



*Nauman's Nautica*

## NAUMAN'S NAUTICA

by A.D. Nauman

Thoughts on navigating the turbulent life of an author

*(Nautica [noun] /'nawtika/-- navigation, seamanship)*

*(Nauman [noun] /'nawman/-- my last name)*

**September/October 2023**

Hi friends,

My book launch is SOON! I hope, from the bottom of my heart, you're able to attend. In addition to hearing the brilliant Abby Geni and having the opportunity to browse in a terrific indy bookstore, you'll see me bouncing off the walls with glee.

Here again is the info:

Oct. 14<sup>th</sup> (a Saturday), 2023, at 4 pm  
The Book Cellar in Lincoln Square  
4736-38 N Lincoln Ave, Chicago, IL 60625

Here, too, is my newsletter for September/October. I was having some trouble keeping up with a monthly missive, so it's become bimonthly. ☺

Hugs to you all!

--ADN

### Thoughts on American Character(s)

by A.D. Nauman

I'm so excited to have been invited to teach a class on character development at the Evanston Writers Workshop conference in November. ("In the



### **Launch Party!**

for *Down the Steep*  
October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023,  
Saturday  
4:00 pm

**A.D. Nauman**  
in conversation  
with **Abby Geni!**  
at

The Book Cellar  
(in Lincoln Square)  
4736-38 N Lincoln  
Ave  
Chicago, IL 60625

Trenches” is the conference title.) Naturally, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about how one creates fictional characters, mulling over what I’ve learned from all my teachers and books.

One dictum I’ve heard repeatedly is that characters must not be passive. About 15 years ago, I attended a children’s book writers’ conference, and in a talk on how to find a literary agent, the agent spent the whole session instead complaining about the manuscripts he received with passive characters and basically scolding us for potentially creating them. I felt bad for my fellow authors in the packed auditorium—mostly women who dutifully listened to this man, taking notes, too polite to be irritated at him. The thing is, when creating child characters, it is difficult to avoid all traces of passivity. Real children have minimal agency in their worlds; they are largely acted upon. Their choices are truly limited.



Nevertheless, I kept that guy’s admonition in mind (he was so obnoxious, I couldn’t forget him) when creating my protagonist in *Down the Steep*. Willa McCoy is a young teenager through most of the book. She begins as a virulent racist, like her Klansman father, then grows beyond the toxic culture of her birth. Absent the racism, Willa is a more academically successful version of me at that age: feisty, reckless, determined, sometimes bone-headed, challenging. I don’t think she could be read as “passive.” She does make things happen. So, I guess, good for me for not creating a passive character.

But the question nags at me: Why aren’t we allowed to create passive characters? Why is a timid person not worthy of a story? We do find timid characters in fiction from other countries—think of British books, movies, and TV shows. Many of them portray people who are stuck in their lives, uncertain how to move forward, stymied by their options. Unless we’re writing superheroes or basing characters on Greek gods, we do model fictional characters on real people, and most real people at times get stuck. Many of us, I think, cannot clearly articulate what we want. We go around with vague feelings of wanting something, unable to pin down exactly what (and so end up eating snack food). Yet fictional characters must have a clear idea of what they want. (This is another common dictum: Characters must *want* something.) They must *want something* so they can actively pursue it and be thwarted and then persist and be thwarted again but triumph in the end.

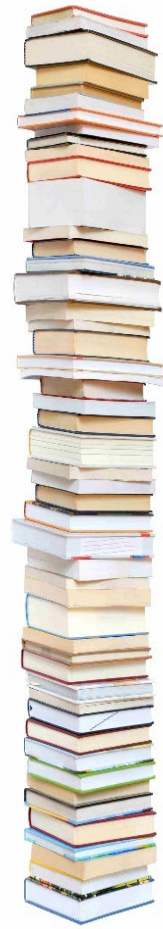
For those of us interested in writing about the human condition, at some point, surely, we’ll write about people who feel powerless, who *feel* powerless because they actually are.

Poverty, racism, misogyny, and all those other bigotries do in fact strip people of their options. We might also want to write about characters whose emotional states manifest in inaction—those who suffer from anxiety or depression, for instance, which we have in abundance in the US. Fear, shame, low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness—all of these emotional states can rob people of agency. So, why is passivity taboo in American fiction?

