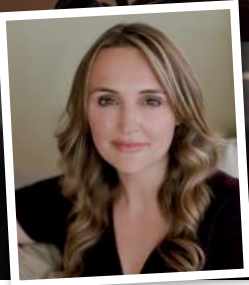


CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT:

Writing characters over time



Novelist **Amy Neff** looks at evolving the characters in your fiction over the course of their lifetime, with advice on how you can develop them as they go through different life stages

As a novelist, it is a privilege to be with your characters over a long period of time. Writing characters across many decades is no easy feat because you must hold their personal histories in your mind, and any small change can have massive ripple effects.

I have known my main characters Evelyn and Joseph for their entire lives, and in turn they have been with me for over ten years, a third of my life, as I wrote their story.

My debut novel *The Days I Loved You Most* begs the question, what if we could choose how our story ends? It tells of Joseph and Evelyn's love from the very beginning to the very end, and it spans sixty years of their life together. It explores what it means to love someone for a lifetime, how that love shifts and change with time, and how to build a life well-lived within the framework of an all-consuming love.

The novel started out as a dual-POV story, with just the two main characters Joseph and Evelyn represented. A developmental editor I worked with along the way made the case for me to add chapters from the perspectives of their three adult children, because their love story does not exist in a vacuum, and their decisions deeply affect their family.

At this point, I was nine years into the process of writing and revising this book. I had spent so long in Joseph and Evelyn's heads, but now I was given the task of creating three new chapters from blank pages, from new points of view I

had not yet explored, and fitting them inside the narrative as though they had always been there.

When I did this, something incredible happened. Instead of slogging through and struggling to find the words, these three chapters burst out of me. I had spent so much time with this family, I knew every one of these characters so intimately, that when it was time for their children to speak for themselves, it was as though they had been banging on the door, waiting to be let out.

Those three chapters ended up becoming some of my favourite ones in the book. Not only because they provide crucial context to their parent's unthinkable decision to end their lives together at the end of one year, but because these characters came to the page as fully formed people in my mind. There was no question what they would sound like, how they would think, what they would say.

I had known them before they were born. I knew their parents, their grandparents, I knew them at three and six and sixteen and twenty-six and forty-two. I had written sixty years of this family, and I knew what came even before those sixty years and what would come after. I knew them on their deepest levels, their motivations, their fears, how they hid the deepest hurts, and the lies they believed. They were fully formed people who existed outside of the story I told about them.

Here is some advice I can share, things I learned along the



way that will help you to develop your own characters, and in turn, to write those characters over time.

Choose (and track!) your characters' birthdays

This feels painfully obvious, but it is one of the most practical pieces of advice and the best place to start. Give every single character a birthday, write it down. No, your characters never need to experience these birthdays on the page. The reader never needs to know when their birthday is. But you do. I'm not just talking about main characters here. You need to know when each character that appears on the page is born if you are going to be writing across time.

Then you are going to create a tracker. I used an Excel spreadsheet with a simple formula (who am I kidding, my Excel-savvy husband inputted the formula for me, math is hard!) so I could easily calculate what age each character would be in any given month and year. My spreadsheet had four columns: Character, Birthday, Date, Age. With this spreadsheet, I could type in whatever date I was writing in, and the spreadsheet would spit out the character's exact age for the scene.

You can use this in two ways. First, if you know you need a scene in August, 2002, for instance, you can input that date into the 'Date' column, and it will spit out how old each character would be during the scene. Or, if you know you wanted to write a scene where your character is sixteen, you could input 'Age' and it will spit out the date without you having to do all the calculations.

This is especially helpful if during revising you need to shift a scene into a later time frame. You can quickly recalculate ages and adjust accordingly without doing a bunch of math. Also, and crucially, if you understand the ages of everyone in your world, you may suddenly realize you are writing a chapter during what should be their daughter's sixteen birthday, but you had no idea, but now you can use that detail to add interest to the scene.

Remember your characters don't exist in a vacuum

The Days I Loved You Most covers a wide range of time, from the 1940s through the early 2000s in the United States.

When I was thinking about what my characters were going through, I relied a lot on what was happening in the cultural moment they were in. There are elements of history that appear throughout my novel. Some are essential to driving the plot forward, like their experience throughout World War II, and some are backdrops that appear as little snippets, like the 1969 moon landing. Through the 1950s, a time when women were expected to be in the home, Evelyn struggles with her role as wife and mother.

You cannot write characters throughout time without understanding the cultural conversation happening around them. A quick Google search for 'notable events during YEAR' will give you a sense of what was happening and you may even find things to work with that are relevant. But be careful not to turn the chapter into a history lesson. The best way to show you've done your homework is for the reader to be fully immersed in the scene, not for them to feel as though you are showing off everything you learned along the way.

Shifting perspectives over time

Your characters have overall arcs that guide them from the beginning of the story to the end, and along the way they will have some realisations/undergo some change that relate to the book's narrative drive. But one interesting way to show this is to thread in something they thought they knew or understood, or a way they saw the world at a certain age, that changed as they learned or grew. Moments of reflection, the contrast between what was and what is now, is a great way to show aging without telling us time has passed.

There's a line in my book when Evelyn, who bucked the role of wife and mother in her youth, recognizes the joy she has found in exactly that towards the end of her life, and she says, 'I'm not sure when it happened, when I found the beauty in domesticity and embraced all the comfort it brings.'

These things can tie into your character's overall arc or not, but it is important that your character is not the same person at fifty that they were at fifteen. But you have to earn all of those changes – you can't assume someone will feel



differently because they are older or younger. You must show the reader how you got there.

