

Connecting with Characters

by Docena Holm

In order for readers to connect to a story, they must connect to the characters. We become involved with the characters because not only can we see and hear as we can in the real world, we experience how the character feels through thoughts and reactions. An author shows how a character feels with story structure, a character's physical reactions, and internal conflict and uncertainty.

Part 1: Analysis of authors who connect

I analyzed four books by four different authors: *Enna Burning* by Shannon Hale, *The Chosen One* by Carol Lynch Williams, *Deadline* by Chris Crutcher, and *Swoon at Your Own Risk* by Sydney Salter. Each author handled the connection with characters in different ways.

Shannon Hale's style is very traditional. She writes in third person in a structure that shows us what Enna is doing, explains that in a nice paragraph form, getting deeper into the actions or background or thoughts of Enna with each sentence. The first sentence is a perfect first sentence. I could write a paper just on first sentences. "Enna let the fire burn out" (Hale 1). In the next paragraph we learn why that first sentence was significant:

She was not used to this duty. For the three years she had lived and worked in the city, the hearth had been the hall mistress's responsibility...but with a garden to tend, wood to chop, and a brother, a goat and chicken to feed, she often forgot the fire. (1)

Then a couple of paragraphs later we learn what Enna thinks as introduced by the word *thought*: "Of course, Enna thought, she would overlook the coals on a night when her brother and, more important, the flint... (1). When Leifer, her brother enters the scene Hale speeds up or slows

down the dialogue scenes with actions between words and not much thoughts or reactions until the scene is complete:

‘Hot,’ said Enna at a near run. She put the pail by the hearth and brushed off her hands. ‘Ow, but that rag grew thinner the farther I walked...’

Leifer closed up his pack and shoved it into the darkness under his bed.

‘Well, had you kept the fire going...’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Enna, shooing away his protest with a wave of her hand.

‘No need to remind me...’ (3)

Later she does have a thought during the conversation which propels the story forward:

‘Hm. You find anything else?’ *The vellum*, she thought. She knew if Leifer did not bring it up on his own...’ (4)

And the vellum is italicized like she is saying those words in her head. The thoughts slow down the action, explain what is going on, and dig deeper into the story and into the character.

Carol Lynch Williams’s structure is to have bursts of words and action with short paragraphs, sentences that vary in length, and immediate actions with few internal thoughts. “‘If I was going to kill the Prophet,’ I say, not even keeping my voice low, ‘I’d do it in Africa’” (Williams 1). The word Africa shows us she has some knowledge that we will learn about later. Two new paragraphs show her actions. “I look into Mariah’s light green eyes. / I kick the toe of my sneaker into the desert sand. Feel the heat coming up from the ground, through my tights, right under the skirt of my past-the-knee dress” (1-2). The “past-the-knee dress” shows us something about her environment (2). A couple of paragraphs later we see how she feels about her baby sister in her actions and thoughts without telling us they are her thoughts:

Mariah smiles at me again and lets out a bit of baby laughter. I shift her from one hip to the other, then lean close, smelling powder and, from the desert around me, sage. I touch my lips to her face so soft and smooth. Eight months old, this baby, my youngest sister, is as sweet as new butter. And just as fat. I love her.

Oh, I love her. (2)

Then she speaks aloud what she thinks but in secret because she is talking to her baby sister.

“‘I’d kill him first for me,’ I say into her cheek, my lips still resting there, my eyes closed. ‘And then I’d kill him for you. Then I’d kill him for the rest of our sisters. And our mothers. And the other women here...’” We know Kyra is startled and afraid to be found out plotting the prophets death by her reaction to hearing her name. “‘Kyra.’ / I jump” (2). Williams’s style of action, reaction and observation propels the story forward so that you can hardly put the book down.

