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Voiceover: Your story is waiting for you today. Your story has something new to say. But your story will only come out to play when you're alone... Alone... Alone in a room with invisible people.

Rebecca Galardo: This episode of "Alone in a Room with Invisible People" may contain swearing.

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Hi, I'm Rebecca Galardo, I'm the host of Alone in a Room with Invisible People. I'm here with author and teacher Holly Lisle and today's topic is Creating a Better Character.

Before we get onto the topic, we just wanted to make a special note of our new intro, we hope that you guys like it. So, who did we get for the intro, Mom?

Holly Lisle: [laughs] We got my older son, Mark.

RG: [laughs] My little brother, he's my little brother.

HL: Yeah, your older little brother [laughs].

RG: [laughs] Yeah, my older little brother, yeah. I think he did a fantastic job; he gave us a whole bunch of different types of voices and everything...

HL: Ooh we have a special one for Halloween.

RG: Yes, yes, we'll have to figure out a good Halloween episode as well, which I'm sure you'll have no problem figuring out [laughs].

HL: [laughs]

RG: So, before we get onto today's topic of Creating a Better Character, let's go over what - what are we working on right now? What are you working on right now Holly?

HL: Well, character wise, because we're gonna keep this topical for the characters that we are working on right now, I am finally on the last episode of the Longview series and I am developing the owner and I have had this planned since the very first episode, it was what caused me to go ahead and write the whole story. This episode that I'm writing right now and the owner has been this mysterious character throughout the first five stories in the series and now the owner comes forward and people get to see what's going on, who this character is, how this character came to be - like the backstory. And the owner comes across in a number of ways as fairly evil and the owner has in fact done some things that are really bad, but... there's a lot going on there. And I'm so excited about this story, so that's what I'm working on right now, is the multiple faces of the owner, the evil owner and the good owner and the... there's a lot of stuff there. This is the whole reason for the thing and I'm excited [laughs].

RG: [laughs] That's awesome and you're... You said you were developing him. You've already created him but you're developing him through the fiction?

HL: Right. See, people met this character twice already; in Hunting the Corrigan's Blood and in Warpaint; the owner was actually in both of those episodes, not as the owner, not as the person who owns the Longview and who is running this secret freeing the slaves mission in deep space. But they know this character...

RG: Whoa, that's weird [laughs].

HL: And they're about to see - yeah, oh yeah - they're about to see; have this whole story come home to roost.

RG: Oh man.

HL: A lot of lies, a lot of hidden things, a lot of... just having to keep things secret to save, basically at this point, probably pretty close to a million lives.

RG: Wow. That's definitely taking your story and making it pretty big.

HL: Well yeah, but that's...

RG: But you keep it small too, by keeping it the same people that we already know and we've known for a while and that's always been the mission.

HL: Mmmhmm.

RG: So, I can see why you'd be excited to get to the whole reason why you wrote the entire series [laughs].

HL: Oh, I am, I am, and it's taken me so so so long [laughs].

RG: Mine is nowhere near that fascinating as far as what I'm working on right now. I've got...

HL: What are your characters?

RG: Well, I'm putting together a very rough idea of the second book for the - Leaving Wandalucia was the first one, I don't have a working title for the second one - but it's Brock and Angie from the first one, so if anybody has read the first one, they would probably want to see Brock and Angie get together.

HL: Absolutely, I know I do.

RG: [laughs] And then the other thing I'm putting together, I kind of have Angie's character kinda fleshed out, but Brock; Brock is definitely going to be a surprise to a lot of people when they read it, because there's some interesting stuff in his past. So [laughs].

HL: I liked him; he was a good character from the very beginning.

RG: Yeah, I did too. I really did like him and he wasn't originally Dominic's best friend or anything, he was actually originally, he was only just supposed to bust her and then come back in as conflict, but Dominic just immediately; it's funny how characters - and I'm sure this is something we'll talk about, how characters can surprise you, how characters can throw something out there that, it's like 'whoa where did that come from?' [laughs].

HL: Oh my god [laughs]. Yeah, I have a little story for later in this episode about how character can surprise you.

RG: That's cool, so that actually really works then, because it was a complete surprise when I was putting things together, because originally the cop wasn't even that big of a deal. So, to have developed him to the point where not only was he a major part of the first book, but he's got his own book now. I really liked his - the humor came across very easy between him and Dominic too, just being able to write it, it just came out very naturally, they just - sometimes characters are so alive in your head that they can do things for you almost, it doesn't feel like part of you, it feels like the characters are real.

HL: Yeah, that's... I love that.

RG: So why don't we go ahead and talk about this. Why don't you introduce the idea behind creating a better character, give us an idea of maybe problems, or...

HL: Okay. I think that it is a very good place to start, in fact, problems that people have writing characters. The first and most important problem that people have with writing characters is that they separate themselves from the process. They think 'okay, well I'm gonna base this character on Bob Dylan or Boy George, or somebody else' [laughs]

RG: [laughs]

HL: I'm gonna base it on this real person, or I'm gonna base it on my best friend Bob, or my best friend Kate and I'm going to, you know, just change a few things, but the problem with that is that characters that you create are never - it is impossible to base them on someone else, because you can't live inside anybody else's head but your own.

RG: Absolutely, yeah.

HL: So, all that you have - when you start basing characters on somebody else - you have a physical description, you have the things that you know about these people externally, but you have nothing in the way of genuine motivation, you have nothing in the way of genuine fears or passions. And the character that you get from that comes out very thin and flat and you end up giving them a twitch that, you know, to personalize them, like when they get nervous, they jangle their keys. Or they stutter

when they get, when they're attracted to someone, they always end up stuttering in front of this person, or some other trivial non-essential part of character. Character is not the fact that somebody wears blue, or the fact that somebody has blonde hair, or the fact that somebody has a funny voice. Character is what you do when people are looking and what you do when people aren't looking and how and why those two things are different.

