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### Tip: Creating an Antagonistic Antagonist

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Newton's third law of motion could equally apply to fiction as well as physics. Creating a good story requires a protagonist, and for every protagonist, there needs to be an antagonist. A strong antagonist will not only elevate your plot, by providing conflict, tension and drama but also your protagonist: the central character in your story needs to stretch him or herself, grow, change, and summon inner resources to defeat the villain.

The key to creating a memorable antagonist is empathy. Of course, having empathy for all our characters is a requisite part of story-telling, but arguably, no more so than for the baddie. After all, few people think they are evil, nor believe they are acting heinously. Most of us are able to justify our actions to ourselves and others. So, put as much effort into creating an antagonist as into your protagonist. Know as much about them, what they want, what their motivation is and their background as possible. Walk a mile in everyone's shoes, not just the good guys'!

Think creatively about your antagonist: an antagonist need not be a person, but could be a force, a concept, a trait or a psychological state. For instance, in *1984* the antagonist is 'the Party' given the human (or inhuman) face of 'Big Brother'. In spy thrillers, there is often a conspiracy or a government cover up; in *LA Confidential*, the hero is battling his own alcoholism; in *Sense of an Ending*, the opponent is human nature - the anti-hero, Tony's inherent character flaws; in *Solar* it's global warming. There may be multiple antagonists. The antagonist may not be who they seem: the person your central character thinks of as their enemy could actually be their friend and, conversely, their friend may, in fact, be their enemy. In *My Cousin Rachel*, Rachel is a wife, a widow, a lover and the love interest to the male characters, as well as potentially being a murderous poisoner.

## Exercise: Creating an Antagonistic Antagonist

Thrillers need to be page-turners with cracking plots, plenty of twists and great characters (particularly in psychological thrillers). They also need to have exceptional antagonists. However, I would argue that every novel needs an antagonist, even if the bad guy isn't a guy, may not seem to be bad (at first) and may not even be human.

1. Think about your five favourite works of fiction. Who or what are the antagonists?

2. Think of your five favourite antagonists.

Mine are (and they are not necessarily related to my five favourite novels):

Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*

Roger 'Verbal' Kint in *The Usual Suspects*

Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*

Colonel Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*

Frankenstein in *Frankenstein*

What you'll notice from this list are that these antagonists aren't straightforwardly evil, although certainly some of them are pretty nasty. Lecter, a cannibalistic psychopath, grows to care for and mentors Agent Clarice Starling; Heathcliff is also Cathy's lover in *Wuthering Heights*, even if he becomes vengeful after her death; and Frankenstein is, at first, pitiful when he is abandoned by his creator. What they have in common is that one can empathise with their pain, if not their means of expressing it.

3. Now think of the story you are writing. Who or what is the antagonist?

What are his/her/ its key character traits?

What do they need?

What do they want?

What motivates them?

What is their background?

What makes them so dangerous or frightening, and why are they hard to defeat?

Is there more than one antagonist?

Does a character become more antagonistic or are they secretly a villain but they appear to be a friend?

What makes him or her into the villain, or become known as an enemy at that point in your story, and why?

Remember that your antagonist may not be a person, but could be a force, a concept, a trait or a psychological state (for instance, a tornado, a plague, fame, a conspiracy, an addiction, alcoholism or anorexia could all be antagonists). If you're writing about someone who is battling addiction, the antagonist is the addiction and some of these questions will still apply - what does your character need to fuel the addiction; find out as much as you can about this specific addiction: what makes it so dangerous, frightening and hard to defeat? What will happen to your hero if he or she can't recover from their addiction? And how will they ultimately defeat their inner demon?