

## **Fight or Flight: Enriching Your Characters by Finding and Feeding on Their Fears**

Margo Catts, RMFW Conference, 9:00 a.m. Sunday, p.1

*NOTE: Naturally, the person whose books weren't shipped to the conference is also the person whose presentation was blitzed by the power outage. If you want more complete notes from the presentation, please email me at [margo@margocatts.com](mailto:margo@margocatts.com). You can see the book that wasn't there at [margocatts.com](http://margocatts.com). I bet I can figure out a way for the publisher who dropped the ball so hard to get a signed copy to you.*

Ten tools for using fear to develop your characters:

1. Identify a constant problem for your character, a fatal flaw, an Achilles heel trait. Examples:
  - Lacking trust in relationships? Too trusting?
  - Lack of self-confidence? Overconfidence?
  - Temper? Passiveness?
2. Identify the fear it's expressing.
3. What was the inciting incident for that fear?
4. What's the conflation/conclusion/internalized story, the narrative from it that explains larger reality for the character, their worldview?
5. How has your character avoided dealing with that fear?
6. What would it take to confront it? Avoidance has been ongoing, so it's got to be extreme.
7. Is the character self-aware, or in denial? (Example: *Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro)
8. This fear manifests in what behaviors? Quirks, tics, patterns, responses? Defensive behaviors?
9. Pay attention to opportunities to reverse-engineer your characters. You stumble into them as you write. If you see a character getting worked up in a scene, ask what fear is being revealed
  - Is it the one you listed, or were you unaware?
  - If it fits & is beneficial, cool. It will widen and deepen your character. But if it doesn't fit the character's emotional story, rethink the scene—your character isn't being real.
10. Build a fear arc (emotional character arc anchored in identified fear) and intertwine it with the story arc. What's changed? (OK if they're still afraid.) This may suggest twists or developments you hadn't thought of. Design obstacles that confront the fear and escalate the stakes
  - E.g., couple meet, some obstacles (what obstacles need to be), happily ever after
  - E.g., inciting incident, quest (what obstacles need to be), get talisman

Enrich the character with fear modulators:

- What is the character's personality? Different levels of innate qualities—boldness, skittishness, introversion, reticence...fear accelerators. Some people natively far more alert, on guard, defensive. Use these to modulate the character's fear responses, but make sure the personality is constant, not something that appears only in intense moments.
- How central is the thing he/she is afraid of losing? The greater the hope (the amount vested), the greater the fear. The more something matters, the higher the stakes, the more is invested...the greater the fear.

Communicate the character's fears, desires, and values to readers with fear responses. You have options:

- Extreme avoidance (what does your character avoid? relationships? difficulty? self-examination? certain experiences or conversations?)
- Out-of-scale reaction (obsession, intense anger, overfunctioning/overpreparing—there's more going on here than a PTA dinner)
- Fear response is clench. What we hold tightest, we're most afraid of losing. Show what the character cares most deeply about by showing what s/he holds tighter, squeezes to death, treats with extreme caution & protectiveness

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My graphic, drawn from the work of Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, professor of psychology at Northeastern University, who identifies four states as all the brain is capable of using to classify signals coming from physical systems. I added emotions we might use to describe the state of being at different places on the grid. Now put your stimulus somewhere on the grid and come up with stories to explain why someone would have that emotional reaction.