RG: As far as people basing characters off of other people, why would they do that?

HL: Because it seems easy, because they seem ready made, you know, if you have someone that you like, or someone that you hate and you want to put that person into a story, then it seems like most of the work's already done for you because you know what you like about them or you know what you hate about them, but you don't know them.

RG: But you can... Can you start from basing like - well I like these things about this person, I wanna use them in this and then go from there?

HL: Yeah, well yeah, you can always start with a template.

RG: Okay.

HL: If you have somebody that you like to look at and say, 'okay that person can be the template for my main character', fine and dandy, you know, Angelina Jolie I'm sure has been the template for a lot of fiction [laughs]. But the people who give characters that connect with other readers are the ones who go deeper than this physical form. The only way you can go deeper is to dig inside yourself. So you have to - writing a character is being who you would be if you were someone else and it's who you would be if you were evil, it's who you would be if you were great, it's who you would be if you were famous or poor, or really ugly or lonely, or incredibly beautiful or whatever. But every single character that you put on the page that works, ends up being you. It is some version of me if I were a terrifying villain.

I turned out to be pretty good at some of this. I have written villains so bad that I scared myself at one point, that I stopped, that I couldn't write the book...

RG: Wow.

HL: For about a week after I wrote, yeah... That was the second

RG: Secret Texts...

HL: Yeah, the Secret Texts. And I wrote the villain and the villain did something that I had known was coming and I thought she wasn't gonna do it and then, my god, she did and I couldn't write for another week after that. I rolled into bed and cried for a week [laughs].

RG: Wow.

HL: Yeah, but that was something that came out of me, this is if I were this person, in this situation and I did not feel and think the way I do, what would I have been able to do. And what did... Damn. [laughs]

RG: See? And that's one thing that people don't see about writers is - I'm sure it's different for everybody, but I feel like if you're not emotionally moved when you're writing it, then it's kind of like Syd Field said this thing when writing a screenplay; the importance of backstory, he said 'if you don't know it, who does?' and that always stuck with me, since I was, what, like 13 or 14? So, it's the same thing with the emotions, I feel like if you're writing something and your characters are moving you, your characters are making you laugh or giggle or go 'oh my god that's just so naughty' or whatever, whatever you're writing. If they're not doing that to you then there's a good probability, they're not gonna do it to your people either, to your readers.

HL: Right, right. That is absolutely true. If you are not entertaining yourself with what you're putting on the page, stop. Go back, try again.

RG: And a big part of that connection, a big part of something that's moving you or entertaining you is your characters - I would assume they would be a big part.

HL: Yeah, *it is*. And we talked last week some about how the right brain throws stuff at you and put stuff on the page that you don't know is gonna be there. There is a thing that I call dancing naked on the rooftop.

RG: [laughs]

HL: And when you are writing true to yourself, when you are putting parts of yourself into the story, when your right brain and your left brain are clicking and words are hitting the page, you don't see it at the time but you are dancing naked on the rooftop. When people go in and read the story later, they are going to see you. They are going - fiction is telepathy, it is the only way we have ever found to read minds.

RG: That's Stephen King's thing from 'On Writing' right?

HL: It might be, but it's also just true.

RG: [laughs]

HL: You figure; you can pick up Chaucer or Shakespeare, or Mark Twain and you can read their words as they wrote them perfectly, as they thought them on the page right now and understand exactly what they meant. Well, you know, if you dug into Middle English you can do that with Chaucer.

RG: [laughs]

HL: Shakespeare is still pretty transparent and Mark Twain is still perfectly transparent. But these are the thoughts of somebody dead 600 years or 300 years or 100 years, 150 years, that they're still talking to us and this is what writing is. Then

you put character into that and you start creating these people and parts of you are going to slide into those people, which does take me to - because of what you said there, things that happen that you don't expect on the page while you're writing. I was writing Warpaint and in the middle of the book, in the middle of the first draft they were in big trouble and this nothing character who was working with Cady at the control of the space ship, did something very clever that saved their asses, so that they did not get, you know, blown out of the sky. When they got away, she thanked him and he said, 'that's alright you can sleep with me later' and I laughed my ass off because that came out of nowhere. I looked at my fingers - it was like 'who are you people?'

RG: [laughs]

HL: But there it was, so I wrote the rest of it and then I handed it off to Matt and he read through it and he said, okay 'well first off you missed a point and second off this character has to be someone' and that character turned out to be Herog.

RG: *Oh wow.*

HL: It was... Yes.

RG: [laughs]

HL: And turning and finding, discovering Herog the person who was tough enough to carry that line off and not this dude who was nobody in the story until that moment, who was this really tough, you know, very withdrawn, very quiet guy, who then says that [laughs]...

RG: [laughs]

HL: Then was shocked that those words came out of this mouth. When it became Herog, because he didn't say things like that, but he did, right then, right there and it changed everything. It changed the story; it changed the physics. It is the reason I wrote the entire Longview series, that line right there, that moment when that character took over the story and grabbed it and became somebody, required me to go back and look at the physics that I had built in Hunting the Corrigan's Blood that I broke and then write Warpaint so that I could start fixing that physics and then write a six episode series to finish fixing that physics and then have Wishbone Conspiracy coming up next in which I roll on to what happens next.

RG: Oh my goodness.

HL: *One line; you can sleep with me later.*

RG: [laughs] Oh my god and I was here sitting there thinking that the chemistry that Brock and Dom had was just because it came out of nowhere and it was just very instant, it was just... and I was sitting here thinking; when we were talking earlier about it, that's pretty strong because this character came out of - who wasn't

supposed to be anything and he just pushed himself not only into his own roll in the book, but into his own book [laughs]. You know, it's like...

HL: Yes! Oh and they were perfect. They were funny, they were such guys.

RG: Yeah and yours...