Chris Crutcher’s style in *Deadline* is almost like Ben is writing his story down in a journal or sitting down with a good friend to process his story. A lot is narrative and in his head. Right away he tells us his plan was for being serious and finding out about the world during his senior year and then that his plan was sabotaged by finding out he could die at the end of the year. After “telling” us his plans, he lets us into a scene with his doctor using dialogue with few to no tags:

‘Hey, Ben,’ he said as he passed me in the waiting room ‘Where are your folks?’

‘They couldn’t make it.’

‘I’d really prefer they were here.’

‘My mom’s...well, you know my mom; and Dad’s on the truck.’

‘I’m afraid I have to insist,’ he said.

‘I’ll relay the information. Promise.’

He said it again. ‘I’m afraid I *have* to insist.’

‘Insist all you want, my good man,’ I said back. ‘I’m eighteen, and adult in the eyes of the election board and the Selective Service and your people, the American Medical Association. I decide who gets the good on yours truly.’

(Crutcher 3)

While the journal type narrative caught us up on what Ben wanted before the bad news, the dialogue here shows us a lot about Ben. He takes care of things himself, considers himself an adult and all is not quite right with Mom. Also the conversation with the doctor shows that Ben interacts with all people in a straightforward adult manner and adults respect him. After Ben hears the bad news from the doctor which he does not relate directly to us, he processes the information in his thoughts so we learn more about him and his family. “All my mother ever wanted was to be a good mother and a good wife, but that’s not as easy as it sounds—for her at least—because she’s crazy” (5). Then he tells us more about his younger brother Cody and his dad and through his thought process we are shown again that he doesn’t want to burden anyone and tries to take care of his problems by himself just like he is going to take care of dying by himself. “I’m the one who tries to get in and make her feel better. File that under Don Quixote. Dad...helps Cody and me problem solve, by request only. [Dad’s] keel is as even as hers is tilted;...I speak both their languages, while Cody speaks neither, and I spend way more time than I should translating” (5-6). Even though Ben seems so nonchalant about the whole dying thing/not telling his family, Crutcher lays on the sympathy thick with a sappy song Ben listens to when he runs:

So I will climb the highest hill
And I'll watch the rising sun
And pray that I won't feel the chill
'Til I'm too old to die young . (7)

So even though as readers we are privy to Ben's thoughts, we can also see that at some point he will fall apart because he stays strong for us too in the retelling and we know from our experience that it can't last.

Polly in *Swoon at Your Own Risk* has an instant likeable and relatable teenage voice and we are allowed to experience her instability with male relationships through her internal thoughts and explanations and then her immediate reactive thoughts. "I am *not* noticing his green eyes. Or the way the sun has already streaked his hair blond. I am *not*" (Salter 1). Of course she is and we know it because Sydney Salter makes us privy to Polly's every thought. We know immediately how Polly feels about Sawyer, her ex, as he supervises her at their summer jobs at Wild Waves:

'Pollywog.' Sawyer points his pen in my direction. ' You and I will tackle the Lazy River.'

Pollywog! Doesn't our breakup deny him the right to call me annoying nicknames? A couple of guys snicker, repeating "Pollywog." It's going to stick—like after the one time I drank too much at a party (post-breakup) and everyone squawked Polly-Wants-A-Beer at me for two weeks. I want to smack the guys upside the head, but I simply smile at Sawyer and say, 'Sounds great.' (2)

By Polly's physical reaction of simply smiling, we know she does not show her true emotions but we are lucky enough to know her inner turmoil and thus connect with her in ways the characters in the book cannot.

Physical reactions that only the reader knows about connect us with a character's internal state. Each author handles these reactions differently with Chris Crutcher, the one male author, having very little physical reactions. Are women more aware of our bodies? That's a question for another time, another paper.

