

—The Monthly Column—
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DIALOGUE VS CONVERSATION

I had a letter from Lucy, a student at Harvard University this month who asked a common but interesting question for ‘Ask the Writer’, of whether I get material from people I know or meet, which might raise the following questions:

‘Is anyone safe around me? Will I steal people’s behavioural traits and dialogue, and cast them into an evil character?’

As I pointed out to Lucy, most regular conversation is not suitable for a character in a novel or a screenplay—it’s too long, full of ums and ahs, and ‘dialogue’ is different to ‘conversation’. This is a big subject and process, so I thought to explain a little further.

This is what dialogue does:

Exposition: Quickly, the dialogue must set up the story, reveal something of importance about the character, situation, universe. It must hook you in. Gone are the days when we could start every play with two French maids dusting the salon of an ornate country manor, early in the morning after a big dinner party last night, telling each other who is who, who is sleeping with whom, who has money troubles and who was missing during the storm last night, and where’s the letter opener. These days, we have to be cleverer than that. No one must suspect the exposition.

Subtext: All dialogue needs to sit on top of subtext, this is particularly important in a play or film but also a novel—all creative writing, come to that. In a play and a film though, you have actors who can only “act” subtext. So, when an actor on stage says, ‘Good morning, mother.’ They aren’t saying good morning, they are saying, ‘I hate you mother, and first chance I get I’m stabbing you in the eye with the gold leaf letter opener sitting on the table, next to the stuffed koala with its eye missing wearing a tartan jacket.’ The koala is wearing the jacket, not the missing eye.

Efficiency: Dialogue must be slim, trimmed, contain no more words than are needed to do the work, and not start until it absolutely has to. Like: (Subtext) ‘Pass the letter opener, please, I’m stabbing you with it’. Not: ‘Please pass me the gold leaf letter opener, which is currently sitting next to the stuffed koala with the one eye missing.’

Rhythm: I look for rhythm of language, for tempo, for cadence, for lilt, I use repetition, anaphora, alliteration and humour. People don’t do this in conversation. Dialogue needs to portray its intent, even if that intent is to misrepresent itself, to obfuscate, to mislead, to increase the dramatic irony—the gap between what the audience knows that the characters don’t, the ‘oh oh’ moment. It must move the story forward, it needs to disrupt, to describe, to conceal, to... well you get it. I have a loose objective in my work, in that, every word needs to be doing more than one bit of work to justify itself on the page. I sweat over every single word, every phrase, sentence, paragraph, page, chapter and so on... again, you get it. Anyway, I could write a book on all of this, so I will stop here.

So, do you need to be wary of me? No, I never steal anything that will identify anyone. I snatch bits, actions, subtlety, but mostly I listen to what people are saying, or more

importantly, to what they aren't saying. I am a creative writer, I do not reproduce, copy, thief, or imitate. I make my own stuff up, so even if you do something, or say something of interest, it will need to be relevant to what I'm working on, and even then, it is more likely to be a catalyst for something else entirely. So, relax, you are in safe hands. You can trust me. Be yourself—who else are you going to be? Let me worry about '*What Will Happen To You?*'

Thankyou Lucy for sending in your question, which was selected as October's winner of 'Ask the Writer', and accordingly goes into The Readers Competition for a chance to win the grand prize at the end of the year. Good luck.

Thanks for Reading
Gary