

Make Your Protagonist Likeable

The Source

This seems to have emerged from commercial fiction marketing in the 1980s-90s, particularly in romance and women's fiction where publishers wanted "relatable" heroines readers could identify with.

The Hollywood screenplay industry amplified this - studio executives wanted "sympathetic" protagonists that test audiences would root for. Blake Snyder's "Save the Cat" beat sheet (2005) literally includes having the protagonist do something kind early to make them likeable.

The principle had logic for commercial genre fiction: **If readers don't connect with the protagonist, they may not finish the book.**

Reader identification became conflated with moral approval, and the rule metastasized.

The Morphing

The corruption followed this path:

1. **Original:** "Readers need to care about the protagonist"
2. **First corruption:** "Readers must like the protagonist"
3. **Second corruption:** "Protagonists must be morally good"
4. **Third corruption:** "Protagonists can't have serious flaws"

5. **Final form:** "Protagonists must be victims or heroes, never villains"

The rule became: **Protagonists must be kind, honorable, and wronged - preferably underdogs who never do anything questionable.**

This led to sanitized protagonists who are bland, flawless, and boring - or whose "flaws" are quirks (clumsy, talks too much) rather than genuine moral failings.

The Reality

Some of literature's greatest protagonists are monsters:

Vladimir Nabokov (*Lolita*): Humbert Humbert is a pedophile and predator. Not likeable. Utterly compelling. The novel only works because we're trapped in his elegant, horrifying consciousness.

Patricia Highsmith (*The Talented Mr. Ripley*): Tom Ripley is a murderer, sociopath, and con artist. We don't like him. We can't stop reading about him.

Bret Easton Ellis (*American Psycho*): Patrick Bateman is a serial killer and misogynist. Deliberately repulsive. The novel is powerful precisely because he's unredeemable.

Gillian Flynn (*Gone Girl*): Amy Dunne is a manipulative psychopath. Nick is a cheating, self-absorbed liar. Both are deliberately unlikeable. The novel was massively successful.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Notes from Underground*): The Underground Man is bitter, self-pitying, cruel, and irrational. We're not supposed to like him - we're supposed to understand him.

Anthony Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*): Alex is a violent rapist who enjoys causing pain. The novel makes us complicit in his perspective - disturbing and powerful.

Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club*): The narrator is self-destructive, nihilistic, and creates a terrorist organization. Tyler Durden is a fascist. Neither is likeable in conventional terms.

When Likeable Protagonists Work

Likeable protagonists succeed when:

1. **The story requires emotional investment:** Romance, coming-of-age, stories about connection
2. **Identification serves theme:** Stories about goodness, community, or moral choice
3. **Genre expectations:** Cozy mysteries, inspirational fiction
4. **Likeable doesn't mean perfect:** Flawed but decent characters (Atticus Finch, Elizabeth Bennet)

When Likeable Protagonists Fail

Demanding likeability fails when:

1. **It sanitizes reality:** Real people are complex, sometimes awful
2. **It limits subject matter:** Can't explore dark psychology or moral ambiguity
3. **It creates blandness:** Protagonists with no real flaws are dull
4. **It serves false comfort:** Some stories should disturb, not reassure
5. **It confuses identification with approval:** We can identify with flawed people without condoning them

The Actual Principle

The real craft principle isn't "make protagonists likeable" - it's:

Make protagonists compelling. Give readers reason to care about or be interested in their journey - through complexity, honesty, insight, or the questions they raise. Readers don't need to like a protagonist to be fascinated by them.

Different types of reader engagement:

- **Identification:** "This character is like me"
- **Admiration:** "I want to be like this character"
- **Fascination:** "This character horrifies/intrigues me"

- **Empathy:** "I understand why this character does what they do"
- **Curiosity:** "I need to know what happens to this character"

Only the first two require "likeability" in conventional terms.

The Irony

The "likeable protagonist" rule became rigid precisely when prestige television gave us complex, morally ambiguous protagonists: Tony Soprano, Walter White, Don Draper, Cersei Lannister. Audiences proved they could engage deeply with deeply flawed characters.

Literary fiction prizes consistently went to books with difficult protagonists - *The Goldfinch* (Theo is a thief and addict), *A Little Life* (Jude is self-destructive and manipulative to friends), *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (narrator is nihilistic and cruel).

Why This Corruption Matters

This rule damages fiction by:

1. **Limiting psychological range:** Can't explore dark aspects of human nature
2. **Creating false morality:** Fiction becomes about good people, not complex people
3. **Privileging comfort over truth:** Reassurance becomes more important than honesty

4. **Sanitizing character:** Real human messiness gets smoothed away
5. **Condescending to readers:** Assumes they can't handle moral complexity

Most destructively, it teaches writers that **readers need to approve of protagonists morally** when actually readers need to find them **psychologically true and interesting**.

Some of the most beloved characters in fiction are terrible people - because they're fascinating, honest, complex, and reveal something about human nature we recognize.