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Writing Good Bad Guys

Susan Vinocour | March/April 2016

NOTES

My premise is a simple one: to write good Bad Guys, you must write them with some good.

In a prior life, before devoting myself to writing, I was a criminal trial attorney and then a clinical and forensic psychologist. I've spent many happy hours sitting in cells with murderers and other nefarious characters, so I know something about people we commonly call Bad Guys. I say guys, but let's not forget bad girls, from Eve to Lady Macbeth to Lizzie Borden and all points in between. But in my writing, I've struggled with how to help readers fully engage with people who commit evil acts, like Ada Simms, a mentally ill grandmother charged with the beating death of her three-year-old grandson Raymie. So I want to say a few things about people we consider Bad Guys and how to put them on the page in ways that are engaging and have psychological integrity.

I'd like to begin by introducing you to a woman named Aileen, by way of a letter she wrote to her friend, Dawn:

> Dear Dawn, I'd like to thank you so much for coming down, and dear Nick in arranging it all so you could. Man. What a beautiful soul. And you, too! I'm so very sorry it hurts so much my leaving … all your tears cut like a knife, and I'm so sorry even one drop fell, … hopefully some day we'll meet again. Thank you! Love, Aileen.[1]

Sounds like a person you can relate to, right? The Aileen here is Aileen Wuornos, a serial murderer who killed seven men and is the only woman to have ever been executed in the state of Florida. The "leaving" she refers to is her scheduled execution. Yes, she's done evil things (though her victims are no princes). But she's also a person in whom we can recognize bits of ourselves, a person with universally familiar feelings and needs.

In fiction, we create our characters, we imagine them into being, and in nonfiction, we find or discover our characters, but we also create them, in the sense that we choose what and how to show them to the reader. And characters are much more than the sum of their outwardly observable acts, much more than a tagline on the evening news. In the case of Ada Simms, the reporter tells us:

> Raymie, whose death was attributed to a head injury, was the son of Simms' daughter. An ambulance crew found the boy's cold, stiff and battered body in the kitchen … Simms allegedly told homicide investigators that she beat Raymie repeatedly with a wooden board because he ate too much.[2]

Those are the bare facts, the external topography of the story. But it's what it doesn't tell us—about Ada's IQ of 70, her psychosis, her love for the child, and her own body, covered with scars and burns from her own childhood abuse—that reveal something about her character, and about the nature of evil, and are worth writing about.

My premise is a simple one: to write good Bad Guys, you must write them with some good. The most interesting and enduring characters in literature are complex, nuanced, and contain some basic psychological truth. Good Guys who are flawlessly heroic, unmarked by any hint of evil or conflict, are not very interesting. Nor are Bad Guys who are unidimensional caricatures of evil. Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," tells us, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."[3] And when it comes to human beings, beauty and truth lie in their complexity and nuance.

Imagine if all we saw in Humbert Humbert was his pedophilic lust for Lolita, his perversion and predation. But Nabokov shows him as a lonely, incomplete man, a child in a man-body who both despises his impulses and is transfixed by them and unable to deny them.[4] His acts are truly monstrous, but as a character he is much more compelling and memorable than the mere sum of his acts.

But a character's behaviors, and their terrible effects on others, can blind us to their shared humanity. Anger and condemnation can overshadow more complex, nuanced, truths. As we are repelled by their acts and want to psychologically distance from them, we can wall ourselves off, both as writers and readers, from a character. And we can be distracted by the acts, like drivers gawking at an accident scene we pass.

Alexander Masters writes about this in *Stuart: A Life Backwards*, about Stuart Shorter, the homeless, drug-addicted, mentally ill man at the center of the story. He describes Stuart as "a poly-drug-addicted, alcoholic 'Jekyll and Hyde' personality with delusional paranoia and a fondness for what he called 'little strips of silver'—knives, to you and me."[5] And he acknowledges that at one point, after a series of bad behaviors and betrayals, "He ceases to be (to me) human… there is only… the set of bloody incidents.

Events replace character… Personality is gone."[6]

So the question is, how can we render characters who are more than just the evil they do?

