

# CREATING GREAT HEROES/HEROINES IN YOUR STORIES



From award-winning author  
Cliff McNish

The main reason most people read fiction is to fall in love with great characters. We can't do without our heroes and heroines. Imagine *Twilight* without Edward and Bella? Or *The Hunger Games* without Katniss Everdeen? The characters we really yearn for are those **who overcome huge odds to achieve something amazing**. Below are 12 top tips from award-winning author Cliff McNish for creating fantastic heroes and heroines in your own stories.

## CLIFFMCNISH Tip 1 - Heap huge problems on them right from the start.

When we first meet Harry Potter, J.K.Rowling has already dumped a whole world of problems on him: his parents are dead, he lives on hand-me-downs, the Dursleys are nasty to him, he has a disfiguring scar - oh, and Lord Voldemort, the darkest and most powerful wizard in the world, is trying to kill him! Always, always, get sympathy for your hero/heroine by giving them really big problems to deal with from the outset. The bigger the problems, the better. Plunge them into terrible trouble. If you do that the reader will start desperately wanting them to get out of that trouble as well.

## CM Tip 2 - Keep building up the pressure!

In *Stormbreaker*, Alex Rider starts off by losing his last living relative and almost being killed in a car dumpster yard. But Anthony Horowitz skilfully builds the pressure from that point. He throws at Alex garrotting bikers, poisonous jellyfish and professional killers. By the end of the novel the combined forces of Herod Sayle enterprises are all trying to destroy him. Even if you're writing comedy, never relent the pressure for long. Ideally each pressure event in your story should be bigger than the last as well, until at the end your hero/heroine is alone, facing the worst possible pressure, against enemies that have never looked more powerful.

Photo courtesy of MGM

## CM TIP 3 - Give them a noble desire.

All great heroines and heroes at some point **give up something they want personally for the greater good**. In *Twilight* Edward dearly wants to taste Bella's blood. Instead he chooses to deny himself and protect her with his own life. In the final battle scene of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* Voldemort offers to bring Harry Potter's parents back if he'll join him. When Harry (already half dead at this point) says no, sacrificing his most personal desire, and instead stands and fights because it is the right thing to do, he achieves true hero status.

## CM TIP 4 - Provide at least one very powerful enemy to confront.



Where would Roald Dahl's *Matilda* be without Miss Trunchbull? Or Bella and Edward without the James Clan? Great villains help us to identify much more strongly with heroes. (See my sheet [Creating Great Villains in Your Stories](#), for more on how to create brilliant enemies your reader will never forget.)

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## CM Tip 5 - Give them a sense of humour.

We're prepared to forgive even villains a great deal if they make us laugh. It works doubly so for our heroes. Keep them seeing the amusing side no matter what happens. Plus, when they can still smile under pressure, it shows their inner strength.

### CM Tip 6 - Make them doubt themselves.

Real heroes and heroines aren't sure they can cope. Their self-doubt makes them more human, more believable.



It also makes it harder for them to overcome their problems, so the triumph when they do so is even greater. In *Twilight* Edward doubts he can restrain himself from drinking Bella's blood. In *The Story of Tracy Beaker* Tracy can't even admit to herself that she's struggling. She cries all the time, but pretends the cause is just hay fever. The greatest heroes are very human indeed - and that's why we love it when they succeed.

Photo courtesy of Summit Entertainment

### CM Tip 7 - Give them a dark side.

Harry Potter speaks parsel-tongue, linking him to Voldemort. In *Twilight*, Edward is a real vampire with an intense desire to drink human blood. Tracy Beaker has so many behavioural problems that she's constantly messing up her chances of happiness. We love our heroes to be struggling with powerful issues of their own - when they are their own worst enemies!

### CM Tip 8 - Have them help the defenceless and the weak.

Real heroes constantly place themselves in danger to help others. In *The Hunger Games* Katniss Everdeen volunteers to enter the games to save her little sister. In *Lord of the Rings* every single member of the Fellowship repeatedly puts his own life in danger to protect Frodo, the ringbearer.

### CM Tip 9 - Make them brave enough to overcome their worst fear.

We love characters who are *physically* brave. But far more important than that is that at some point your hero or heroine has to be brave enough to confront their worst fear and overcome it. Tracy Beaker's greatest fear is that her mum will never come back for her at the children's home. In the end she accepts that her mum doesn't care enough about her to ever return. It's amazingly brave of Tracy to admit that to herself. After waiting so long, it's the bravest possible thing she could possibly do. What's your hero/heroine's worst fear? What's the hardest thing for them to do?



Photo courtesy of the BBC

### CM Tip 10 - Keep them modest.

Sam Gamgee in *Lord of the Rings* just wants to go back home to Hobbiton and lead the quiet life of a gardener. He never boasts, just quietly does the right thing. Keep your hero humble. As part of this, make sure they always have a deep regard for other people's feelings, especially those people who are usually ignored. We love this in a character.

### CM Tip 11 - Give them a talent.

Harry Potter is superb at using magic, especially the dark arts. In *The Hunger Games* Katniss Everdeen's gifts for foraging and hunting are what keep her alive. Even apparently normal Bella in *Twilight* discovers she has the unique talent of being able to prevent vampires using their powers. We truly love our heroes/heroines to be unusually good at something.

### CM Tip 12 - Ensure they grow as characters.

By daring to confront Voldemort, Harry Potter becomes much stronger than the schoolboy who was scared to confront the Dursleys at the beginning of book 1. By the end of *The Secret Garden* Mary Leonard has brought happiness back to a family and is no longer the selfish, spiteful girl she was at the start. By confronting their worst fears and their enemies they've become someone we can deeply admire, someone the reader wants to be themselves. If you do the same with the characters in your own stories readers will love you for it.

To find out more about Cliff McNish's own award winning novels for children and young adults go to [www.cliffmcnish.com](http://www.cliffmcnish.com)



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