Enna is playing with fire, literally throughout the book. She has learned the power of summoning fire from the heat around her but struggles throughout the story to control and not let it consume her. Much of Enna's physical reactions deal with fighting and fostering the fire. Isi, Enna's friend who controls wind, is trying to help Enna control her fire. Isi tells Enna that "it's not [her] fault, that the fire is bigger than any one person" (Hale 154). How does Enna feel about this? "Enna felt her legs tremble" (154). That's her physical reaction to Isi's advice and the fire which is taking over. Then her thoughts, "*Not bigger than me*" (154). We know from her physical reaction that it is bigger than her but because of her thoughts we know she thinks she can control the fire. When Isi observes that the fire is using Enna, "chills [shake] Enna. She started to think about what Isi said, but it was getting hard to see" (154). Then later, "The heat was pressing itself against her face, into her mouth when she spoke, into her eyes so they stung... The heat was pressing, pressing... Enna pulled all that built-up heat inside her, gasping at the burning pain... She had to get away. Now. The heat was blazing in her chest. She thrust it out" (155). We know Enna's physical turmoil because Hale provides us with the inner struggle. We feel the heat, the pulling, the conflict and we know what it costs Enna to contain the fire and then to let it go. We would not know these things if Hale did not share Enna's thoughts and physical personal reactions.

Williams in the Chosen One is sparse with her physical reactions and when she does, she creates strong, unique images that border on the cliché but are perfect for Kyra. She reveals to

Joshua the book she borrowed from the bookmobile. We know this is an important moment because of how she feels physically and mentally;

‘Do you know what this is?’

I nodded, my braid feeling extra tight, tears stinging at my eyes. If he wanted, Joshua might stop seeing me because of this. But I had to show him. Had to let him see this part of me...

“Don’t you miss novels?” I said. ‘Don’t you miss fiction?’

It was a long moment. Long enough that worry grew in my stomach. By showing him this book I’d given Joshua something I couldn’t take back. I’d handed him a bit of my freedom.

‘Never mind,’ I said, tears threatening. (Williams 102-103)

My braid feeling tight, tears stinging at my eyes, worry grew in my stomach, tears threatening. Such simple statements that I relate to, that I’ve felt, experienced, endured when I was afraid of being rejected. And Williams uses them so well.

Ben’s physical reactions are largely sexual. Since I’m not a man, I have to assume this is normal. Of course, the scene I flipped to is when Dallas Suzuki, his girlfriend, is giving him a massage. And he doesn’t tell us physically how he feels, but he relates what he is feeling to his life and dream plans that he knows won’t be fulfilled:

I’m lying facedown on Dallas Suzuki’s couch while she straddles me, massaging my back and shoulders. It feels so good I’m considering paying her the money I earned cleaning cars...

She kneads along the sides of my spine.

‘Mmmmmmmmmmm.’ This is deep tissue work; maybe not as good as sex, but it will stand in nicely until sex comes along. ‘So good,’ I say. ‘A little higher on the shoulders...Will you marry me? We don’t have to live together or anything. I’ll just come over once a week. (Crutcher 183)

Later when Rudy confides about being a child molester, again Crutcher shares very little actual physical feelings but there is a lot of mental response to the sick story. As Rudy continues with the story these are Ben’s thoughts: “I want to run out *now*, but I’m as fascinated as I am repulsed,”(206) “I have this awful feeling in the back of my throat” (207), and “I said I’d stay through this, but I want to run. I just want to run. I can barely breathe” (210).

Most of Polly’s pain in *Swoon at Your Own Risk* is more emotional than physical because of her father leaving the family. Even when Polly is deeply wounded from a shopping cart race and Xander, the young man she *will not* fall for turns up unexpectedly, her pain is more mental and within her heart than from her road rash and gash in her leg. “My leg throbs. My arm throbs. My heart does *not* throb!” (Salter 197). During her ordeal at the hospital under Xander’s kind care, every physical reaction is also mental as Polly fights against her growing love for Xander and her unexpected jealousy: “Xander jumps up and runs over to the receptionist...he starts flirting!...my eyes have trouble focusing through the tears pooling in my eyes. From the pain. Only the pain” (205-206). When Xander kisses her forehead she tells us she’s not feeling anything physically: “I can’t stop the tears from coming. My lip quivers. Big fat drops slide from my eyes...I’m numb. But for the first time all summer the rest of me is most definitely *not* numb. I’m feeling everything” (210).

