

The Characters Are the Story

I know I'm not advised to introduce too many people to you, dear reader, but this rule is really at odds with my brief. They say that bringing in too many roles in a short story might confuse you, labour unnecessarily upon trivialities or drown out the narrative. However, if I set out to sketch my little town for you, I'd have no material without bringing up more than a few of our finest.

You see, if you live in a small town, you'd know that some of the roles are universal. In my little corner of the world, there's the normal breadth of personas; from the friendly girl in the coffee shop who once let you once get away with being 50 cents short for your coffee, to the forthright business holder who's seen harder times than this (even though times are tough again) and the inevitable cloud of bar flies always out the front of the town's one pub. Sure we have those players, but our story also lies in the accounts of individuals who can *only* be found here.

Take that couple that live by the train station. She has the warm rosy cheeks of a lady somewhere between middle and older age; he is quiet and seems thoughtful, speaking only when spoken to. Did you know they have such an extensive stamp collection that they have used all their doubles to wallpaper their down stairs bathroom? They invariably sleep in on a Thursday because they always go shopping on a Wednesday, and frankly driving to Goulburn and back from the small town just takes it out of them. Their only daughter would help them with the shopping, however, she's always had a bad knee since she fell off the rope swing over Meadow Creek at Barbour Park when she was 16 - plus she lives up in Sydney now.

What about the curious recluse that lives up on Wombat Street? Yes, she looks like any other isolate; she has one stocking that always seems to be hanging around her left ankle and wears a cardigan that is a shade of brown that could've only been possible in the 1970s. But did you know she was the first woman to complete a doctorate in Fermentation Science at Canberra University back in the 1990s? She also exclusively eats cake for tea. Nowadays, when she is feeling a little adventurous (once every three months or so) she catches the train to Cootamundra and back in the same day. Just as she is in in the little town, she sticks to herself on the train and never talks to anyone. She also never leaves the station at the other end for fear of missing the return train.

And the young guy across from the school. He works over at the wool store and sometimes does letterbox drops to make a bit of extra cash. That same young man has always had a passion for bird watching because his grandfather used to take him out with an old set of binoculars to the Mundoonen Ranges when he was little. Last week he was even lucky enough to see the rare Chestnut-rumped Heathwren. But this week he is resting up and eating chicken soup, made with the bones in by his nan, as he caught an unseasonal cold; he was covid tested though and he came back clear which is a relief for those that know him in the small town.

I could tell you about the little twins who live up on Biala Street who you'd barely tell apart. Their mum gives one a yellow bow in her hair and one a blue bow – in line with the school uniform of course – just to save the teachers' sanity. They're both amazing little athletes winning every race at the small schools swimming carnival and going on to zone this year. But could you guess that they once smashed a window at the historic Pye Cottage when they were playing around in the nearby park? They didn't mean to, but when it was done they swore never to share this secret with anyone else in their little town. When they did a history unit on this at school a few weeks back, they both went an unexplainable shade of red, which thankfully for them wasn't noticed by anyone (except each other); no one is ever really looking out for children who blush about historic cottages.

Finally, there is that ever-indefatigable lady in her late 70s with white grey hair. She is a member of almost every community group in town and is currently serving as the president of the View Club and Secretary of the Progress Association. She purses her lips when she is listening intently (which she often does) - not much that happens in this town slips by her. Last year when a local community organisation wanted to erect a plaque for a retired committee member from a few towns over, she made it her personal mission to dissuade them (he had been a dirty old drunk with no respect for women) and, of course, she won. Most people think about the lady with white grey hair as a nuisance or as a road block, and she does sometimes get in the way of progress; yet, she also helps keep the place ticking.

My friends, I could've dropped you in on the middle of a heated argument outside the historic Courthouse in the centre of my town. You would've seen something of my town from a certain perspective... but that story could've been anywhere. And, even when some of this recount isn't even loosely based on fact, it is clear that my point is this: this overgrown village wouldn't be the same without its personalities. Sure, come and see the little antique stores and the friendliest butcher this side of the black stump; enjoy a cherry ripe slice that even the Premier of New South Wales' personal security detail stops in for each time they head south on the Hume Highway; and, make this somewhere you come regularly because our community groups are working hard on fundraising to make our playground a bit better each year and your kids will love it. But don't hope to ever truly understand what this town is about without taking the time to meet a local. It is guaranteed that you will look at this little place with a refreshed sense... but only if you let its characters be the story.