

ASTONISHINGLY BEAUTIFUL

DESCRIPTIONS THAT REVEAL CHARACTER

BY LAINA VILLENEUVE & RACHEL GOLD

Today's mission

Finding unexpected ways to say things that contribute to more vivid language.

Includes:

- New ways to describe diversity
- Avoiding unintentional meanings
- Adding awesomeness

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

Common ways we describe ...

What the character looks like: hair color, eye color

Style, how they dress, what they own

What their voice sounds like

How they smell

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Character notes

Lauren, 16-17, 5'11"

Build: Tall, skinny, inverted triangle (shoulders, no butt)

Hair: Brown, curly/frizzy, a few inches beyond her shoulders

Eyes: medium brown imbued with subtle gold

Skin: Cool medium: between raw sienna and a light burnt ochre

Defining features: Tall girl with a chest, long often-frizzy hair

Clothing & misc descriptors: Avoids red because they make her look flord. Blues and greens. Hipslung jeans. Small shoes that de-emphasize her feet.

Grass green, dark green, blue violet, periwinkle, aquamarine, marine green, celadon, sage, pale sage

reedy, angular, gangly, loose-limbed, lanky

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character



BRAINSTORM

What are different ways we can describe character?

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

insenuity
MARKETING GROUP

What Description Does

- Shows us how characters look
- Continues the action
- Foreshadows
- Gives us the character/voice of the describer
- Reveals character through traits/mannerisms
- Gives us a world/culture

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

Visual Description

Major Characters

Example: KG MacGregor *Trial By Fury*

“Her black spandex dress left one shoulder bare, and her shoulder-length dark hair followed the same line, parted on one side with bangs angling across her brow. **Two-inch platform heels brought her almost to eye level,** since Theo, conscious of their height difference, had worn low-heeled dress sandals” (94).

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Visual Description

Minor Characters

Karen Joy Fowler *We are All Completely Beside Ourselves*

- “A man walked up behind Harlow and put a hand on the back of her neck. He was wearing a black knit toque with a Canadian maple-leaf on it, and had a sharp nose that swerved slightly left. Surfer-type, but in a minor key.”
- “A woman with thin, peevish lips and shellacked, Republican hair came and took me to the bathroom.”
- “This officer didn’t introduce himself. He had a triangular face, like a praying mantis, wide mouth, sharp chin, and a vibe of pure, implacable evil.”

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Description as Action/Conflict

Karin Kallmaker 18th & Castro:

“Stretch marks, the emergency C-section scar and the occasional thick black hair that grew back faster than she could pluck it— **how could Brenda find any of that sexy?**”

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Description as Foreshadowing

From Michael Gruber's *The Book of Air and Shadow*:

“But there was something about her that drew the eye. The shiny, smooth dark hair hung neck length, held away from her face with a silver clasp. The nose was sharp and seemed to have more than the usual number of component bones making odd little corrugations all over it. Her lips were unfashionably thin and pale, and **when she spoke you could see that her teeth were odd too, the incisors especially long and dangerous looking.**”

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Description as Voice

Neverwhere by Neil Gaiman:

"There are four simple ways for the observant to tell Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar apart: first, Mr. Vandemar is two and a half heads taller than Mr. Croup; second, Mr. Croup has eyes of a faded china blue, while Mr. Vandemar's eyes are brown; third, while Mr. Vandemar fashioned the rings he wears on his right hand out of the skulls of four ravens, Mr. Croup has no obvious jewelry; fourth, Mr. Croup likes words, while Mr. Vandemar is always hungry. **Also, they look nothing alike.**"

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Description with Mannerisms

Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects*:

“It was the first time we’d seen each other in almost a year. My hair was a different color—brown from red—but she didn’t seem to notice. She looked exactly the same, though, not much older than I am now, although she’s in her late forties. Glowing pale skin, with long blonde hair and pale blue eyes. **She was like a girl’s very best doll, the kind you don’t play with.** She was wearing a long, pink cotton dress with little white slippers. **She was twirling her amaretto sour without spilling a drop.**”

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Description as World-building

The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms by N.K. Jemisin:

"... Face like the moon, pale and somehow wavering. I could get the gist of his features, but none of it stuck in my mind beyond an impression of astonishing beauty. His long, long hair wafted around him like black smoke, its tendrils curling and moving of their own volition. **His cloak — or perhaps that was his hair too — shifted as if in an unfelt wind.**"

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Skin Tone

Best practice = describe everyone's race or no one's

Not

“Lacey! Over here, girl!” my lunch date Delevasha hollered, like I hadn't spotted my tall black friend sitting smack in the middle of the nearly empty restaurant. She pointed to the empty seat with a tray waiting in front of it.”