HL: I mean, they were really well written male characters and they had this great chemistry with each other and I loved - every time you put them on the page - I loved reading them.

RG: I loved writing them and they definitely - I hang out with a lot of bikers and a lot of dudes - so it's not like, I guess it's just stuff that my muse had picked up on. But it's funny to see these characters that are basically like, I'm trying to think of a show, there's Hawaii Five-0 if any of our listeners have seen that. There's a character that they brought in an actor specifically just because he was in Lost with - Chin Ho Kelly is the character but Daniel Dae Kim - they brought him specially just because he was on Lost and they're filming in Hawaii, so they wanted to throw in a little Lost joke and make some fun and that was it. He was so well loved, not because necessarily the actor, because, you know, it was just a one-time joke, but the character and the way the actor portrayed the character, he was so well loved that he's now a regular cast member and Daniel Dae Kim isn't even there anymore, which is unfortunate, but that's besides the point. But it's these characters that, it's like little actors pop up in our heads when they weren't supposed to be there. The regular guy called in sick and we're like 'well screw it, we're filming today, get somebody else in' and the fill in is just too good, it's funny the way that happens, because the director maybe didn't even know that person was even there. It's like 'who the hell is that? Okay, you're now a regular, now you got your own book, now apparently you have changed enough of those to include - what six stories - and a brand new...

HL: [laughs]

RG: Physics and - that's amazing.

Alright, so, basically what is it that makes a character fun to write and then maybe fun to read, are they the same things? What are you...

HL: Okay, for me, making the character fun to write requires that the character has some things in common with me and some things that are very, very different from me, that allow me - okay - Cady Drake is my all time favorite character I have ever created. And she is this genetic experiment done by her mother and she's tough, she is tough in ways that I would love to be, she's *really* really smart in ways that I would love to be. [laughs]

RG: But she's also vulnerable, because this is not one of those fake bad-ass women, this is somebody who is very very, I don't know, she's just great to read, she's vulnerable but she's bad-ass.

HL: Yeah, that's just it, she has these genetic abilities that were built into her and a couple that she hasn't even found yet.

RG: [laughs]

HL: But she also had this crap childhood and one good friend that stuck with her when horrible things happened to her and she managed to escape with her life from her home world and changed her name and became somebody else. And her friend was still with her and that was her whole world, was her and this one friend and they put together this little business that there was just - kind of a hanging on the fringes by your toenails kind of thing - where they were just scrabbling to make their payments on their spaceship every month and... There is so much about her that I identify with, including scrabbling just to make rent every month [laughs]

RG: Oh yeah [laughs].

HL: Just a bunch of different things, but along with that she has this - the thing that she has in common with me, more than that kind of weird wrecked childhood, is this smart ass sense of humor, where she will blurt things out - and she'll say 'em, I think 'em, but she says 'em [laughs]...

RG: Yeah, she doesn't mince words.

HL: No, no and all of the shit that runs through my mind that I want to be able to say in person but don't, because I was raised a little bit more civilized than that, she just says. And that makes her a blast to write. Herog is fun to write because he came, like I said, out of nowhere with this one blunt remark that - he didn't even intend to say and didn't realize he'd said it out loud until everybody stared at him... And then I started digging into his history and he was, basically, like a Roman gladiator, in that he was a slave, he was owned, he was thrown into the ring because his owner wanted to have him killed. And he won, he won unarmed and naked against an armed gladiator... and became, like, a folk hero for a while and then he killed his owners and got away and built a new life for himself and... He is - well he's Matt [laughs].

RG: Yeah, of course he is. Yeah, a lot of the Glenraven guy was Matt too.

HL: Yeah, well...

RG: I understand because all of my guys start off as Tony and then they just have to be like - okay I can't keep writing Tony in everything otherwise none of my readers will stay with me, they will start throwing the books at me.

HL: Yes and then you have to start finding these other facets of these characters - hence the gladiator - hence the horrible, horrible childhood where his parents sold him for a 12 pack of grain that they could plant.

RG: Damn...

HL: Just because they were destitute and on one of these crappy little terraformed worlds that wasn't doing well and they had other mouths to feed and he was old enough to be sold, so... yeah.

RG: So, making a character fun to write is... What you're saying is you have to have something that you have in common with them that's important, but you also have to have things that aren't, so a lot of times it makes them more fun to write because there's this other side of you... Again, we get back to the possibility 'well what if I was like this'. So, it makes it fun to write.

HL: Right.

RG: For me, it's also having something that they want to achieve, having something that they can't necessarily get to. Writing Brock in Leaving Wandalucia was a lot of fun because... not just because he was, you know, kind of a funny dude, he was this good looking guy that - even his best friend's like 'you're a dick' and 'I don't know why women like you' [laughs]...

HL: [laughs]

RG: You know, you're so smarmy and good looking, can't they see through your crap. But he also had - he can't get the woman that he wants, he can't because of the past and having that made it a lot of fun to write. I've found that in the past, that kind of desire - especially when it's very strong in a character - and I'm sure that we'll cover that too, but that's something that's always made it a lot of fun to write each scene as well and how the character deals with stuff can sometimes surprise you.

HL: Yeah, well that's it too and that's really a good lead in, in that conflict is what drives the character and people get so screwed up on what conflict is, but for a character it is 'what does this person want' and I meant *want*, not 'gee, I want a new Mixmaster, but gee I want to be able to find the person that I want to spend the rest of my life with and what am I willing to do to get there'.

RG: Yeah.

HL: That is conflict.

RG: And anything can be boiled down to that, because when you said that it made me think 'well I want a new iPad Pro 12.9 with 516gigs and wi-fi only and an Apple pencil, but why do I want that?' It's because it's gonna help me create art, well why do I want to create art? So, everything boils down to these things because eventually it comes to the same thing that I was raised - which is you make your own living if you can, do anything... Like my priority is to be at home to see if I can retire Tony, you know, that sort of thing. So that's my conflict...