Earlier this month I had the opportunity to attend an academic conference in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where I happily stumbled across a Waterstone's and found one of my favorite Irish authors: William Trevor. I bought and am reading his novel *The Story of Lucy Gault*, published in 2002. When I read an author like William Trevor, I am palpably in the world of capital-L Literature. His dexterity with language, complicated structures, masterful point-of-view shifts, descriptions, nuances, metaphors and themes transport me to another realm. But Lucy Gault is a frustrating character. As a child she does something foolish, then carries that guilt into adulthood. Feeling unworthy of love, she lives alone, friendless, jobless, in a big empty house. Twenty years after her foolish childhood act, she rejects a marriage proposal from a man she loves. He keeps asking, year after year, and she keeps rejecting. He goes off to World War II, survives, and asks her again and still she won't marry him. She just roams around the empty house dreaming of him. Eventually the guy marries someone else, and Lucy roams around some more.

That literary agent at the children's book conference would hate this character. He would have railed against William Trevor for creating her. Yet William Trevor has won bunches of top literary awards in Britain and was even knighted by Queen Elizabeth. Apparently, this dictum against passive characters is not universal; not everyone in the world finds them unbearable. So what's the deal with us?

In mulling this over, I was reminded of something I heard back in the Obama years. Someone had conducted a national poll of American men asking who they most admired—who they would most like to be. The winner was Don Draper from the TV series *Madmen*. So, the majority of American men polled wished they could be Don Draper. This is disturbing on several levels, but what's relevant here is that all these men named a *fictional character*, not a real man—not, for instance, President Barack Obama—to emulate.



This made me think of my doctoral dissertation, which I did in the 1990s. In it I investigated how fictional characters influence children, and I found that children do indeed look to fictional characters as role models, which, we now know, adults do, too.

And this reminded me of something one of my brilliant graduate students recently wrote in a reflection: "...many teachers lose sight of [this] being the sole purpose of fiction—to change us, at least a little bit. It is why I read for pleasure: to take bits and pieces of characters and ideas and collage those onto and into myself." (Thanks to Michelle Harris for this beautiful insight.)



And then I thought of Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian educator and theorist, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, who argued that education is never politically neutral. What gets taught, says Freire, serves some group's interest, usually the group in power. I wondered if this also applied to fiction: Does what gets published serve a particular group's interest? That of the status quo? Is that why American characters must be active, spunky, in control, unfettered by their circumstances or social contexts? So we can believe we have more agency in our lives than we really do? Are American characters required to be descendants of Horatio Alger's impoverished boys, who rise from humble backgrounds to security and comfort through hard work and good choices?

Maybe this insistence on intrepid characters in American fiction is a way to sustain our beliefs about the health of our culture and the power of ourselves. We want to believe we can boldly and simply state our desire, then get it; that we can overcome any obstacle with our confidence, smarts, hard work, good choices, and positive thinking. We want to believe our circumstances have little effect on our lives. And how wonderful to imagine we have that much control. Any one of us can be wealthy, beautiful, buff, desired, loved, happy—any day now, we will be. All is fine! Yet what initially feels like a message of hope—that everyone has the power to overcome any hardship—becomes a tool for social control: If you fail to rise above your miserable circumstances, it's your fault. It's not because of racism or misogyny or lawless capitalism. It's because you weren't confident enough or positive enough. It's because you were weak, hesitant, fearful—passive.

In Trevor's *The Story of Lucy Gault*, Lucy's context and her character shape one another. Her foolish childhood act was a consequence of the political trouble in Ireland in 1921.

Oppressed Catholics were setting fire to the plantation homes of their British Protestant landlords, and Lucy's family had to flee. She doesn't want to go, so she runs away from home. Her parents, believing she's tragically drowned, leave without her and cannot be located when she turns up alive. Lucy's context shapes her; she in turn shapes her context; and this cycle continues. What drives her isn't a simply stated "want"; it's a complex mix of beliefs and circumstances. Because where do our individual beliefs come from in the first place? Our cultural contexts.



The impact of circumstances is real and for many Americans, harsh. Fiction is an opportunity to illuminate this impact. But I suppose if readers develop a deeper understanding of how external forces shape individuals' lives, readers may start thinking something needs to change, and that could challenge the status quo.

I wonder how much of this I'll say in the class I'm teaching on character development. I will tell my students I've met agents who really hate passive characters. I'll talk about the transaction of context and character. I'll say, yes, your character has to want something, but if it's only a bagel, or a new car, or a hot guy, or money and power, you may be missing an opportunity. What cultural beliefs have your characters internalized? Why does your protagonist think that one option is better than another? Who has the real power in your story? How do others push back, or do they? And perhaps I'll recommend *The Story of Lucy Gault*.



Here are some sheep in Northern Ireland. I noticed they were quite passive, but I liked them a lot anyway.