

Creating Characters through Pictures

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I haven't told my husband yet, but I've finally broken up with Viggo Mortenson. He had to go, you see, to make room for George Clooney. Of course, Clooney is on the way out right now too because, well, frankly, I've got my eye on Howie Long these days...



Perhaps I should explain before someone brands me with the Scarlet Letter "A." I am referring to what I call "character pictures," a process I use to develop major characters for my stories. Before I start writing, I generally have an idea in mind of my hero, heroine, or major secondary characters' archetypes, with perhaps a few personal details as well. I am a visual person, however, and I find that I tend not to lock into who those characters really are until I spot a picture in a magazine or on TV and I think, "That's him! (or her!)"

I stumbled on the process quite by accident. In the throes of writing a still unpublished historical, *Alonsa's Choice*, I came across a poster of Viggo Mortenson in character as Aragorn from *Lord of the Rings*. The picture inspired a number of reactions in me, but since this is a G-rated newsletter, I'll describe the most relevant one. I knew immediately that his was the face for the character of Günter Behaim, my German mercenary. Until that moment, I'd had trouble "seeing" the character in my head. Once I got a look at Viggo, however, I was able to describe the heroine's first glimpse of him perfectly:

"A study in counterpoint, his dark-blond hair flowed nearly to his shoul-

ders and revealed bronze highlights that glinted in the sun. It made for a surprising contrast with eyebrows dark as raven feathers over emerald green eyes. A slash of high cheekbones and a wide jaw opposed the marble smooth curves of his mouth...Despite being worn from battle, he was still the most striking man she had ever met."

Hubba, if I do say so myself.

For my contemporary *Dreamweaver*, a paranormal romantic suspense, I had several photos of George Clooney and Renee Russo plastered across my writing space. For me, the advantage of choosing such well-known actors was that there were plenty of pictures available of them on the Internet. I surfed around until I found photos of them in various emotional states, from smiling to contemplative. When I needed to describe their facial expressions for a given scene, I just studied the pictures and wrote what I saw.

Eileen Wilks (*Mortal Danger*, Berkley, July 2005) employs character pictures, too, but prefers not to use those of someone she recognizes: "None of my characters look like Brad Pitt, for example. Brad Pitt looks like Brad Pitt. My characters sulk or go



away entirely when I don't listen to them, so I can't afford to have what I know (or have read) about Brad messing up the way I see my hero."

The members of my critique group, the Four F's, use character pictures as well. I won't claim I taught them how, but let's just say great minds think alike! My critique partner Lynne Marshall's favorite choice of a real person for a character was Hugh Grant for her multiple contest winner *The Swap*. "He helped me orchestrate many tough scenes," she says. "Hearing him stutter or seeing him gesture in my memory helped me put it on the page.



Not a bad guy to hang out with for 300 pages, eh?"

Indeed.

2004 RITA finalist Susan Squires, currently working on an erotic vampire series for St. Martin's Press (*The Companion*, May 2005 and *The Hunger*, October 2005), uses character pictures depending on the needs of the story. "If there are specific appearance requirements dictated by the story, you have to go with that. For instance, when I am writing vampires descended from the Carpathian original race, then they have to be dark-haired and dark-eyed. If, however, I'm writing a vampire 'made,' or one of my sci-fi characters, then I have more latitude and can substitute any current favorite image." She reveals that her favorite actor to base her character pictures on is Russell Crowe. In fact, she's used him for three different books.

Los Angeles Romance Author member Cara King, whose first Regency novel *My Lady Gamester* will be released in November 2005, also chose Russell Crowe for her hero, but not just any Russell Crowe: "It had to be the right picture of Russell—brooding, and not too pretty. A little searching on the Internet, and I had him."

Are you struggling with visualizing a character in your WIP? Then pick up a magazine, a catalogue, or head for the Internet. Remember, a picture really is worth a thousand words.



LARA member TJ Bennett is the *LARA Confidential's* editor. She is a PRO and a finalist in the 2005 Laurie Contest for *Dreamweaver*.