

Those Characters We So Lightly Call Secondary

BY VIRGINIA MCCULLOUGH

Enrich your story with secondary characters

Think about your favorite movie or series and call up a secondary character—or, as I prefer to call them, the so-called secondary character. Really, would whatever movie or series you chose hold a place in your heart without that character? In books, it's the same principle. Those of us writing series, a group that includes a vast number of romance authors, rely heavily on secondary characters. Along with other genres, we have good reasons for carefully shaping secondary characters because they often turn up as our protagonists in subsequent books in a series. In fact, one of the best compliments we get as romance writers occurs when a reviewer says, "I hope we see Corinna again," or, "I'm looking forward to Carter's story."

Like many TV series, particularly those with an evolving central romance (say *Castle* or *Bones*), most of the other characters have a changing story. For *Bones* fans, what would the series be without other powerful twosomes with their unique and intense arcs? *Bones* earned a dozen seasons because it was populated with two compelling main characters, a stable supporting

cast with critical roles and strong individual arcs, and a revolving group of interns and FBI staff. All the characters, regardless of the length of their stay on the show, had distinct personalities and backstories.

In many ways, *Bones* was an example of the ensemble concept, which is increasingly prominent in current TV. Consider *Succession* or *Downton Abbey*. In these shows, secondary applies only to whatever character arcs are prominent or recede into the background at any given time. Or, look back at *Friends*. It featured six main characters, all of whom were essential to developing storylines season to season. However, the series wouldn't have been the same without some additional quirky secondary people like Ross and Monica's often annoying parents. They made occasional appearances but were never simply in the background and present only to fill in needed dialogue. In other words, the writers didn't take them lightly.

Granted, books are not TV series, but we romance writers have always thought in terms of ensembles—not necessarily in each book, but in a series. Romance, whatever the subgenre

(fantasy/paranormal, historical, intrigue/suspense, sensuous or sweet, and so on), usually features two primary POV characters. However, not all romance needs two POVs to work, and we see many current romances written in the first-person point of view.

The heart of romance advances the two main characters' arcs. Something happens that brings them together, pulls them apart, and brings them together again after they've overcome obstacles and have grown enough to earn their happy ending. The secondary characters play various kinds of roles, some hidden in the background, but at other times, the plot depends on their presence.

ASSEMBLING YOUR CAST

I have a particular affinity for the role of best friends. In my first Harlequin Heartwarming release, *Girl in the Spotlight*, Lark learns the whereabouts of a child she gave up for adoption eighteen years earlier. Lark has been avoiding her best friend, Dawn, because she's never told anyone about her daughter—not even her mother or her now ex-husband, the father of her young son. Dawn presses Lark, prompting Lark to finally reveal that she relinquished a daughter who is now a rising star in the world of figure skating.

The reader first sees Dawn as an enthusiastic and fun-loving friend who runs her own business, as does Lark. She gently coaxes information out of Lark and gives her a needed nudge now and then. Dawn then is cast as the heroine in the second book in the series, *Something to Treasure*. I'd already set her up as a lively woman, so she stays true to herself while being the vehicle to bring the hero back to life after a huge loss. On the other hand, readers can enjoy *Something to Treasure* without reading the first book because Dawn is the fully developed heroine of her own story, with Lark playing the supportive friend.

The Rancher's Wyoming Twins, the first book in my Harlequin Western Romance series, opens with Heather coming home for her best friend's wedding. She's immediately hit with the news that the best man, Matt, is the guy who bought her family's ranch four years ago after



foreclosure. The book focuses on Heather and Matt; the bride, Bethany, shows just enough personality and flair, loyalty and truth-telling, to make her a worthy best friend character and catalyst for revealing Heather's conflicts and their resolution. I hadn't thought of Bethany as the lead in a book of her own, but the original two-book series stretched to five, so she'll be back as the heroine in the final installment of my Back to Adelaide Creek series. I'm pleased, and I think the readers will be, too.