Every good story contains an external and internal conflict. Through a character’s thoughts we become connected to that internal struggle.

As Enna is held captive by the Tiran's, her guard Sileph, manipulates Enna to gain power over her and for his country. We see his manipulation yet are pulled into trusting him with a bit of reservation because of Enna's thoughts and reactions to him. Sileph drugged Enna with king's-tongue to keep her fire under control. He stayed with her while the drug wore off and before the next dose was administered. Here's what we know in her mind: "For Enna, they became the most delicious and grueling hours she had known. The first time she could gather heat to her, she nearly cried out...Never had the gift brought her so much joy or forced such a struggle for control" (Hale 184). She explains to Sileph a bit how it works and starts to trust him more, but then we know her thoughts:

'Where do you get the heat?'

'I don't know. It's all around. I can't remember anymore.'

She did remember. Living things give off heat. But she would not reveal all willingly.

Just as Enna had wished, because Sileph became more hopeful of learning, he put off the drug until later and later. (184)

We are unsure of her feelings for Sileph because we are shown her uncertainty in her thoughts and then Sileph manipulates her more when Finn and Razo are captured trying to rescue her. Sileph claims they are assassins. Here is what Hales shows us as a clue to how Enna will react when she is given a chance to help her friends and escape:

Inside, deeper than the hollow spot in her chest, she did not believe they could be assassins. But Sileph's words still buzzed in her head, and she could not be sure.

Regardless, she could not let her friends be killed. She would not burn. (199)

We hope that Enna will choose her friends and be mended from Sileph's manipulation and because we know her thoughts we know she will choose right in the end.

Kyra's oppressive community demands strict obedience. While she acts and speaks with obedience most of the time, we are aware that she does not think with obedience because we know her thoughts. She uses her mother's Cutco knives to trim a tree so she can have privacy. When reprimanded by her mother she says that trimming the poky thorns is "Healthier than getting stabbed" (Williams 5). But what she thinks shows us how penned in she is by her circumstances:

What I couldn't say was, 'I needed a place to breathe by myself, that's why I did it.' I couldn't say, 'Mother, I am almost fourteen and I haven't had one minute alone except when I'm sitting on the toilet and even then Carolina tries to get in with me and I have to hold the door shut with my foot 'cause the lock's been broken and I don't know how long.' I couldn't say, 'Some days I need to be alone.' Instead, I just shrugged. (5)

This is a masterful technique that I need to use in the current book I'm writing about a girl who doesn't say much. The readers of *The Chosen One* know Kyra cannot last in this community and that she will need to break free because they know her conflict even when the other characters don't see.

Ben holds himself together to save his family and friends but Crutcher lets us know the toll this takes on Ben:

I'm suddenly feeling even worse about hiding my own death penalty. I can't be my brother's best friend while hiding something that big. I can't expect to be loved by Dallas after I'm gone if I don't let her know what's happening to me. And I can't look

Rudy in the eye. Hey-Soos has been telling me this all along. The thing that prevents the worst from happening is the truth. (Crutcher 228)

Ben is on the path to sharing his burden with his family and friends.

Polly needs to experience a relationship with a guy she can trust. She's allowed herself to be treated poorly, but until she admits to herself that she can have better she won't allow Xander to get close. Her thought process shows us how low she sinks in her estimation of herself: "[I] feel like trash. Disposable. I keep trying to recycle myself, but it's just getting desperate, and my reputation looks as mottled as that really cheap paper Mom started buying for Grandma's printer" (Salter 252). She sees Xander writing in his notebook and reacts this way: "I don't deserve his kindness, which is completely misplaced and confounding" (254). We rejoice with Polly when she values herself because we've known her conflict.

