

## Agent Insight: Captivating Characters by Nancy L. Eady

As authors, some of the most frustrating people in our lives are our main characters. We wrestle with their looks, their character traits and flaws, and their reactions to situations. We want our readers to identify with them, relate to them, and either root for or against them.

Because our main characters are so important to our works, I asked a panel of agents what they looked for in a main character. Six agents, Kimberley Cameron with Kimberley Cameron & Associates in Tiburon, California; Lucienne Diver with the Knight Agency in Madison, Georgia; David Haviland with the Andrew Lownie Agency in the United Kingdom; Alice Martell with The Martell Agency in New York; Paige Wheeler with the Creative Media Agency in New York; and Helen Adams Zimmermann with the Zimmermann Literary Agency in New York, were gracious enough to provide their take on main characters.

### Likable characters

First, I asked what attributes a likable main character has in the manuscripts that interest them.

Helen Adams Zimmermann believes “the attributes of the character are less important than the voice of the writer. I can ‘like’ a character who does bad things if the writing is great. By ‘like’ I mean I want to keep reading and see what this person will do next.”

Lucienne Diver agrees voice is important, but she listens for the voice of the character. “Characters don’t have to be entirely likable to be intriguing, but they do need a strong, unique voice. A main character can be a cantankerous sumbitch (pardon my language), as long as they’re entertaining about it or particularly sharp or on-the-mark with their observations. That said, I want to care about a protagonist and, for that, I have to see something redeeming within them and something with which I can identify.”

Kimberley Cameron emphasizes a character need not be perfect to be appealing, while Alice Martell looks for both complexity and redeemability. “A likable character is an empathetic character—they can be flawed, but if we are rooting for them, they have me,” says Kimberley.

Alice emphasizes that she likes, in fact needs, “a complex character, with significant weaknesses, as well as strengths.” To her, credibility is “essential. I always tell my fiction writers I have to be able to trust them so I can let them transport me to someplace I couldn’t otherwise go (in my view, the critical responsibility of any novelist). And to generate that trust, the details and the characters have to be well researched and, thus, realistic. No one is perfect. So, I want to see a character who is complicated and flawed, as well as appealing. And I want that mix to be fresh and insightful.”

Paige Wheeler agrees realism in a character is important. “Above all, characters who are realistic and display raw, vulnerable, complex human emotion are immediately easier to connect to, which is

essential to making readers want to keep reading. They need to be way entertaining to read about, but without compromising their authenticity.” Paige also finds that “characters who are independent but allow others to help them are interesting.”

Both David Haviland and Paige Wheeler find the character’s goal to be interesting. “I’m much more interested in characters whose goal is to rescue another character, for example, rather than to achieve things that are trivial, ephemeral, or self-centered,” says David. “Then, we’re looking for someone with some exceptional quality, be it courage, quick thinking, intuition, etc.

Personally, I’m drawn to the everyman type of hero, who is exceptional in ways we could all emulate if we only had the nerve.”

Paige agrees that “when characters have something to fight for and give themselves to, readers become invested in their journey and root for the character to succeed.”

### Making them relatable

Next, I asked agents what attributes make a main character someone they believe readers will relate to and be interested in.

David Haviland finds that “it’s important that the main character be active in pursuit of their goal. If we understand the goal, and the stakes are high enough, we are naturally interested in sharing the journey toward it.”

Lucienne Diver also looks toward a character’s goals in the sense that “when you know what or who a character cares about, you see their human side. You invest in them.” Because of this, she likes “to see a character’s passion, their strengths and weaknesses, what they run toward or from.” She also enjoys “quirks and spirit.”

Paige Wheeler and Kimberley Cameron look at the complexities of the character for relatability. Paige finds she enjoys “characters designed to be imperfect, as readers can more easily connect with someone who is flawed. Instead of having a main character who is heroic, I enjoy reading about characters who are scared, who have overcome challenges that have broken them down, and characters who have tried and failed.”

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*—Literary agent Lucienne Diver*

## Agent Insight, continued

Paige adds, “No one is perfect and constantly heroic in real life, and no one does the right thing one hundred percent of the time. We’ve all experienced getting knocked down or being disappointed, so reading about a character who is working their way back up from a fall or one who is trying to figure out how to handle their emotions is easy to relate to because they are human, they are real, and they have real struggles.”