Do your homework and use sensitivity readers

When I started writing *Joseph and Evelyn*, characters the reader first encounters when they are in their late seventies, I was twenty-two years old. Since my characters are dealing with a debilitating illness and facing a final year together, I did a lot of reading in the death and dying canon, books about grief and illness and hospice care, books about living and leaving a good life. It was important to do my homework and understand the full picture, not just a clichéd version or my own assumptions of what that picture would be, especially given my own age while writing.

I also used a sensitivity reader. A woman in her seventies read a draft to ensure the perspectives I was portraying rang true. This can work if you are inhabiting someone at a different age than you have ever been, but it's equally important if you are writing characters who are much younger than you are. I sometimes cringe when I see a writer

writing a teen character who has clearly not had a modern teen read it first, because it is always so telling, especially in the dialogue. You want real people, not caricatures of who you imagine people would be.

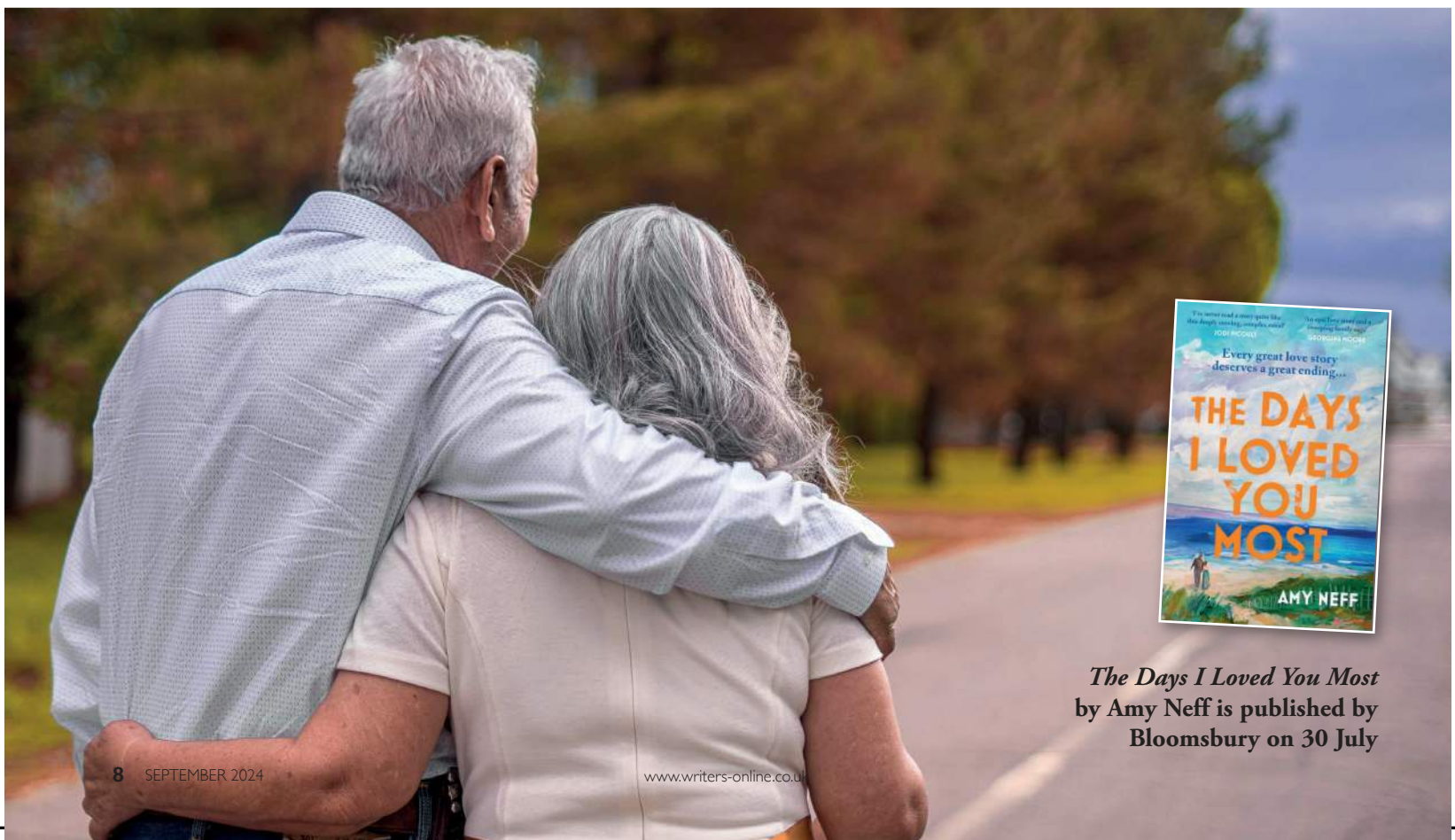
Write far more than what ends up in the book

When you are writing characters over time, no writing is lost. You may write scenes that are cut from the book, but write them anyway. You need to know more about your characters' lives than you share on the final page for the reader to see them as people.

Pick random life events that have nothing to do with your outline. Write them at their high school graduation, at their fifth birthday, at their twenty-first. Write a memorable Christmas. A fight they had with a best friend.

Your characters are people who have lived full lives – they can't merely be devices for your story. You'd be surprised how much you learn when you aren't trying to move the plot forward. I have so many scenes that were cut from the final version, but I saved them all. When I was editing, I often filtered back through those cut scenes and there were lines or moments that ended up back in the book as a memory. That is what makes well-rounded, believable characters, when they have lived a life that exists outside of the narrative you created for them.

The best compliment a reader can give is that my characters felt real to them, because to me, my characters are real people. If you can see writing over time not as a challenge or burden, but a gift to have that perspective to share on the page, then you will write characters that feel real to your readers, too. www.writers-online.co.uk



The Days I Loved You Most
by Amy Neff is published by
Bloomsbury on 30 July