You must begin by imagining, or discovering, your shared humanity with these characters, even those who appear evil. Terence said: "I am a man: nothing human is alien to me"[7]; few of us are only evil, just as none of us are only good, and good and evil often lie closely beside each other, as Primo Levi observed in *The Drowned and the Saved*, about his experiences at Auschwitz: "Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment."[8] And Stuart Shorter tells Masters, "50% of people in for murder are your ordinary people who just for one moment lost it."[9] In my experience as a criminal attorney and forensic psychologist, this is true. It may even be an underestimate.

There is a common public misconception that people who do terrible, inconceivable things must be crazy. This is generally not the case. True, sociopaths are without much redeeming value: they are predatory and opportunistic, supremely manipulative, conscienceless and lacking in empathy, while often coated in a veneer of charm. But they are small in number—five percent or so of the population; most of the rest of us are considerably more mixed in our motives and behaviors.

So don't retreat into simplistic notions of good and evil. Be willing to recognize the bad in yourself; it will help you recognize the good in your antagonists. Find ways in which you can identify with your character. Put yourself in their shoes. An interesting thought-exercise is to imagine yourself as an antagonist, and your Bad Guy as a protagonist.

So the question is, how can we render characters who are more than just the evil they do? You must begin by imagining, or discovering, your shared humanity with these characters, even those who appear evil.

Most people, even the most despicable appearing, are motivated on some level by feelings and needs we can all relate to on some level. We might not all be able to imagine having sex with a twelve-year-old, like Humbert Humbert, but most of us *can* imagine wanting to feel unconditionally adored by someone pure who demands nothing in return. We don't murder and then rape our victims, as Lester Ballard does in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*,[10] but we do feel loneliness, anger at rejection, and a powerful impulse toward sexuality and physical intimacy.

So distinguish between the person and the act, the character's intent and the consequence to others. If you haven't yet understood what your character wants and needs, what lies behind the bad act, what causes him or her to suffer, then you probably don't yet fully understand her. Dig a little deeper. I'd even suggest doing some research into personality development and psychopathology before you write, just as you'd expect to have to research other topics before writing. People are not arbitrary, random agglomerations of behaviors; they have personalities, feelings, and behaviors that cluster around certain poles or traits. Familiarize yourself with them.

Once you have accepted that your evil-doer is more than simply evil, what are some of the strategies you can use to bring alive those aspects of the character that are not apparent on the face of their evil acts? How can you lead readers to see the humanity in all your characters?

First, as narrator, you can use your own positive relationship with the character. In *Stuart: A Life Backwards*, the author starts out at a critical, almost repulsed, distance from Stuart, and as the story

progresses, he shows a growing regard for Stuart and the gradual formation of something like a friendship. He uses this movement, this closing of emotional distance between himself and the character, to promote a bond between Stuart and the reader and portray Stuart in a more positive light.

Similarly, you can use a secondary character's relationship with a Bad Guy to create acceptance and empathy for the character, as Masters's does, giving us the words of Stuart's mother, "… he was such a caring boy… Always such a caring boy…"[11]

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc uses a similar technique in *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble and Coming of Age in the Bronx*, a portrait of people living in deep, multigenerational urban poverty in the Bronx. We first meet César as a young boy living in a chaotic family and a dangerous neighborhood. Over the next few years, LeBlanc tells us, "César had gone from acting like a hoodlum to being one; his tough posture [became] part of his identity…. He went from playing tag to hiding drugs in his pocket to carrying guns."[12] It culminates when he accidentally shoots and kills his best friend during a robbery. She reports that his prison records classify him as "depressive—violent/suicidal type."[13] But LeBlanc, in showing us that he is loved by his sister and the young woman Coco, hints that he is something more than a sociopath and thug. He is someone others can care about.

We also see this strategy in Ian Frazier's book, *On the Rez*, about the Oglala Sioux Pine Ridge Indian reservation and its inhabitants. Frazier tells us about a man named Le War Lance, who lives there when he isn't in jail or on the road hustling and raising hell. He tells us: "Le War Lance often is not a very nice guy. If he has done only a few of the things he says he has done it's amazing he isn't in jail… he is a drunk and a brawler, a liar and wholly irresponsible and unreliable. He has been in prison, and hints darkly that he killed two men 'with his bare hands.'"[14] But Frazier also tells us: "So Le War Lance and I became friends."[15] He uses his own relationship with this flawed character to both model acceptance for him and highlight the man's more positive qualities, his moments of compassion, altruism, and remorse.