Kimberley notes that “a multilayered character interests me the most. I lose interest in characters that are flat or one-dimensional.” When a character has complexity, the readers know that the character is “exhibiting the many facets of being human.”

### The turnoffs

I also asked agents whether there were any character traits that immediately made them want to reject a manuscript.

The answers to this question shed light on the individual approach agents take to evaluating an author’s work. Alice Martell finds that “I don’t want to spend 300 pages with someone who is relentlessly offensive or obnoxious. I wouldn’t do that in real life, so I certainly don’t want to do it in my free time and I think most readers feel the same way. Occasionally, an author will say to me, ‘But he eventually turns out to be decent.’ That’s fine and a character, ideally, should evolve. However, I and most readers will not be open to spending time with an obnoxious person for 200 of those 300 pages. Life is too short and there are too many books to read. And by the way, it’s not like you can tell your reader—sure this person is offensive and grating, but hang in there, they change.”

David Haviland also looks to whether the character is someone you can enjoy spending time with. He explains that “lots” of things will turn him off of a main character, “probably anything that might turn me off another person! I see lots of novels with assassins as the main character, even serial killers, and I’m frankly baffled by this trend. Who would want to spend 300 pages in the company of a serial killer?”

Lucienne Diver succinctly says she is “not interested in main characters who are haters, pure and simple.” Kimberley Cameron is turned off by a character who “seems flat or clichéd; I know the author can do better with the work it takes to develop a more multilayered individual.”

Helen Adams Zimmerman, on the other hand, looks for connection. “I don’t usually reject a manuscript based on a character trait, per se. The main reason I decide not to represent a project is if I don’t feel any sort of connection to the main character.”

### What grabs an agent

Finally, agents were asked for the signals they look for that show an author has done a good job creating her main character. This question also highlights varied approaches to evaluating a main character.

Helen Adams Zimmermann looks for attention to detail. “I want to feel like I’m meeting them in person. Which means complete description of their looks, what they wear (not necessarily all in one

shot), and how they talk to the other characters. Character traits shouldn’t come as a statement, like ‘Cheryl was always sloppy.’ Rather, I should find out she is sloppy by a description of her space or by another character commenting on her clothes, etc.”

David Haviland’s philosophy differs. “This may sound odd, but a lack of physical description is often a good sign. The important aspects of a character are revealed through action and dialogue, so when I read paragraphs describing how sexy, expensively dressed, or gym-toned the hero is, I usually lose interest. Some of the most enduring novels provide only a bare minimum of physical description of their main character.” The common thread to both answers is that details revealed in dialogue and action show a skilled author, while information dumps do not.

Kimberley Cameron looks for character-driven stories. Kimberley observes that “when a story is character-driven, we don’t want to stop reading about them. The reader becomes curious and interested in how the character will handle different situations that occur.” She adds that character-driven stories are “memorable, and stay with me for a long time.”

Lucienne Diver and Paige Wheeler look at voice. For Lucienne, “voice is the number one thing for me. If a voice is unique and charismatic, if I want to follow it wherever it will take me, the author has created a main character that will hook the reader. Additionally, the voice should flow naturally and fit with the time/place/background of the character.” She also observes that “something that’s often overlooked is cadence. Some speech is particularly melodic, and if the cadence isn’t right, the whole voice will sound off and the character won’t be convincing. Likewise, some speech is meant to shock or stun. Whatever makes it to the page should have a point.”

Paige is absorbed by a character with her “own voice, separate from the author’s. This voice should convey the character’s motivations, emotions, and beliefs, which should largely be unique to them. I also want the character to surprise me in a genuine way—not because they do the most unthinkable thing, but because whatever they do is so realistic and in-line with their personality that they cease to feel like a character.”

Alice Martell looks at credibility. “This may sound crazy, but one thing I always initially look for is if the characters’ names ring true. I don’t have specific standards or cues, I just know it when I see it. And I figure, if the names aren’t working for me, this person isn’t going to meet my credibility factor in other respects. I generally read on a bit, but I’ve never felt I made a bad decision passing for this reason.”

She also adds a qualifier. “Keep in mind this is a wildly subjective business and what doesn’t work for me, may be perfect for another agent and may go on to be a highly successful book. But I’ve always felt to have an agent do the best work for you, they need to be passionate in every respect. If that passion isn’t there, for whatever reasons, they’re not the right agent for you. A writer should want and is entitled to an agent who absolutely believes in their book and therefore, by definition, that agent will do whatever is possible to find the book the right home.”