

Character Arcs—Or, Where Were You Going With That Series? by D.V. Berkom *(originally written for Indies Unlimited)*

What happens when you write a book and either people like the characters so much they ask you to continue writing about them, or the story's too big for just one book and it turns into more than one? That, my friend, is what's called a series.

Writing a series is a good way for a writer to establish him or herself in the heart and mind of a reader. If readers like the first book, then they're more apt to purchase the second and so on. Plus, the writer begins to know and understand the main character (or characters) and is able to delve further into what makes them tick, bringing a depth to them that wouldn't be possible in the length of one book.

Which brings us to the concept of character arc. In fiction, readers expect the character to change in some way by the end of the book. Change in protagonist = character arc. For example, if the protagonist starts out shy and insecure, then by the end of the story the writer should have at least given that character more confidence. But how do you handle character arc across an entire series?

That's a bit tricky.

If you're a plotter, when you plan a series you should be able to figure out the immediate character arc in each individual book as well as over the whole series. For writers who are pantsers (writing by the seat of your pants), this tends to be problematic, although it doesn't have to be.

Begin by thinking about your character: what problem or problems will they encounter in your story? Could be an inner trait, like shyness, or an outer obstacle, like the world's coming to an end and mutant-zombie gerbils are going to take over the world in a rodent apocalypse. Or both. Now, take that problem and jot down a couple of notes about how the character is going to solve it. (Don't worry, it's only a little jotting.) How will the character change? They must change, or the book won't be as compelling as it could be.

Got it? Great. Now, take a moment to pinpoint the larger idea behind the character's problem. In the case of overcoming shyness, it could be that Henry was dropped on his head as an infant and as a result he's never felt safe. How can you work that character trait/story problem into a larger story arc? Figure out how many books you want to write and jot down a couple of lines detailing Henry's trajectory from shy, insecure pet salesman to studly mutant-zombie gerbil exterminator. Perhaps in the first book, he alone figures out that a certain kind of kibble made in Minot, North Dakota gives the little furballs a virus that replicates at an alarming rate. By the end of book 1, our Henry could be on the front lines, tracking down the last stores of kibble and destroying them, all the while eluding the elusive rodent zombies. Maybe give the guy a budding love interest, for good measure.

The next book could show Henry gaining confidence, both in his gerbil-hunting prowess as well as his ability to cater to his girlfriend's every need (hey—it's my fantasy, uh, I mean post. I get to

choose.) Maybe in book 2 he finds that single-malt whiskey from some obscure Scottish village protects non-zombie gerbils from the virus. Thus, Henry gains even more confidence in his ability to fight the evil mammals. Of course, he's too busy stopping the gerbils to worry about how self-conscious he is, which also shows his arc.

By book 3, our boy wipes out the bad gerbils, saving humankind from certain death. Yes, there's a bunch of shredded paper and half-eaten North Dakota kibble to clean up, but the human race is saved! And Henry has a girlfriend! And...

Anyway, you get the picture. If you don't have any intention of writing a series, then it's a bit more complicated when you finish book 1 and realize there could be more to the story, but you can still work with the original concept in the first book. The main thing is to give your character an inner struggle/obstacle/problem with enough weight to carry a series. Trust issues, insecurity, fear of gerbils, it all works. Then, let your imagination run wild.