HL: Mmmhmm.

RG: So yeah [laughs] I can see, when it comes to characters, you can boil down the reason they want anything, the reason they do anything in scenes is the ultimate conflict.

HL: Right, exactly. And it matters to the reader if it matters if it matters to you as the writer.

RG: So, does conflict make it more fun for a reader to read the characters?

HL: Oh my *god* yes. Conflict is what keeps people turning pages and this is something that I probably am going to say again and again and again and again...

RG: [laughs]

HL: But conflict is not argument. So many writers think 'oh well I've got conflict on the page, I've got these two people nattering back and forth with each other about nothing important, but they're arguing therefore it's conflict'; *no*. No. Conflict is a tornado is bearing down on our house, we have one minute to save what matters, what do you grab? That is conflict. Conflict is...

RG: Put it into a smaller scale too, put it into... Just a day to day kinda conflict. Conflict is not the fight itself, it's the reason behind it, right?

HL: Right. So, conflict for a writer is 'am I going to watch this, my favorite television show, or am I going to sit my ass in the chair and get the words on the page' and how you answer that conflict determines whether you're gonna be a writer, or whether you're gonna sit around wishing you were a writer.

RG: Yes, yes, there's something that - I don't know if you're to the minimalist podcast or anything because it can be a little bit much to do - but I remember something that they said and it was basically about minimalism is taking away all these unimportant things to keep what's important to you. Minimalism is the focus on what's important to you. So something that they've even mentioned is, what is that is important to you because, yeah, you might have this show that you like or, yeah, that you might have this video game you like or you might like social medial, but is it an addiction that's keeping you form what's important. You have to weigh the importance of that TV show against the importance of your life dreams.

Once they said that, I stopped watching a *lot* of the shows that I originally liked because, yeah they're fun to watch, but it can be, like, an hour or two of TV that you could be better spending elsewhere and one of your - I believe your How To Motivate You. class - is that the one that has you check your time? Has you track your day and very very very exact track your day and I did this years and years and years ago, I did it probably two or three times with many years in between, and you can see myself gradually getting better, but this is the first year that I devoted so much time to all of my efforts and you can see that difference. And it's the same thing when it comes to characters, I think, I've read a bunch of books where they threw anything and everything at the character and - like you said - they'll have fights, they'll have arguments, but a lot of it is unimportant and I love how you make sure to note - and

pretty much a lot of the things that you're writing, a lot of the courses that you're teaching - is that don't just put random stuff in there, everything has to be in there for a reason.

HL: Right.

RG: And that fits with characters.

HL: Yeah, I wish it were the case that I actually got all of that stuff in there the first time through.

RG: [laughs]

HL: A lot of that does have to - you got through after you have written it and you discover that you have added a lot of trivial stuff about the character and you have them arguing about things that don't matter and... So that's what revision is for, but you don't have to think that you have to get this right the first time, you don't, you just have to understand what makes it right so that you can get it right in revision.

RG: But you do teach people how to focus on characters in revision too, so that's something that's very freeing now too - is that when you're writing, if you know that you can fix it in post [laughs]...

HL: [laughs]

RG: If you know that you can always go back and take out problems, or whatever, then you're free to write these characters that even change half way through the book, if you think something better, because you can always go back and fix your villain or your hero or whoever.

HL: Well it wasn't even something that I had planned to say, but about characters and doing that, when you are writing through and you have a character who changes on you partway through, rather than go back and change the story then, because 'oh my god I just figured out this better way to do this character'. You put a little note at the point where the character changes, where you say 'when I go back, revise this character in the beginning to match the character from here', you just have that note in there then you just keep writing and you write the rest of the story as if you had the character right from the beginning. As if you had not screwed up that first part where he's this wishy washy little dude and all of a sudden, he grew some - you know - testosterone [laughs]...

RG: [laughs]

HL: And you go back and you think about, but that's in revision.

RG: Yeah and...

HL: You just allow him to be who he has become from the point where you discover him, straight through to the end and then you see where that takes you.

RG: Yeah. And we don't wanna go into revision in this one, because we're on characters.

HL: No.

RG: But yeah, it gives you a chance to really keep going with that character and not have to go back and try to figure out - with a brand new idea of a character - how they would do other things. So just keep building that character...

HL: Yeah.

RG: As you move forward. What do you think the most difficult kind of character is to write?

HL: For me, villains are the most difficult. I mean genuine, really bad scary - not bad guys, I have no trouble with bad guys - not main characters; I love them, not sidekicks, not any... But villains are emotionally draining for me to write because I have to put myself into their heads to create them. Even if I am not showing them in first person and generally, I don't show my villains in first person, because that - first off is painful to write and second, if you are a tender reader and a lot of my readers are, it is painful to read. You don't want to be trapped inside the head of a villain, but to be fair with the story, to treat the story with the respect that it deserves and to treat your main character with the respect that he or she deserves by giving them opposition worthy of them, a genuine villain, you do have to find the part of yourself that can be... Or that if you were someone different, who had a different childhood than you, who had a different upbringing than you, if you were that person you could do those horrible things. For me, that's really tough.

RG: Yeah.

HL: How about you?

RG: I would say the hardest ones that I have - yeah - I mean, it's gotta be the same, because sidekicks are probably my favorite thing to write [laughs] and main characters can be difficult, but the stories... I actually have two screenplays that I found it very hard to write because I... The bad guys were very - not bad guys, the villain - the actual genuine horrible trashy human being villain was so difficult to...