I've received a lot of feedback from my submissions and most agents and editors respond that they did not feel connected to the character. I thought when I started this analysis I would find one formula to fix the connection problem. Of course, I did not. Every author varied in the amount of thoughts shared, the structure for sharing, and the physical feelings. I need to find my own way, my own voice for connecting to a character. I was reminded that reading is a very personal experience because of those connections and that I need to provide depth to my own characters. The next part of the paper is rewriting a passage with what I've learned and then to tell what I did.

Part 2: Two passages with improved connections

A Kiss and a Curse opening scene

I ran from Emmeric's kiss. "Race you."

He lunged and grabbed at my ankle. I tripped, and caught my fall with my hands but kept the reaction of a curse inside. I must not let one out, not when lately a mishap seemed to occur with each profanity I uttered.

With a grunt, I pushed against the warm dirt of the hill, but not before a tug at my skirts and a triumphant Emmeric sprinted past me to the top of the hill.

I brushed the dirt from my stinging hands and lifted my skirts to catch him. Tomorrow at my spinning wheel, I'd regret my scraped palms. With my hair streaming in my face and my breath heavy and deep from my attempt to catch Emmeric, I arrived under our apple tree.

"Juliana. What will your mother say?" Emmeric waved a strip of my shift. "We'll have to marry now."

"She'll say, 'You two. Who won this time?'" I tucked my hair back into its ribbon and sat upon the lowest branch of the apple tree. White blossoms with pink centers cascaded to the ground releasing the sweet scent of spring and a future plentiful apple harvest. Orange, yellow, and red streaks of sun shot through the tops of the dense forest to the west of our family's manor like streams of wool flying off a burning spinning wheel.

Emmeric leaned against the branch and moved closer until his side pressed against my thigh. I grasped the rough branch to keep my seat and gasped at the pain.

"Are you hurt?" Emmeric slid one arm behind me. I let go of the branch and opened my hands into my lap, my back against his arm for support.

"Your Grandma Lina will give me a word or two about this." He brushed my red palms and a tingle shot through me. How did he do that?

One of his arms still supported me while he rummaged in his pouch and produced a pot of salve. "For sheep udders and for you." He grinned as he applied the cream with his fingertips.

Oh, this man, he was so good to me. Why then, when he asked for a kiss earlier, had I run? Why did I always run?

The kiss that binds. It was supposed to strengthen love and our kingdoms if given at the proper time which was believed to be at the marriage ceremony. But none adhered to that belief, none but Grandma Lina. And a kiss should not be given or taken or viewed. It should be shared. With the person I wanted to be with forever.

We would marry. Have children. Live on his father's land and I could continue to spin in the great room of our manor. My life would remain the same.

Or.

There was no or. There was nothing else.

Not of This World opening scene

You can learn a lot from listening. And it's safer.

"Ben. Sam. Time for scripture." Mom's voice gets louder as she comes down the hall into the kitchen and sits down in front of the computer. *They won't come for another five minutes. That's enough time to check if Chris answered my e-mail.*

I glob strawberry jam onto dense slices of Mom's bread.

"You coming?" Dad has Sam draped over his shoulder wrapped in a blanket. He squeezes Mom's shoulder as she taps on the keyboard. *I wish she'd wait to worry about Chris but I can't make it sound like I'm irritated that she does this every morning.*

"Just a second." Mom waves him away. *Not hearing from Chris is more important than you right now.*

“Marti. What have we got today?” Dad reaches over my head into the cupboard for bowls. *I can see the peanut butter, but I want you to have an interaction with you where you smile.*

“Peanut butter.” He’s going to say something funny.

“A potty in every bite,” Dad says. *I mean party, but saying the word potty is always funny.*

I do smile, then stuff the sandwiches in bags.

“Let’s get started.” Dad walks out of the kitchen and I follow.