Instead

“You're not old,” I reminded her. I placed my hand on hers for a moment. I loved her skin, the dark richness of it like soil in fall. Mine was the stark contrast of winter snow unless I had burned to a painful red.

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Skin Tone

Early draft:

Sitting against the near end of the couch, but turned with his back mostly to me, was **a brown-haired white guy** with a thick, heavy body like a barrel.

Final:

A guy with a barrel-shaped body in a navy hoodie sat cross-legged, his back to me. His **dense, brown hair made a stark contrast to his eggshell skin at the back of his neck** and all down the heavy, furred calves showing below his gray cargo shorts.

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Mental Health

Best Practice = be aware of your audience and the impact your choice of words may have.

Not

Shawneen stared at me like I was crazy.

Instead

Shawneen stared at me like I was hitting myself on the head with a hammer.

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character



MANNERISMS

How do mannerisms reveal character?

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

insenuity
MARKETING GROUP

Step 1:

Start with a general character idea. You can use demographics, general details and archetypes.

For example:

- A thief with a heart of gold
- A shapeshifter who can't follow the rules
- An awkward programmer

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

Step 1:

If we stop here, it's easy for our character to be one-dimensional or a stereotype.

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

Step 2:

Start asking your character, “Why?”

For each answer, ask “Why?” again. Do this 3-5 times until you feel you’ve hit bottom on the answers.

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

Step 2:

Start asking your character, “Why?”

For each answer, ask “Why?” again. Do this 3-5 times until you feel you’ve hit bottom on the answers. For example ...

- Why does our thief steal? – Trained as a spy; stealing is less damaging than what she was trained to do.
- Why was she trained as a spy? -- At a young age her parents sold her to an experimental government program.
- How does she feel about that? -- Fiercely grateful. She thinks her parents are weak and if they’d raised her, she would be weak too.

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

Step 3:

Use that answer to create a trait. For example ...

We know this character abhors weakness, so what traits does that suggest?

- She holds eye contact too long -- stares people down
- She holds her shoulders broad and takes up a lot of physical space
- She never shows fear. If she's afraid, she grins

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

Step 4:

Start asking “Why?” again! Go deeper.

- You hate weakness but you have a good heart, how does that mesh?
-- I have to protect the weak because no one protected me.
- Do you still feel unprotected, even with all that spy stuff? -- Yes, that’s why I steal things. I’m only safe when I’m unseen.
- How do you feel about the things you steal? -- Those are my friends, my safety, I trust them more than I trust people.

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:
Descriptions that reveal Character

Step 5:

Create another mannerism from the answers you got. For example ...

- She always keeps her hands under the table or hidden.
- She always has something in her pockets to play with; it's something she's stolen.
- She has a hidden room with her favorite stolen items that she visits as often as possible.
- If she likes someone, she'll steal something small from them to remind her of them.

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Pick favorites & combine

Take your favorite mannerisms from the list you've created and combine them.

In our example: A thief who takes up space and stares people down but you almost never see her hands. She's always playing with something hidden that she stole from someone she cared about.

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

Resources

The Emotion Thesaurus, Angela Ackerman

N.K. Jemisin's posts on describing race

<http://nkjemisin.com/2010/02/describing-characters-of-color-3-oppoc/>

Guide on language choices: <http://writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/96830966357/writing-with-color-description-guide-words-for>

Thoughts on use of the word crazy

<http://whatprivilege.com/replacing-crazy-for-ableism-and-preciseness-of->

[language/](http://whatprivilege.com/replacing-crazy-for-ableism-and-preciseness-of-language/)

<http://natashatracy.com/writing/mental-illness-words-cant/>

#GCLS2017

Astonishingly Beautiful:

Descriptions that reveal Character

THANK YOU!