And in a screenplay, you're literally as distanced away from something as you can be when it comes to writing. As far as I know, there's nothing more distant than writing, because you're basically telling people what they're doing but in a very dissociative way. You're not writing as these characters; you're literally just showing people what they're doing. And yet it was so difficult to write and these are very very important themes that I still want to write, I still want to get these screenplays out there and done, but writing those scenes were intense and very uncomfortable. I also wrote one book that was - I think it was a 3 day novel and it had a character like Barry in it and that one was so hard that, whenever I got to a scene that he was in, that it was

more or less from his point of view, I just would outline the scene and tell myself I'd get back to it. I never did [laughs]...

HL: [laughs] Yeah, well, I think some characters are never gonna make it all the way to a finished project. Some characters are just this infection you have to get out of your system [laughs]...

RG: [laughs]

HL: And I've written some of those, I have some of that still sitting on my hard drive, these some essays of fury and rage...

RG: Yeah, I think you're right, I think that that's what - for any readers who don't know that's my biological father and he's dead so there no issue of him suing or anything - but I think you're right, I think it was just a psychological kind of venting that I needed to get out for that... And again, like I said today, I couldn't write those scenes, but I have a lot of little snippets of anger and curiosity about, you know, where certain things could have gone. Those don't necessarily lead anywhere, you know, on characters and everything, but they're still something you needed to write - to get out.

HL: And I have a little story about that too. For my very first book - my very first attempt at science fiction - was awful and it had two characters in it, one was named Draegan Dankmire and the only thing I remember about him, well two things, was his horrible name and his purple pimp hat. But along with him I wrote this story about a woman named Tadra Amu and Tadra was the first good character I ever created and I created her when I was like 27/28 years old, which means that the stuff that I wrote when I was 24 and 25 all just sucked [laughed], it was just...

RG: Yeah but to have only been writing for two years and get a good character, that's not bad at all.

HL: Yeah, but then she just sat there in the back of my mind in this world that I had built for her, in this place that was called Old City and, for 15 or 16 years, she just kind of... No, oh god it's been longer than that because I wrote her when I was 28 and I just put her into the story when I started the Longview series. And she's actually in Viper's Nest and then she is going to reappear... Oh I mean she appears in Viper's Nest as a corpse, but she does *appear* in Viper's Nest, well that was how she ended in her original story and I just kept her story whole...

RG: Wow.

HL: In the back of my mind and the whole thing transported - and the fact that I had not planned this and was writing along in Longview and all of a sudden had this revelation where Tadra Amu needed to be in Longview because she was in Old City which is the world that I - or was the location where Cadence Drake was born. And I had just reused the world and then I realized, my god they were there and they were there at the same time, and there was this click and that's what a good character will do for you, is they will just hang in the back of your head unthought of...

RG: 30 years [laughs].

HL: 30, yes, good god, 30 years and 30 years later, there she was, and she came back with her name and her history and her biography and her horrible death and she's in there, *I got to use her*.

RG: That is you being able to fan fiction yourself, to fan geek yourself, that is... And it's not in this horribly self-absorbed way, it is your brain creating these things so awesome to you that you never got to use, that even 30 years later your brain says 'we finally found something to put this chick in, oh my god this is the perfect'...

HL: Yes.

RG: Spot, let's put her in there.

HL: And not only that, it turns out she's *really* important. She's not just this little side note, she is critical to the whole thing and the moment I had the revelation, it was - I just stopped writing - I just got so happy and I laughed.

RG: So, that's [laughs]...

HL: [laughs]

RG: That's the power of characters, for real, I mean that's... Okay, so we've discussed the difficult characters, why they're fun to write, why they're fun to read, we've discussed conflict a little bit; now you did mention heroes, villains and wishy washy wimps, is that something you wanted to discuss briefly? [laughs]

HL: [laughs] Yeah, well, there are a lot of different definitions of hero and a lot of different definitions of villain and people who are unwilling to commit to a villain and say 'this guy is genuinely bad' cannot write a hero because to write somebody who can be genuinely bad (good) you have to admit to the existence of the opposite of that; to things that are genuinely evil. So, then you end up 'okay well, no it's all just a different point of view, we're going to have to agree to disagree, well yeah he raped and murdered 15 children but maybe that was a cultural thing' - no. You know, some things are bad. Some things are genuinely bad and they're bad no matter who does them and no matter where they do them, some things are genuinely good. The guy who runs into a burning building risking his own life, risking his own life and - Becky's husband is a firefighter, so this is a thing for, you know... [laughs]

RG: [laughs] Something that pops into my head every now and then too, unfortunately [laughs]...

HL: Yeah, but this is... There are people who do things that are genuinely heroic as part of their daily existence and between those two lies the mass of humanity, but everybody has within them the ability to do something truly magnificent and equally the ability to do something truly horrific. And to create a main character who is worth a *damn*, you have to give him something magnificent to fight against, something to

push himself toward, something to make him be better than he is in his daily life. And to do this, you have to give him an antagonist who does not hold his values and who is willing to destroy him or some portion of his life, to create the alternate world that the villain wants to live in. And when you do that, you lose the wishy washy, then you lose all of the weak characterization and the sloppy writing and you have something at stake that matters.

And it's gonna matter not just to you, but to your reader. Again, you have to be your first audience. If you're not writing something that is meaningful to you, it's not going to magically become meaningful to the people who read it.

RG: Yeah.

HL: You have to put your heart and soul into it.

RG: Into everything, the story and the characters, because, to me the characters... The story can be amazing and this really great idea but if your characters are flat... It's funny, I've read books with really amazing characters that the story was crap and it took a while for me to notice how bad the story was, but the characters were just too good to ignore, oddly enough. But most of the time what there is, is there can be this really compelling story, but the characters are two dimensional, they're flat, they're not interesting, they're boring - they can ruin your story or they can make you story. That's how I feel.

HL: Right. If you can write good characters and put them in compelling situations, it will excuse a multitude of other writing sins.

RG: [laughs]

HL: If you aren't... If you're not bringing people to the page, stay home.