Another way to get at the heart of a character, to get past the exteriority of his or her acts, is to use first person point of view.

Ari Shavit, in *My Promised Land*, about the founding of the State of Israel, dispossession of the local Arab population, and the moral dilemma it now faces, observes "in most cases, the evil do not know they are evil."[16] That is, they do not experience themselves as evil. Because this is true, you can often use the character's own words and point of view—as Mary Shelley does in *Frankenstein*—through interviews, letters, direct dialogue with other characters, and the like, to show them in a more nuanced light.[17] When I'm doing a forensic evaluation of a defendant, the most important thing is to let them talk and to listen carefully; they will tell you who they are, and they are usually not who you think.

In nonfiction, where we are not free to just imagine or make up another's point of view, first person point of view often must come from direct interviews with the character, comments recalled by others, and letters written by the character, as in Aileen Wuornos's letter at the beginning of this essay. These techniques can be used in fiction as well.

Alexander Masters doesn't shrink from detailing Stuart's flaws, his arrest record, drug abuse, joblessness, and even threats to kill his own infant son on one occasion. And he acknowledges the difficulty in giving a balanced view of Stuart, but he also gives us Stuart in his own words, reflecting on the plight of his fellow homeless:

> That's why I want you to write a book. It's me way of telling the people what it was like down there. I want to thank them what got me out… 'Cos there's so much misunderstanding. It's killing people. Your fucking nine to fives! Someone needs to tell them! Literally, every day, deaths! Each one of them deaths is somebody's son or daughter! Somebody needs to tell them, tell them like it *is*![18]

Now we see some of Stuart's ability to care about others.

In *Random Family*, Leblanc uses César's letters from prison to show the side of him that is suffering and vulnerable. He writes to his girlfriend Coco, now pregnant with another man's child:

> Coco I can't sleep at night because every time I close my eyes the picture of you having sex with him come clear in my mind… I really really, really do hate you. And there is nothing that could change that feeling for you the way I hate you now is stronger than the way I use to love you.... I hate you more than I hate the people who I shot to get in here in the first place. I hate you more than I love my mother… Coco this letter is only going to be seven pages long because we don't have any more paper on the unit. But I don't think that a million pieces of paper would be enough for me to really explain how much I really do hate you.[19]

We see the pain and frustration, the rage and impotence that lie behind some of his behaviors.

In *Bulletproof Vest: The Ballad of an Outlaw and His Daughter*, a memoir about her father and herself, Maria Venegas uses another interesting strategy. Her father, José, is a hard man to like: he's a mean drunk, a brawler, and a thief who betrays his wife—their first date was a rape—and abandons his children. He may even have colluded with a Mexican drug cartel in kidnapping and murder. When he returns to his hometown after a stint in prison, a waitress says to him, "Your reputation precedes you," and recounts how he told that he "had just spent three years in prison for killing a man, hell, he'd killed several… word around town was that he was a dangerous man, a cold-blooded assassin."[20]

So Venegas does two things. First, she uses the stories he has told about himself—the *corrido*, or ballad of his life—and that are retold by others, stories of often epic, almost mythic proportions, to give us his own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of himself, without judgment or editorializing. Through these stories, we see that there is another side to her father—he has his longings and loyalties, his talents and dreams, his capacity for loving and suffering, as well as his cruelty and his drunken rage. Had she told this only from her own perspective, it would all have been tinged by her anger and bitterness, all seen through the lens of how his betrayals caused her personal hurt.

She also makes use of a structure of alternating chapters—A,B,A,B—where the "A" chapters are in her own first person point of view and the "B" chapters are in her father's close third-person point of view. In this way, she creates a separate psychological and physical space for him, apart from his negative effects on her. And this use of his first person point of view, or close third, allows us a glimpse of how the character experiences himself, free from the impact of the consequences to others.

And like Alexander Masters in *Stuart*, she begins the story at a physical and psychological distance from her father, and gradually closes both the psychological and physical distance as the story proceeds. Her movement toward a more nuanced, less raw, view of her father invites the reader along on a similar trajectory.

