was the Lee Child telling me how it's not wild plots or storylines, but his character, Jack Reacher, who carries the weight of his best-selling series. A great character really does make or break a book. So what makes a character memorable? Are literature's greatest characters, always likable, even when they're not? Are the best writers always cruel to their characters? What makes a good character? Well, we're going to have all the answers today, because we have bestselling author, Belinda Alexandra, here to shed some light on those questions, and more. Welcome, Belinda.

BELINDA ALEXANDRA: Oh, thanks so much, Cheryl. I'm so excited to be here.

CHERYL: Well, I'm really excited to have you because I know that you are a great writer, but you're also a great communicator, and I really thought you'd be able to add some clarity around this conversation. So let's start with what makes a good character?

BELINDA: Well, I think the most important thing about a good character is that they stand out in some way, there's something unique or something particularly engaging about them. It can be a charismatic personality but it can also be a fatal flaw that we just can't turn away from. And I think the best characters have a fatal flaw that we relate to, in some way. And I often think many of us, we go around trying to solve our problems in exactly the wrong way to solve them. And it's kind of intriguing, when we watch a character do that, we go No, no, don't do that. No, no, don't fall in love with that person. "No, no, don't go down that dark corridor into that haunted house." And so when we see characters that we sort of relate to, but –

CHERYL: Are you saying that in you as the writer, you're trying to control your characters on what they've turned out to be? Is that right?

BELINDA: It's impossible to control your characters, once they're well formed, that it's exactly like, you know, control a real person. And I think a well formed character is, is something that you really have to put in from the beginning. So you have to spend a lot of time on your character and rounding them out and giving them a level of complexity. And you think you're in control when you start, you know that way. But eventually, this becomes a living person on the page. And they basically start to drive the story. And you're just, you know, keeping up with your typing and your writing, following this character once you've really set them up well.

CHERYL: And how do you do that? Like, before you start writing, have you got all your characters mapped out?

BELINDA: They will grow a little bit during the story as the story affects them. Of course, characters should change over the course of the story. Otherwise, it's not really a story. But definitely I spent a lot of time thinking about characters, because when they will round it in, they're alive, they drive the plots. I know that one of the things we're always asked, "Are we a character writer, are we plot driven writer?" But the two really come together. It's like the bass clef and the treble clef on a piano one without the other isn't quite rich enough, you need both of them. But I spent a lot of time working on my characters. And I know that we've got a lot of people who are

interested in writing, listening to the program and so one of the things that I suggest you do is that you sit down with your character as if you had just met them. And so ask them questions like, "Why are you such a mean person?" or "What are you so scared of?" And this character will start to talk to you.

CHERYL: Are you saying that you do that out loud in-?

BELINDA: Look Cheryl, I can't pretend to not be crazy. Really, I'm-

CHERYL: I'm trying to imagine this.

BELINDA: Well, I spend an enormous amount of my day talking to imaginary people. Yes, that's why I get out and make sure that I have a good social life because otherwise I would be a complete nutter. But these characters feel real to me, and they have to feel real to me because they've got to feel real to my radar. Otherwise, they become like two dimensional, you know, cardboard cutouts, but they have to be real, they have to feel like living people.

CHERYL: And they I always have to be likable?

BELINDA: No likability is way overrated. The most important thing for a character is that they're interesting even if we don't like them, we want to know what this person is going to do next, because we just can't look away. And with *The Invitation*, Caroline is probably one of the most unlikable characters that I've ever written. And yet she's so strong. And even though people hate her, you can start reading to see what Caroline is going to do. You know, next.

CHERYL: That's true, actually. I think that one of the books that I have, I can't say loved but enjoyed a lot was *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt. But I found every character unlikable and almost despicable.

BELINDA: Did you want to keep reading despite that?

CHERYL: Absolutely. I found it to be a great book but I hated all of them. Isn't that interesting?