RG: Speaking of a multitude of other writing sins, this is something that I kind of was just talking about, that there's these amazing characters, but... Okay, so you mentioned this is the previous episode and I wanted to get into this again, because it's the perfect place for it. You had characters that were really bad for one of your stories [laughs] you have, I believe you called her a secret agent slut [laughs].

HL: Yeah, that's the one.

RG: So why do you fall in love with characters who are bad for your story and then what can you do about it?

HL: Okay, why I fell in love with her is because, first off, she looked like the perfect love interest for this guy who, at the time, had no love interest. She was hot, she was smart, she was tough and she had this sort of intriguing backstory of - that just popped into my brain about 'my god, she's an FBI agent, cool'. And then things went south in a bad, bad way, but I loved writing her because she got to be all those things that I had never been; this kick ass, tough, smart, sort of able to pull off

surreptitious activities and be two different people in two different places at two different... Just, you know, she was amazing. Until she wasn't.

RG: Until she turned into a slut [laughs].

HL: *Yeah.* Yeah well, she became just awful [laughs] and I ended up extricating her body and soul from the book. But there is... You have inside of yourself all of these different people you want to be and, as you start bringing them onto the page, you're gonna fall in love with some of these facets of yourself that you are going to discover later you don't like at all. And I discovered that secret agent slut me was not somebody I wanted to write [laughs].

RG: [laughs]. Sorry, I'm just 'secret agent slut mom', that's what came into my head.

HL: [laughs]

RG: I've found that a lot of times, or sometimes, when I'm writing stories, when I'm writing certain things, it's... Okay, there's two different things that I have that come into this and sometimes I feel like the characters and this is why I fall in love with them. If I haven't plotted out a story - because I have to absolutely plot out a story, I cannot pants it, I cannot Stephen King it - so if I don't plot out a story and it's kind of fizzling or meandering, then a character will pop it and it's like 'ooh, ooh, this one's interesting' and you're following it along and... So sometimes I think that your muse is like 'okay, well, the story's fizzling, so what can I do to save it, oh let me put in this random cool completely different character' so that's one thing that - and you fall in love with them because they're refreshing your story.

The other thing that I've noticed is - and I haven't not plotted stories for years and years, so that's kind of an older thing that I was running into - the other thing that I've run into is sometimes your characters don't turn out right, they don't turn out the way you want them to. And this was something...

HL: Ah yes.

RG: That I was facing in Glass House and I had a random character pop up in early first draft and it took me a while to realize it; but this other random character was another half of the other half of the character that wasn't turning out right. It was... There were certain things about the psychic that I loved and I wanted and she was fulfilling, but there were other certain areas that she hadn't, and my muse caught that and my muse added another character in there to fulfil the problems that she was leading to. And it's going to be something that - and I didn't catch this until revision - but it's something that I'm going to either have to figure out... It was basically that the psychic was the original love interest for one of the brothers, but there was no chemistry between them, there was a better chemistry between her and her best friend, so I figured out that I'm either gonna have to fix it or add this other character in, because there's nothing wrong with adding another character in a seven book series [laughs].

HL: [laughs] This is true.

RG: But yeah, so I found that either it's your muse trying to save your story, which - especially for me if I haven't plotted it out - it's trying to save it, it's trying to revive it, it's trying to stick the little pads on and go '*clear*'. Or it's... Maybe your muse realizing that one of the characters you've built isn't fulfilling the role that you desperately needed that character to fill.

HL: Yeah, your right brain will work so hard to save you from yourself.

RG: *Yeah.*

HL: And it will do it by having all of these new actors pop in and audition for parts in your book...

RG: [laughs]

HL: And you had that issue with...

RG: With Brock.

HL: With Glass House...

RG: Oh...

HL: You had, what, like 20 characters?

RG: Oh my god [laughs].

HL: I know you said it was a lot.

RG: My favorite one, okay, you have this point system to gauge whether or not a character's important or not. Okay, so one to three points is what a background character should be, something like that. If it's, what, 10/15 or more it's a main character. It's a main character meaning one of what two or three main characters, it is *the* main character.

HL: Yeah, hero, villain, love interest.

RG: Yes. Hero, villain or love interest. So, I had a whole bunch of people that were seven or nines, so those are people that get, something like - it can be resolved within a certain amount of scenes, that person has an important task. I had one character whose literal job was to just [laughs]... Okay, I'll tell you, he had a twenty plus points - twenty plus points I believe it was - and...

HL: So, he wasn't just the main character, he was the main character with a bullet.

RG: He was the main character with a bullet and magic powers and shooting lasers out of his eyes and he was sitting there and this guy was the end all be all of

everything, maybe he could've been the major bad guy for all seven books, I don't know.

HL: [laughs]

RG: And the literal point of him was to just show that the diner had a customer [laughs].

HL: [laughs] Yes.

RG: He was not even supposed to... He could've gone without having a name. He didn't even interact with the main character in the scene, who had seen him in the first place; he was just a customer for the main character's original business - was the diner.

HL: Yes, this was a lesson that I learned the hard way. I learned it with my first published novel, *Fire in the Mist*, in which I had this boy who my main character Faia found when she went back to her village of Bright and found everybody else in the village dead. I'm sorry if that's a spoiler...

RG: [laughs]

HL: [laughs] But this kid was the only other survivor and she took him with her and I gave the kid a name, brothers and sisters, a family in another town - in **Willowlake** - I gave him, they called each other

RG: Nicknames.

HL: *******Brerling and Sissling*******

RG: Yeah.

HL: Yeah, little nicknames, they talked together, they helped each other out and then three scenes into the story, four, when I hit the point where the actual... My main character's story took off and she went in a direction that he didn't and he got left behind, I was done. I just went right on with the rest of the story and never touched him again.

RG: Even in the other books?

HL: No. Not ever.

RG: Oh dammit, I was hoping he was gonna be in one of the other books 'cause I've only ever read *Fire in the Mist* and I'm like half way through...