Be willing to recognize the bad in yourself; it will help you recognize the good in your antagonists.

A third device you can use is to show the character's capacity for caring about others and for remorse. LeBlanc tells us in *Random Family* that "when it was discovered that a cousin of Coco's was being regularly raped by her father, everyone threatened to kill him but it was César who beat the guy up and ordered him to leave the girl alone."[21] And, after an interview with him in prison, where he has been sent for murdering his friend, she tells us, "He realized that he hadn't done anything with his life. He still wanted to kill himself,"[22] and we are able to see him as a person who is *in* pain, not just *causing* pain.

And Maria Venegas shares her father's words:

> "I pray and ask Diosito to look after each one of my kids. I go down the list from youngest to eldest." He counts on his fingers. "La Vicki, Jorge, usted, Sonita, Chela, Chavo y Nena," he says and tells me how, one by one, he asks God to protect each one of us, to never let us want for anything.[23]

And:

> It's important to treat animals with love.[24]

Here we can see a tenderness and capacity for caring in him that is not apparent from the broad outlines of his murderous, violent life. And she gives us, in his own words, evidence of his remorse for the wrongs he has done,

> "Forgive me for having left you with the burden, with all the kids," he says to his wife, "and for having ended your brother's life. Please, forgive me."[25]

And Masters tells us of Stuart's attempts to defend his mother from his step-father's attacks, and, finally, of his ultimate compassion for his mother: he wants to kill himself but hesitates; he wants to make it look like murder or accident, rather than suicide. He says:

> "As soon as I get the opportunity I'm going to top meself," he whispered. "…And it's got to seem like someone else done it… Me brother killed himself in May. I couldn't put me mum through that again. She wouldn't mind murder as much."[26]

He does, ultimately, die: he falls, or throws himself, in front of a moving train, an act of desperate suffering but also of infinite kindness to his mother.

Here's another way to give readers a fuller sense of a "bad" character's deeper humanity: tell us about the character's childhood trauma and suffering, those events that were not of his own making that shaped who he is today. Psychiatrist Gitta Sereny, in *Into That Darkness*, about Franz Stangl, the commandant of the Treblinka extermination camp, asks:

> Can any man or his deeds be understood in isolation from his childhood, his youth and manhood, from the people who loved or didn't love him, and from the people he loved or needed?[27]

Much of what we do, or do not do, has its roots in childhood circumstances, and our more extreme behaviors, both good and bad, often arise from deep wounds.

I've done psychological evaluations of over a thousand youths caught up in what we euphemistically call the "juvenile justice system," charged with serious crimes. More than 80% of them have been repeatedly physically or sexually abused, subjected to extreme neglect, parental mental illness or substance abuse, exposed to domestic violence, or have experienced multiple traumatic losses. Their anger and violence and violations of the rules and rights of others have been come by honestly. When we give the reader some insight into a character's suffering, we invite a modicum of compassion, rather than judgment, even when they go on to do terrible things.

Mikal Gilmore does this skillfully in *Shot in the Heart*, the story of his brother Gary, executed by firing squad in Utah, shot in the heart, for murdering two innocent men. In the years before those murders, Gary had established himself as a bully, a thief, and a rapist, brutal and mean. Mikal does not spare us the details and makes few excuses for Gary; in fact, his own anger at his brother permeates the book. But he does tell us something of the negative forces that shaped Gary early on, including his father's brutality (he tells us his father was "a real monster"),[28] his mother's instability and mental illness, and the rigid Mormonism his family affected, including the tenet of Blood Atonement. He identifies the role of "memories of rage and loss and longing"[29] in shaping Gary's character and behavior flaws and says, "I see a damaged boy."[30] He goes on:

> When I think of what my brothers went through almost every week of their childhood and young adolescence, the only thing that surprises me is that they didn't kill somebody when they were still children.[31]

Another character observes of Gary:

> He wasn't a simple, mindless monster, in the way that the newspapers often portray somebody who has committed a violent act. He was a good guy that got fucked over. A lot of it, I admit, he did himself. But not all of it. Not by a long shot.[32]

Seeing some of the damage done to Gary when he was young and defenseless, still innocent of the crimes to come, helps us to see him not just as what he did, but also as what was done to him.