BELINDA: Yeah, look sometimes I think what works in a book is we're made uncomfortable by these characters, they're not likable. But it's always it's always a careful balance between characters that you don't want to spend time with just they're unlikable. And then characters that are unlikable, but you can't look away from. And I think that comes back to the point they have to be interesting. And one of the ways we make them interesting is we give them a motive that even if we don't like them, somehow we can relate to that motive.

CHERYL: When I think about your books, Belinda, right, I see character, I see plot, but I also see a lot of place. Talk to me about bringing those three things together.

BELINDA: Well, I think, in a way, a place for me in my work is the character. And so I spent a lot of time bringing that atmosphere and the place to life, because it's like a character that you have to bring to life.

CHERYL: You know, Tim Winton said that to me, too.

BELINDA: Okay. Yeah. He said that place is character for him.

BELINDA: Yeah. It may not be a character that talks or, you know, has that role in the book. But it's still very much got a underlying role as a character because it's affecting the protagonist, it's affecting the antagonist is, it's affecting all the players in the story.

CHERYL: So talk me through an example of that with one of your books, tell me where the place is and tell me how the plot and the characters come in. And for you, does it start it as a story, the idea as a story in its entirety, or one aspect is a trigger?

BELINDA: I would say, let's take, for example, *Southern Ruby*, and we're talking about New Orleans. New Orleans is definitely a character in that book, because it puts the characters in certain situations, yeah. And they're affected by their environment. I mean, when you've got the natural environment, which is the hurricane season, and how that affects it, but then you've got the cultural environment of how people are. And as we know, in New Orleans, what I love about that city is it's kind of a crazy city. And you've got a sense of the history, but a haunted history, they say it's the place where the you know, the line between the two worlds of the living and the dead is very thin, because of so many tragic things that have happened there, and all the ghosts that they have there. And so that really affects the characters and how they behave. They don't go about their lives in a very conservative manner. The whole atmosphere of the city brings out in a lightness and living for today. So in that way, I think that's how place and a time affects the characters.

CHERYL: And do you? Is it the character, the place that comes first for you?

BELINDA: You know, some people say they think of a character first. But for me, it's really the place that I want to write about. And once I've got that setting, I think of the characters that could work in that setting. But then the characters have to be full body people, not just people moving through a setting, but they have to be alive as well and interacting with the world around them.

Michael Robotham

MICHAEL: The three words that sort of, I suppose, you know, sit above my desk, and every time is "Make them care," and I want people to really care about the characters, which is why when you put them in danger or in jeopardy, this that's where you create the suspense because people have fallen in love with these characters and they want you to save them.

Belinda Alexandra

CHERYL: That was Michael Robotham. He says he has three words above his desk: make them care. People have to fall in love with the characters and want you to save them. What do you think of that?

BELINDA: I think that's true. Fall in love or become obsessed with, or very interested in. And the way that you do that is you set them up with a motive, and something that they are driven by that they absolutely have to achieve. And that becomes engaging for us.

CHERYL: Can you give me an example of that?

BELINDA: Yeah. Last night, I asked my readers what character they had liked in, in my books. And why did they like them, I asked them that on my Facebook page. And they came back with the most heroic characters and in a heroic I don't mean, like a perfect Wonder Woman or a perfect Superman. These can be very ordinary people, very flawed people, but heroic. I mean,

that when life is against them, they find something inside of them themselves. And I think we're fascinated by people like that. The battlers, the people that we say that have had horrific things happen to them, they've lost their limbs, and yet they've managed to find something amazing in life, the person that's lost a child, and they do everything to find the child. So when we give our characters some motive we want them to succeed, because in a way that inspires us in our dreams, and our difficulties if that character got up, I can get up too. And that's what I mean by a heroic character that their circumstances might knock them down but they get up. And I know one of the things that we talk about is, are we cruel to our characters? And yeah, absolutely, we are because we knock them down time and time again. And they have to keep getting up. And I think that's what makes an interesting story and an interesting character.

CHERYL: Gosh, that's, that's interesting and I hadn't thought about it in that way. Is that how you make the reader care as well?

BELINDA: Yeah, I think yeah.

CHERYL: They're invested aren't they?