My three series for Harlequin's Heartwarming line include best friends, former classmates, siblings, and town newcomers, who've moved from supporting roles to stars of the show. With each book, the series ensemble grows. But the concept of secondary characters goes beyond who might show up in down-the-line books. In my single title romance, *Island Healing*, Lila, age thirteen, appears in a limited number of scenes but turns out to be the disrupter. Her role leads to every other character's healing and needed change. So, when it comes down to it, is she really secondary?



WALK-ONS & CAMEOS

Some secondary characters end up playing fairly minor roles, but that doesn't prevent them from adding to the overall entertainment value of the book. These folks could turn up as a clerk in a shoe store who helps the heroine choose a new pair of heels. Or, maybe a crabby checker in a supermarket is being harassed by a customer, and your hero defends her. What about the stranger who offers a tissue to a character in tears? This person may merit a one-line description, but because the main character is touched or grateful—or annoyed—that stranger plays a small, but important, role in your story.

Walk-on characters in drama and comedy often have something important to do or say that can change the character and the course of the story. If that's the case, then secondary isn't such an accurate descriptor. The same principle applies to recurring background characters, such as neighbors, teachers, healthcare professionals, waitstaff and bartenders, cafe and bakery owners, farm or ranch hands, and any number of other role players. We want our readers to welcome the appearance of the cafe owner who they met in previous books or the doctors or teachers who show up whenever the stories need them. These walk-on players are an important part of world building, and if they have a unique quality or two, they can substantially add to the entertainment value of the story.

I've noted that some readers remark on walk-on characters in reviews or during casual conversations about certain books. In *The Rancher's Wyoming Twins*, Heather has volunteered to be the on-site nurse practitioner at a children's wellness day. One of the patients is a young teen who introduces herself as Mags. She has braces and freckles and takes a shine to Heather and is quite amusing about her ambition to become a vet, a "critter doc." A couple of reviewers remarked about liking Mags and hoping she'd come back. Two books later, Mags makes a cameo appearance as a high-school student volunteer at a kids' Halloween party. For those who haven't read the other book, she's just a teen on stage for a minute or two, but for those who have read *The Rancher's Wyoming Twins*, she's the funny girl they met before, a little older and minus the braces.

BRING ON THE SIGHS

Speaking of cameo appearances, we romance authors often bring back heroes and heroines from previous books in order to give the reader a glimpse of series characters' lives after their "official" story ends. They can play so-called secondary roles or simply be cameos. In *A Family for Jason*, Ruby and Mike have a second-chance romance, so two books later they've married and readers see Ruby with a baby. Mike makes an appearance in the book as well. It would seem only authors and avid readers understand, on a pretty deep level, how reassuring and satisfying

these cameos can be. It's as if we're opening a door and saying, "See? Their love story continues." Cameos offer readers a chance to sigh a little over romance and lasting love.

ASK THE QUESTIONS

Take a look at your favorite books and your works in progress and ask these questions of the secondary characters. Do they:

- have memorable characteristics, such as a melodic laugh, a weak sense of humor, an optimistic or pessimistic temperament, a special talent or vocation?
- possess qualities that potential heroes and heroines need in order to have their stories told in subsequent books, or are they better off remaining in the background as familiar characters readers enjoy seeing on stage?
- play a supporting role as members of an ensemble in either a standalone book with a few main characters or, more likely in the romance genre, recurring characters in a series?
- deliver messages or inadvertently disclose information about the past or other characters and/or events?
- play a role in revealing a main character's conflicts, secrets, deepest hopes, delusions, mistakes, and triumphs?

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- say or do things that add to the overall entertainment value of the book as a whole, such as being an over-the-top dog lover, a toddler who can be cranky or sweet, a modern grandparent with a little style and flair, a person who's a little too cheerful or one whose pessimistic ways add a comic element?

Ultimately, we want our readers to remember all the players in our books. By including some enriching and entertaining secondary characters, we contribute to the overall quality of both single title and series romances but without compromising the standalone value of every story. Most of all, though, populating our books and worlds with a range of personalities and styles is fun for readers—and, as luck would have it, great fun for us authors, too.

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