On the couch, I flip open my scriptures. Next to me, a heap of blanket takes up two of the three cushions. The blanket, Ben, kicks me. I scoot as close to the arm of the couch as possible.

“Sandra,” Dad says. *We’re ready and I don’t want to be impatient but I’ve got to get to work and I wish you would do that another time or leave it alone altogether. Chris is fine. He’s a grown man away at college. Leave him alone.*

“Sam, you’re first.” Sam is snuggled next to Dad in the recliner. Dad says a few words and Sam repeats the phrases.

“Marti, verse 10,” Dad says.

“Martha, speak up.” Mom sets her *Book of Mormon* down and goes into the kitchen. A pot lid clangs. *You should all be here for scripture study, but I’ve got more important things to do.*

I read, “For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light; the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine.”

“What was that?” Mom calls from the kitchen. “That last part?”

Ben's foot digs into my thigh. There's no more space on the couch. I slide off onto the floor.

"And the moon—"

"Don't mumble." Mom's voice carries over the partial wall that divides our front room from the kitchen.

My words are clear. To those who are in the room to hear.

I start at the beginning and read slow but soft. *The sooner we finish scripture, the sooner I can gag down a couple of bites of cracked wheat and meet Dallin out front.*

"What is Isaiah talking about?" Mom lifts Ben's feet and takes my abandoned place on the couch, sitting at the edge with her back straight as though she's ready to leap up to check the cereal again or her message box. *Let's have another discussion about how the world could end at any moment.*

"The end of the world," Ben says as he emerges from his blanket cocoon like a slug.

"Can we not talk about this now? I have to gag down my cereal and catch the bus."

Why can't I talk to Mom like that?

"There was a flood. In Wyoming. It never floods in Wyoming." Mom looks towards the computer in the kitchen. *There must be a reason Chris hasn't answered my e-mails for the past month. And it's killing me inside because I don't know if he's safe.* "Ninety-six people dead or missing."

"It's getting closer." Mom looks at Dad.

"Sandra." Dad sighs and stands, leaving Sam in the chair by himself. He flips Ben's feet off the couch and sits next to Mom. With one arm around her, he hugs tight. "It will be okay." Mom crumbles into him like my sandwich after it's been crushed in my backpack.

“He’s probably busy studying for finals,” I say. I have to say something because all this listening is exhausting. I need to get to school where I don’t worry so much about what everyone is saying and not saying because it’s not my responsibility to keep them happy.

Part 3: What I did to improve

A Kiss and a Curse

I started with a first line I think tells a lot about the story. “I ran from Emmeric’s kiss.” Juliana loves Emmeric yet she is running from his kiss. This is a conflict throughout the book. My opening scene was in the spinning room with Grandma Lina and the other spinners, but this scene of running from Emmeric is the scene I imagined from the beginning as opening the book. The scene should show that she loves him yet she can’t commit. I included her thoughts about not kissing Emmeric, that she loves him, knows he is a good man, but she wants more. I’m hoping this makes Juliana more relatable not so calloused as she seemed before.

Not of This World

One of the most significant changes for Marti is that I tell what she thinks others are thinking since she states, “You can learn a lot from listening,” as the first line. I don’t know how this comes across. Is it confusing to have in italicized what she thinks others are thinking? The beginning of the story is a glimpse into Marti’s life and then at the end of the passage she tells you what the real problem is that listening is exhausting because she feels like she has to make everyone happy. This Marti is less angst-y than the most recent version. I don’t want her to be the typical angry teen, but I want her to be struggling. I hope I capture that in this version.

Conclusion:

I’m glad I read *Finding Your Voice* and did this assignment. Although, I’m still confused about if I’ve found my voice and how to not lose it again when I revise and when I’m trying to

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accommodate suggestions from others. I guess I've got to go with my gut. That opening scene for Juliana feels more right. I've got to dig deep within myself and let the conflict show at every moment even if it's painful for me.

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