

## Cross Cultural Characters

Several years ago, a discussion about appropriation of voice centered around the Canadian writer William Kinsella. In addition to baseball stories, like *Field of Dreams*, Kinsella writes short stories from the perspective of people living in a First Nations community near Calgary. Non-First Nations readers loved the stories and praised them as truly authentic; First Nations people did not.

Writing a cross-cultural character is like those signs in the car ads: “Closed course. Professional driver. Do not attempt this at home.”

I’m not talking about writing a story where culture is an essential element; such as in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* and *Such a Long Journey*. Other writers who did not come from an Indian background might be able to write such fine cultural nuances, but I know it would be an unsuccessful struggle if I tried to do it.

Without doing years of research—not practical for most authors—how does a writer get it right when portraying characters who come from backgrounds different from their own?

Culture matters. Race matters. People who say, “I never see skin color,” or “Everybody thinks alike,” do a disservice to the wonderful, varied ways that people are human, especially since the trend in North America over the past fifty years has been for issues of race and culture to go underground. Discrimination lives, it still hurts, but many people think that a need social justice is a thing of the past. Not politically-correct, you understand.

You don’t have to understand an entire culture, you have to understand a particular person—your character—in a cultural context.

There is no cook book. If you are certain that Italian-Americans like food, talk with their hands, wear gold jewelry, are mostly Catholic, and value their family and their church, in all probability you don’t know enough to write a believable Italian-American character.

Here are some tips on adding cultural elements to your character’s background.

Writing about people from other cultures is writing about movement. At some point, your character’s family came from some place else. Even for a First Nations character, his/her people likely lived somewhere else before they were forced to the reserve or left the reserve for the city.

- When did the family move?
- Who moved? Who stayed behind?
- Why?
- Are any of those original movers still alive? Does the character have contact with them?
- What are at least three family stories about the move? Why are those particular stories being passed down.

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If you can, stay away from stereotypical stories, because they have been done to death. Stereotypical stories include

- The patriarch landed with \$0.14 in his pocket. He worked hard all his life and now his grandson is going to Harvard.
- Grandmother/grandfather went to work for the mob because they were desperate for money for a sick relative and there were no jobs. But she/he always brought the children up to respect law and order.
- He worked two jobs plus going to night school to learn English, and the day he became an American citizen was the proudest day of his life.
- The immigration officials mispronounced his name, so the family got a whole new name. (Okay, I'll admit to having used this one.)

You're a writer; you have a fertile imagination. Come up with new and unique movement stories, or at the very least add a twist to the old stories.

People who move tend to experience something called immobility of fragmentation. Their view of the culture they left becomes stuck at the time when they left. Because I moved from western North Carolina in the early nineteen-eighties, my view of what it's like to live there is fixed in that time period. Even though I've kept up a little bit, the people who now live there now have a very different understanding of day-to-day life there.

Research resources that are contemporary with when your character's family moved. Italy as it is today is not nearly as important to defining the family as Italy as it was in 1948, when grandfather left. People who were the first or second-generation movers will likely insist they know what their culture is about, even in the face of evidence to the contrary that the culture has moved in a different direction. People who move become—more or less—aculturated to their new living conditions. It's the more or less that's important.

Consider S. J. Rozan's character Lydia Chin. Her mother lives a very traditional Chinese life. Lydia and her brothers each have a different take on what they will keep of Chinese culture and what they will embrace in western culture.

Take general cultural information and think about how your character, as an individual, handles that material. You can often find points of conflict and, as we all know as authors, conflict makes our eyes light up. Oh, boy, I can use that to raise the stakes we say in glee, heartless to the havoc we are about to wreak in our character's lives.

As an example, start with a general idea that Italian-Americans like food.

- What would an Italian-American character be like if they had a medical condition, like diabetes or anorexia, which changed their relationship to food?
- How about a woman who can't cook and has no desire to learn?
- How about a woman desperate to lose a lot of weight, but surrounded by food = love on all sides?
- How about a man who loved to cook and wanted to spend every family event in the kitchen with his mother and his aunts?

Break the stereotypes, one of which is that Italian-Americans use their hands to talk. Suppose your Italian-American psychologist very carefully folds her/his hands and keeps them still during therapy sessions. How did this habit develop? Why? It works well in the office, but what happens when they display the same behavior at a family reunion?

Make some attempt to learn about the culture and have a pool of experts with whom you can consult.

- Look at pictures of where and how your family lived and, if possible, pictures of what it looked like when they moved away from there.
- If your library has recordings in the family's first language, listen to them. Not the "Where is the railway station?" and "How much is this loaf of bread?" language lessons, but native speakers reading or singing. This will help you get the rhythm of the language and the music, even if you don't understand the words.
- Use dialect and foreign languages sparingly. Earlene Fowler and Barbara Parker, both of whom write Spanish-speaking characters, do this very well. Dorothy L. Sayers, particularly in *Gaudy Night* and *Busman's Honeymoon*, threw Latin and French into the narrative with no translations. She assumed that readers could a) speak the language, b) get the general meaning from context, or c) find someone to translate if not knowing really bothered them.
- For one of my own characters who is Scottish, I do three things. I have about eight words that I spell differently to indicate his brogue. I have perhaps a dozen words—like "squaddie" for his military buddies or "biscuit" for cookie—that he would be likely to use because of his background. I save the actual Scots Gaelic for two or three points of high emotion, when English just can't express what he feels. To make sure I get the Gaelic right, I send the section in which the Gaelic appears to the organization in Scotland that promotes the teaching and use of the language, give them the line in English, and ask them to write the Gaelic for me. In exchange for their help, I send them a small donation.
- Have someone who is familiar with the culture read what you've written. Does this ring true with them? Can they see a family member or someone they know in the character you've created? "He's just like my Uncle Tony," is about the kind of praise the author should hope to achieve.