BELINDA: They're invested. You know, the character can be very different. Because when I'm writing characters, I've got sometimes characters that are up on stage singing and performing and like very different characters to me. But I think what makes them interesting is that in the end, we're all humans. And if we feel strongly enough, that they have a reason for what they do, whether it's to get out of pain, or to achieve something, we want to follow that character along, we want to see what they're going to do, we're fascinated by them.

CHERYL: Do you sometimes find that a character that you've got is jarring and is not working in that sense of place or the environment and then you think, "No, you've got to go. You're just not rising to the occasion."

BELINDA: I haven't had a character that hasn't risen to the occasion but-

CHERYL: But that's because you are a good writer.

BELINDA: But one character that is very memorable to me is in *Tuscan Rose* and Luciano. And Luciano was originally going to be a dark character, he was going to be the enemy of Rosa. And he actually becomes a hero in the story. And it was, he was very mysterious. He wouldn't show up. First of all, it's really like when you're looking at a book, you're looking into this mist. And Rosa came out of that book very much, here I am, this is who I am. This is the kind of person I am. Luciano sort of repeat is like an arm out of the mist, and then went back in and then another arm and went back in. And he was very mysterious. But he would not cooperate with me as the villain of this story. He came out saying, I'm going to be the hero. And so we sort of can imagine us wrestling around my writing room floor.

CHERYL: So you were having a tussle with a make believe character?

BELINDA: Tussle, he was very handsome one so he was kind of a nice tussle there. But he, yeah, eventually he took over and decided who he was going to be.

CHERYL: And so all your characters, the characters that you have in your head, they always make it in some way, shape or form. They stay in the story?

BELINDA: Ah yes, I haven't. I can't think of anyone that I've eliminated as in the editorial process.

CHERYL: Yes.

BELINDA: I do have characters of course that don't make it through the story. They come to some dreadful end in it.

CHERYL: Yeah.

BELINDA: And sometimes that's, you know, because they that's what they truly deserve. But yeah, I can't recall anyone that I've actually taken out. Yeah.

CHERYL: Dervla McTiernan was in recently, and she talked about characters and profiling her characters. And it was bit like a method actor, like a method, right? She finds out every single thing about that character where they went to school where they grew up, not necessarily putting into the story, but when they come into the story, they have to come in with that profile, so to speak, do you do the same?

BELINDA: I give them a backstory. So I'll give them their childhood, their hurts and, and all of those things, because I think that makes them rounded. Even if you don't convey all of that information to the reader in the current story that you're writing. We come to each other as well rounded people with histories and families and things that happened to us in the past. And somehow I find that creating that for my character, even if it doesn't come out in the current story somehow makes them more real, somehow makes them not cardboard cutouts, but well rounded, complex characters. And I think when we're talking about characters, that's an important thing, that they have to have this sort of complexity to them, as we all do. And, you know, we're all full of contradictions. But in a sense, when we look at our entirety, those contradictions do make a kind of sense.

CHERYL: It's really interesting. And when you wrote your first book, did you know all of this?

BELINDA: No, no. I think, I mean, there's some things about a writer that are innate, because we are storytellers, and they had to, you know, actually break apart and, and break down into techniques. I think this is why writers are quite superstitious, because we, we're conjurers in a way. And we're magicians, we're not just technicians. But then you do learn your own processes and you do talk to other writers, and you do learn about their techniques, and you start to analyze a little bit about what you do. But for me, I think you can't - it's like we were talking about recipes and how you cook, Cheryl that you don't follow the recipe 100% you maybe you're inspired by the recipe. But then you've got to add your own sense of flair to it, to produce it, you know, a dinner filled with love. And for me, that's the same with a book, that I'm aware of the techniques, and I'm aware of the processes but then I've got to, you know, bring Belinda magic to it to really make that book come alive and to enter sparkle.