HL: [laughs]

RG: Dammit, I was hoping he was gonna... I bet you got other people that wanted that kid to be in the books, right?

HL: *Oh my god* [laughs]

RG: [laughs]

HL: Along with - and I will not give a spoiler on this - but along with one thing about animals in the story, which I got *oh my god* so much mail about, I got 'what happened to the kid? Where's the kid? When are we gonna find out about the kid?'

RG: You should write a story for that poor kid.

HL: You know, I really have, I've considered going back and just doing that as a separate little standalone, just a short story.

RG: Yeah, you *have* to, all of these people want an ending for this poor child [laughs].

HL: Yeah, 'cause a really nice kid, he was, he was a nice kid...

RG: He was a great character. That's why I was hoping he was gonna be in one of the next two books. Well at least you told me now, so... You know, 30 something years after the book was published [laughs].

HL: I couldn't think of anything else to do with him, 'cause he was just a nice kid.

RG: Yeah. Well, I mean...

HL: He didn't have magic, he didn't have any - he just had this family in Willowlake that were gonna take him in and they wouldn't wanna have anything to do with him if she were with him, 'cause, god knows, she was trouble.

RG: Yeah. But that was really cool that you created a character with your first book that wasn't supposed to be anybody, and it moved other people enough to be like 'okay, what about this kid'. That's awesome.

HL: What about him?

RG: Yeah.

HL: Yeah, so now... But I learned from that, that was the training ground for me; okay, why did I get all this mail about this guy that I didn't think of as important at all, oh and as I dissected and saw - as I took that book apart and saw what I had done, some years later, I suddenly realized, okay well that's an important part of revising.

RG: [laughs]

HL: Is giving your characters wings and the ones that aren't important, like your flashing laser eye guy who was just supposed to be a customer...

RG: Oh god, I described, I copied and pasted everything that I'd written into How To Revise Your Novel and I got people on the forums telling me 'well now I wanna know his story'. I'm like 'I know!' [laughs].

HL: [laughs] Yeah exactly, because if you give a shit about the characters and you start digging in - and your brain will throw stuff at your, boy - you start saying, 'okay well this guy's kinda cool, what am I gonna do with this guy?' your brain will say 'oh well, he's a mechanic and he's in love with the girl down the street and, oh my god, he really really hurt himself when he was eight years old and fell out of a tree and he has this big scar on his back'...

RG: If you ask the questions, the muse will provide the answers, absolutely.

HL: Yeah, so you have to be very careful. Sometimes, if you have a character there that you don't want to be a main character of the next book, you have to not ask those questions. Because [shudder sound] ...

RG: Yeah and if you do, it's an easy save because you just - like I'm going to put this trucker into one of the Glass House books - but it's gonna be more of an inside joke to all of the people in the forums on How To Revise Your Novel. He is going to be a character that matters...

HL: Cool.

RG: in a little bit of a story but - I'm gonna put a note in the acknowledgements, thanks to those guys. But yeah, it's an easy fix because you just take them and you put them into another story, if you like them that much.

So, let's get to the takeaways for people, give them some actionable items and some takeaways.

HL: Alright, there are three essential things that you must keep in mind when creating your character. The first is that your main character needs to have a worthy obstacle, needs to have something to fight for, to fight against, needs to have a big desire, a big conflict that moves him or her through the world.

RG: But when you say big, it doesn't have to be the end of the world.

HL: No, it has to be big to that character.

RG: Big to them. Yeah.

HL: Yes, it has to be that character's primary desire and the obstacle in the story needs to be what is keeping that character from his or her primary desire. So, it has to be the world to them. It doesn't have to be the world, but it has to be the world to them.

RG: So, it can be something as small as somebody who just doesn't wanna be alone in their life and...

HL: Yeah.

RG: Their obstacle is maybe their antisocial personality or maybe they have some kind of distrust for human beings.

HL: Sure. Or just fear of going outside the house.

RG: Yeah. So that's perfect right there, that's something that they don't wanna die alone, they don't wanna live alone, that is their main obstacle - or that is their main goal, desire - and then their obstacle is something so small as they're afraid to leave the house, which turns out to not be small at all, that's *huge*.

HL: Right. Because it keeps them from the thing they want most.

RG: Yeah.

HL: The thing you want most versus the thing that's keeping you from it. Okay, second takeaway, your setting matters and this is something we need to do an episode on too.

RG: We'll do an episode on setting, yeah.

HL: On setting and world building. Your... everything that surrounds your character has to be there for a reason. My stories set in Settled Space, are done so because allows me to create an entire world of conflicts that are specific to those characters. You cannot just throw a character into the middle of nothing and expect people to want to keep reading about it, they have to - they have to understand the context by which your characters move through the world and that is your setting.

Third; [laughs] and we didn't even talk about this, but...

RG: Yeah, we did, didn't we?

HL: A little bit, shooting characters, yeah...

RG: [laughs]

HL: fixes a lot of stories. Yes, actually we did kind of.

RG: Yeah.

HL: In which I took out the secret agent slut mom.

RG: Secret agent slut mom [laughs].

HL: [laughs] Yes, I shot her, she just disappeared from the story completely because she was unworthy of it. If you are willing to do that to a character, your other characters will fall in line very quickly and this is games you play with your right

brain, but it is totally real, it's totally relevant, if your other characters see you get rid of a character that was really important; just rip them out, throw away, they're gone, okay guys, [laughs]...

RG: Who's next? [laughs]

HL: Who's gonna piss me off next?

RG: [laughs] Yes.

HL: And it's like mmm? Not me.

RG: Yeah and I love how that kind of, basically, strong arms your muse back into place, like okay, well if they can get rid of that one, I really liked that one; she was trouble, then 'oh shit' [laughs] you know?

HL: Yes.