Leblanc does this when she tells us of César's difficult childhood. She starts out with César as a vulnerable, unformed child, before he has become violent and predatory, and shows us his history of abuse and neglect. Then she gives us a letter he writes from prison to his sister Jessica:

> While I was growing up I put up a shield. I couldn't let the neglection get to me so I closed up. But that was how it affected me. It caused me to become frustrated. That's why when I was a bit older I took to the streets. I was acknowledged out there. I was taken in and they showed me love (or so I thought). But now I realize that all they loved was that hatred inside of me. They fed it. And I kept that shield up for all that was good and vibed off of the evil. Jessica, I went and took my problems out on innocent people. Because my family was bad I made other people suffer… I regret what I've done because it wasn't fair. I hate what I've become…[33]

Now we can see that César is a boy who was suffering. And we see him as someone capable of remorse and concern for others, someone we can relate to in some sense, if not condone.

Masters uses this strategy as well, when he tells us of the childhood sexual abuse, bullying, and physical abuse Stuart endured, as he details "this erratic behavior, which is now recognized as symptomatic of

certain types of distress."[34]

It is what Ian Frazier does when he provides the context, the crucible, in which Le War Lance's behaviors were forged:

> So much is wrong on Pine Ridge. There's suffering and poverty and violence and alcoholism, and the aura of unstoppability that repeated misfortunes acquire. But beneath all that is something bigger and darker and harder to look at straight on. The only word for it, I'm afraid, is evil… A bloody history, bad luck, and deliberate malice have helped it along.[35]

In order to render negative characters in complex, nuanced ways, you have to understand at some fundamental level that there is no "us" and "them," there is only "us." We are all flawed, all capable of great harm under the right, or wrong, circumstances.

When we give the reader some insight into a character's suffering, we invite a modicum of compassion, rather than judgment, even when they go on to do terrible things.

Don't shrink from reporting, even dramatizing, the character's bad behaviors; you don't have to deny or minimize them or make excuses for them. If you do so, the reader may suspect you are an unreliable narrator and further distance from the characters. This was my experience at times reading Alice Goffman's *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*.[36] It was such a sympathetic portrayal, with the author an apologist for, and at times seemingly complicit in illegal behaviors and harboring fugitives, that it did not invite the kind of trust that comes with a balanced perspective. It made me suspicious, distancing me from the author but not increasing my engagement with the characters she described.

Perhaps this is one of the dangers inherent in "immersion" writing: in joining with "bad" characters, in order to portray them more fully, there can be a tendency to idealize or excuse, rather than accepting the mixed realities simultaneously present in all of us. Memoir can as easily slide into memorialization as into psychopathologizing and facile diagnostic labels or simplistic moral declarations. Frazier noted this in *On the Rez*, saying about Le War Lance,

> I can feel my words want to pull him in a wrong direction, toward a portrait that is rose-tinted and larger than life, while he is pulling the other way, toward reality.[37]

So don't soft-pedal a character's negative, brutal behaviors if you want to engender a reader's engagement with a bad guy, don't cover for them. But don't give us the lie of omission, either. Provide an open canvas, because the canvas of a person's life, the picture of who they are, is likely to be an incomplete truth, one that amounts to a kind of lie, if it portrays only their misdeeds.

Writing is a communion, a conversation, with our characters and our readers, so give an honest portrait, without condemnation *or* praise. Put yourself in your character's shoes. Be open to the presence of humanity in your characters, even those who appear to be evil. Don't judge. Le War Lance tells Frazier:

> "I talk to you because you have a curious mind and an innocent heart," and he prays for Frazier to "see with clear eyes that do not judge."[38]

I think this is what all of our characters demand of us.

Mary Karr calls her memoir, *Liar's Club*, about her very flawed parents, a love letter and tells us that it is a story about "the people I love most in the world."[39] So approach your bad guys with humility and an open heart, and write them with love. Regard evil with the same sense of wonder with which you behold goodness.

As Susan Sontag observes in her Preface to Jean Hatzfield's *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*, "The issue, finally, is not judgment. It is understanding."[40]

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Notes

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