Melina Marchetta

MELINA: I say this quite often, that I was worried that it wouldn't work because it was about people like me. So it's really interesting how small you think the world of a book is, and then how amazingly big it ends up being. But you know, it's just always such a wonderful reaction. And even at the moment, where my daughter is at school, in a very Italian area, the amount of times that a mother comes up and says that was my life. Well, I've just found out after two and a half years of being there, it's like, "Oh, my god, that was my life." And it's just always such a wonderful reaction.

Belinda Alexandra

CHERYL: Melina Marchetta says, prior to writing *Looking for Alibrandi*, she never saw herself on the pages of the book she read. And that I think is really important. She's saying to us that she, I mean, for her the motivation was to write somebody she knew. But it can also be a sensitive area, because it opens up the conversation about cultural appropriation. And that's really topical, at the moment. And it's really important. Do you believe a writer should only create characters within their own race and culture? Or? I mean, you don't do that?

BELINDA: Yeah, I was about to say, I wouldn't have eight books behind me, if I did that. For me, the challenge is to sneak into another world that you don't have, you're not familiar with. For me, that's the challenge. And for me, it's not appropriation, it's a compliment, to bring that culture to life. And sometimes it's a bit like you're an explorer, because you can explain that culture, then to the people who don't come from that culture, and we start to understand each other better. But I think what you do is you don't buy into stereotypes. You really, you know, pay the respect to the other culture that you really get to know them. And I have to say, that's really how I've lived my life. I've been fascinated since I was a child. I mean, I was brought up by a Russian mother but brought up in Australia, always interested in other people's stories, always interested in how they saw the world. It made my world richer to have a Russian mother, but to be brought up in Australia. And so when I travel, I am not the sort of person that is going to be on a cruise down the river in my little bubble, I'm going to be the person trying to speak in the language with the taxi driver, I'm the person that's going to rent a room and a house, you know, with another crazy writer from that country, or I'm going to go to the market. So I'm not going to go to restaurants, and I'm going to cook the food, and really live the life because that's just what I do.

CHERYL: You need to smell and taste it don't you?

BELINDA: Absolutely. And be part of it. You know, if I go to a party with a Greek family, I'm going to dance you know, with them. I lived with a girl from Zimbabwe for a year and when her relatives used to come over and dance, I mean, Sunday afternoons were amazing. She'd have the family over could be 80 years of age, could be eight years of age, clear the furniture to the side of the room, and we'd all dance. And I said, you know, they said I didn't do too badly for a white girl, but I need a bigger bottom to get that happening. But I'm totally into that.

CHERYL: So when you pick your place, talk to me about the places that your books have been set and where did that idea come from?

BELINDA: Well, I think there are countries that I'm fascinated with.

CHERYL: So it's piqued your interest?

BELINDA: It's piqued my interest, I would say. Let's take *Golden Earrings*, for example. I have always had an interest in Spanish music and Spanish dance. And so I want to learn more about that. So I surround myself in it. I live, breathe, you know, eat Spanish, you know, and Spain. And so I read books that are popular in in Spain, or listen to Spanish music, I learn flamenco. I'll do all of those things.

CHERYL: So that's method acting again isn't it?

CHERYL: Method acting, and my friends say, "My goodness, you start to look like somebody from the country," then, and then the greatest compliment is when somebody tells me you really, you

know. That book is published in Spain. And I get so many compliments from Spanish readers. They don't go "Oh, you know, I can't believe you're not Spanish." And actually my flamenco teacher was very funny. She met someone who had read *Golden Earrings* and they were recommending the book to her. And she was going, "Oh, did you like the book?" And they go, "Yes, I think I think this woman has lived in Spain for a number of years, or she must live in Spain." And these were Spanish people saying that. And she goes, "Well, actually, she lives in Sydney. And I'm her flamenco teacher". And they were just so amazed to hear that. And I think that's a real compliment. So it is like being an actor, it would be it you know, to say cultural appropriation it would be to say that nobody could act as a character from another country. But that's I think it's sharing each other's stories -

CHERYL: But you know, what I'm getting a sense from you that whether it's character, whether it's place, whether it's plot, you have done the homework behind those, you've lived it, you've breathed it, that you've done the research. So each one place has its setting, its profile, the character has its setting in his profile, and the plot does too. So that's why they come together, because you've done the work I think.