RG: It's kind of like that idea of having people go into a movie, a horror movie or an action movie and setting up this one person as the main character and, if the trailers have not spoiled it, then it's done really really well. I never watched a trailer for Scream, the original Scream, and Drew Barrymore starts off the film and, it's freaking Drew Barrymore, so you're thinking that's the main character, there's no - and again, hadn't seen any trailers too spoil it - and you're watching it and you're like 'okay well she's the main frickin character', *nope*. She dies. You know, spoiler or whatever, but it's from the '90s so if you haven't seen Scream then...

HL: [laughs] Yes. If it's from the '90s - that was my excuse for Fire in the Mist.

RG: Yes.

HL: It was from the '90s. [laughs]

RG: Yes. And that's the thing, too, is... It surprises the audience, it makes them think 'oh shit, if Drew Barrymore died anybody can die' so it's the same thing with your brain, it strong arms it back into place, I think. [laughs]

HL: Right, yes.

RG: Well, that has been our episode on a better character - Building a Better Character and, again, if you have any questions, if you have any comments, we would love to hear from you on our blog; it is AloneWithInvisiblePeople.com please... We're gonna put some show notes up, we're gonna put the listener, the little player up so you can listen to it there if you want and if you have any questions for Holly, as far as any of the details that we went through, if you feel that we can cover this topic again... Because clearly, we have no problem talking on topics.

HL: [laughs]

RG: We have no problem at all filling in time and, as Holly said, there was a couple of different things that we didn't even get to mention this time, so if this is something that you're interested in hearing another episode, we can do maybe a side story on it to fill in the gaps or something. And I guess... Is there anything else you want to say before I go over the socials and the links and stuff?

HL: No, not really. I think, aside from the fact that we missed about three quarters of our questions [laughs]...

RG: [laughs]

HL: That we set up in our show notes, because we do get to talking. Yeah, I think we're pretty good there, so no, go ahead and do our out stuff.

RG: Okay. Okay, well, again, you can find us at AloneWithInvisiblePeople.com you can read or show notes and anything that's mentioned in the podcast, we will make sure that we link in there, mention in there, I'm sure we can find some stuff of Mom's to link in there as well. We also have an Instagram, it is [@AIARWIP](https://www.instagram.com/AIARWIP) you can also just do a search for Alone With Invisible People. We have a Twitter account which is [AloneWithInvisiblePeople](https://twitter.com/AloneWithInvisiblePeople) or, again, [@AIARWIP](https://twitter.com/AIARWIP) and you can also find us on the Facebook page, which is Alone with Invisible People, or Alone in a Room with Invisible People, I believe I got the full title in there with that one.

HL: [laughs]

RG: Lastly, we are on Podcast, we are on iTunes and we are on Stitcher, we still have to wait, I believe, for Google Play, for some reason they still haven't approved it, as far as I know.

HL: PodBean.

RG: PodBean is where our host is.

HL: Yes.

RG: So, if you want to listen to us straight from there, we are on PodBean, it is HollyLisle.podbean.com - a big shout out to all of our subscribers so far, you guys have been amazing. All of our...

HL: And my Patreon guys, hi guys.

RG: Yes, yes, thank you to the Patreon guys too, you guys are gonna get the episode early. So, if you are interested in hearing this before *anybody* else gets to hear it, you can head to Holly's Patreon and, I believe, you share this with everybody, right? This is an everybody bonus?

HL: Yeah, this is not... Yeah, anybody who's funding me gets this early.

RG: Okay, so even the dollar amount...

HL: All levels, yeah. And I don't have any high levels, but all my levels, yes [laughs].

RG: [laughs] And, again, this is... We really need ratings, specifically on iTunes right now so that we can help try to find people - and again I'm just gonna put this out there - if there's something out there about the podcast that you feel, you know, it doesn't deserve a highest of ratings, let us know and we can see if that's something we can fix, like sound issues or anything like that. But, if you could, if you feel like you like what we're providing, the service that we're providing, give us a good rating, then we'll be able to get a little bit higher in the ranks and find some more people, because that's what we're looking for is to really be able to find more people who love writing and have questions and need answers.

HL: Yeah, as well as readers who just like to listen to how sausage is made.

RG: [laughs] Yes.

HL: [laughs]

RG: Yes, yeah, 'cause I know that I listen to the weirdest podcasts of things that I have nothing to do with, but it's fascinating. Oh, and an offer, I don't know if Holly has put this together or not, but I am writing an anthology of ghost stories and I have one 3000 word story done and I would like to give that story to anybody who does a review. And it's not buying you reviews or anything like that, it is, if you take the time to go ahead and write us a review, do me a favor, email us at show@AloneWithInvisiblePeople.com and let me know that you have put up a review; I need a link to it so that I can see it's there - and this needs to be iTunes reviews because iTunes is the one where, we can kinda get up there in the ranks and find new people. So, if you leave an iTunes review email me, again, at show@AloneWithInvisiblePeople.com and I will verify the review and then send you a copy of that story. It is a ghost anthology; it is a ghost story.

HL: And I have one story that is set in Settled Space and it's a complete separate story from all of the Cady Drake stuff, all of the Longview stuff, all of the Bailey's Irish Station stuff and all of the City of Fury stuff.

RG: Oh my goodness.

HL: [laughs] It's a big world, it's a big big world. But you can have that story too, I'll send it to Becky and she will just send you a pdf of my story and then whatever files she's sending...

RG: Yeah, I've got a pdf right now, so yeah, so that's what we'll do. So that's two stories from both of us, mine is a ghost story and, of course, Holly's is...

HL: Science fiction.

RG: A science fiction, so...

HL: Yes.

RG: Again, thank you so much for joining us, thank you so much for your time. We hope that you've loved this episode, we hope that it has helped and, I guess, just have a great time writing.

HL: Yes, we'll see you soon.

RG: And now, a word from our sponsor.

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