Dialog -- Capturing voices for characters
by Wen Spencer

I got a question posed to me:

Hi Wen.

You keep mentioning that you answer questions on writing, I thought I'd ask one here.

How do you manage to write different "voices"? Reading your dialogs, I can usually tell what Ukiah said as compared to what Rennie or Max said (even without checking who said it). And you do it without resorting to accents (except as a flavoring).

When I tried writing dialogs, people told me that the character which was my avatar had really vibrant representative dialog. The other characters, and I admit it, were flat, and sounded a bit like me trying to portray someone else.

So, the question is, how do you write different people that sound so different? Any general tips for newbies?

Thanks,
(name withheld by request)

Good question, one that is hard to answer -- mostly because I'm never sure if I succeed in doing it myself.

People have natural vocabularies, point of views, and speech rhythms. For example, one person might talk all in small words in small sentences.

"I work at Borders. Weekends. Nights."

Or they might ramble.

"I work at Borders because I just love books and they give you an employee discount. How cool is that? Of course that means all my paychecks ends up back in their pocket, but that happens anyhow, so I might as well get more books out the deal. Anyway, I like to work nights -- I'm a nightowl kind of person."

The first person might be shy and uncomfortable about talking about themselves, or not trusting of the person that they're talking to. The second person is willing to say anything to anyone.

Rennie's point of view isn't the same as Max's, so how he'll approach any subject is going to be different. And of course his vocabulary is going to be peppered with "old" words.

"Work at a bookstore? I'm not into booklearning, cub."

Max's wealth and business experience makes it so while he's a father-figure and slightly suspicious of the world like Rennie's, he sees it in a different manner than Rennie.

"Whoever came up with the bookstore cafe marketing plan was a genius. People are going to browse, so why not encourage them to cough up money for overpriced coffees while they do it? Two addictions at once."

It's actually a little hard for me switch from Ukiah's books to Tinker. Ukiah is laid back, watching, flooding his senses with input, unworldly but wise. He doesn't use a lot of slang, and his focus in life in people.

"I like bookstores. They're filled with happy people. My moms used to take us to the Barnes and Noble store out in Cranberry. We'd nestle down into stuffed chairs, drink hot cocoa, and be together in contented silence."

But Tinker is mouthy, naive but worldly. She tends to be more self-centered.

"I don't know if I love or hate this whole coffee shop thing. I mean, yeah, the food is to-die-for yummy, and it's a cool way to scan through the physics books -- find out if they actually say anything I don't already know -- but I always have to take the back copy because the front copy been so mauled, it's gross. I subscribe to all the real science magazines, but I like to skim through the pop tech magazines like Wired, just to see what might be leaking into technology from a weird angle."

Practice is the way to learn how to do dialogue. It is hard to approach every line of dialogue as if there is a POV shift and yet not actually step out of POV. I at first had to actually sit down and say "this person will talk in short sentences, this person will ramble, this person will use sentences that will be extroverted, this person will use self-centered sentences." I would go through and check for things like: this person is self-centered, so they won't say "This is annoying" but "I'm extremely pissed at the moment."

Slowly it becomes more ingrained so I don't have to think as much about it. I actually have to sit and think about why Rennie sounds different from Max, but after a while, I can pinpoint what I've put into them to make them different. Little character things, like the fact that Max rarely teases Ukiah, while Rennie will do little digs (and he really harasses Atticus to no end.) That Max mostly calls Ukiah "kid" unless he's very stressed out and concerned about Ukiah, and then he becomes "son." That Rennie never calls Ukiah anything but "cub." Max is 20th century, high tech, money. Rennie is 19th century, low tech, wolf.

Of course, you can't always get every line of dialogue to be flavored. Nor should you. My first attempt at a novel, I had one character that only mumbled odd long strings

of dialogue, and then I made him a main character. Talk about unreadable! Just be aware that even short exchanges be radically changed by word choice.

     "Stop it."
     "Oh, give me a break."
     "Could you please not do that?"
     "Do you want hit?"
     "Try that again, and I'll tear your throat out."
     Heavy sigh, look away, without a comment.