BELINDA: You absolutely have to, otherwise there's a sense of the falseness about things. I mean, you can feel it when you meet someone who's authentic, and then you meet someone that's false. And the false just makes you cringe. And it's the same with a story that feels false. When you don't believe the place you don't believe the characters, you don't believe the plot. It's like, you get that same icky feeling when you meet a con person. And I think that's the difference. You want something that feels amazing and feels real and feels authentic.

CHERYL: And I want to talk about writing characters of the opposite sex. I mean, I have read wonderful books that I've enjoyed that have been about a woman written by a man. What about in your stories? I mean, you're falling in love with some of your characters aren't you? How does it start? How do you get there and how do you get that, that feeling that?

BELINDA: Firstly, now, this is interesting, because I don't understand men at all.

CHERYL: Welcome to the club.

BELINDA: I'm in person, personally, in my life, but to, and I think this is coming back to what feels false and what feels real. Basically, in the end, we're all human beings. And so if you, you want to get away from the stereotype, you want to relate to your character who's the opposite sex to you, as if they're a human being. So you'll give them a fear that you can relate to or a strength that you can relate to, but the way they express it might be different. For example, when a woman feels a fear, she might go and talk to 20 of her friends about it and get their ideas and then they'll come to a group consensus about it. A man might feel fear but keep it to himself. And so when you look at that, you look at what do we have in common, which is the fears we feel. But what do we do because of the way we were brought up in society? How do we go about solving those things or dealing with those things? And that can become quite an intriguing journey of understanding. And so as the writer brings that understanding, and that sympathy and that empathy to that character, that character starts to feel real, because we understand. I mean, when we're at a funeral, which is a terrible example, but we all feel the grief. But we might express it differently. It might come out differently, depending on our sex, depending on our race, depending on our own personal temperament. So I think the first thing is we always connect on what we have in common. And then we look at the individual, and how would that individual react to something?

CHERYL: What do you think are the three things you have done that have helped you carve out a successful career?

BELINDA: Well, I think the first thing and I learnt this from my first book from *White Gardenia* is that you must connect to your work every day. Now, a lot of people will be working full time, and yet they still want to write. But even writers get busy when we've got tools, and we've got other things that we need to do. And by connecting to your work every day, sometimes you just can't write every day. When I was writing, *White Gardenia*, I had a full time job in a conference company. But I used the time in between when I was on airplanes, in the hotel rooms, in between seminars, in the conference, to connect with my story. And the way that you do that is you might just be thinking ahead to the next scene, or you might be thinking of some dialogue that you can put in the next scene or doing some research, or going back and write-reading something that you wrote, you know, previously the week before, whatever. And the reason why you do that, is it because it keeps you in the momentum. And you don't lose that passion and that drive because dipping in and out of your story for any length of time, sort of drains that away. So that's the number one thing that I've learned.

The next thing is that to be a writer, you can't be a shy, retiring person hiding away in your room with only your fictional characters and your cats. You have to be out there living, you have to be out there meeting people, you have to be doing new things, you have to be challenging yourself, you have to be falling in love and getting your heart broken. You have to be trying something new and making a fool of yourself, you really have to live because you bring that into your writing. And when you do something, milk it for all it's worth, if your heart is broken, milk it for you know everything. If you're in love, milk it to the you know, it's a crazy way to live and no wonder authors are mentally unstable. But you know, that's what you have to do to make your art alive.

And then the third thing that I would say is always be authentic and always be unique because there's only one you. Don't copy anyone else bring what's unique about you to your work and to your characters so and don't hide behind your story. Put yourself in the story, put in your passion, put in your pettiness, put in your fears and put in your greatness because when you do that, you bring magic to your work and you do a book that no one else can do. In that way you connect with your readers.

CHERYL: Belinda Alexandra, you're a superstar. Thank you so much.

BELINDA: You're a superstar Cheryl, thank you so much for asking me to be here.

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