



## **The Chemistry of Relationships**

by Sylvie Kurtz

As writers we spend a lot of time worrying about our main character and opponent. We work on their traits and backstories and seek ways to show rather than tell who they are as the story unfolds. One of the tools available in our writer's kit to show a new side of our character is through his relationships.

When I think of the shows I like to watch, like *The Closer* or *Psych* or *Burn Notice*, as much as I like the main characters, what I enjoy even more is how the characters interact with their friends, families, and coworkers. That chemistry truly creates the magic of these programs.

Showing your character through his relationships allows you to add depth to your story. A relationship adds depth because there's a shared history behind it. And history means material to mine for interest. They share something meaningful, whether that something is of a sexual nature or that patchwork quilt of familial history. Brenda in *The Closer* is strong and confident on the job, but once her parents trot on the scene, she often reverts back to her little girl role. Michael and Fiona in *Burn Notice* share a sexual past that still steams between them while they're trying to remain friends. Shawn and Gus in *Psych* have been best friends since they were kids, giving them a lot of common experiences.

That history gives them ways of communicating, common goals, goals at odds, and...love. Because deep down, that's what those personal relationships come down to. Love. Michael's mother might drive him crazy, but he loves her. Brenda's coworkers don't always agree with her, but they know she'd risk her job to protect them. Shawn's best friend may provide the voice of conscience, but he's also the only person who gets him and accepts him as he is. The emotions of the relationship show up on the page as chemistry.

When you've grown up with someone and shared common experiences, you develop a language and shortcuts. Walk into my house and you may frown when one of the kids moans, "I have to do everything," when asked to do any task and the rest of us start laughing. And the shortcut of "specialty glasses" may not mean anything to you, but would certainly get a smile from any of us. Those two expressions have years of meaning behind them for us. Think about your own family and friends and you'll discover some sort of verbal shorthand. Give that same sort of mutual language to your character relationships to build chemistry.

Another way to show chemistry is through the games the hero and opponent play with each other. An opponent who admires and respects his prey, offers a more engaging relationship than one who simply argues with and loathes his target. Think of that scene in *Die Hard* where McClane and Hans, the terrorist who's taken over the building where McClane's wife works, talk

for the first time. The way they play with each other, testing each other shows they're worthy adversaries. There's no way a viewer in a theater would go out for extra popcorn during that scene, because he *has* to know how this is going to work out.

Pairs of characters often fulfill a need within each other. Think of the contrary beliefs that opposites attract and that like attracts like. The best "buddy" teams and romance couples are the ones where one's strength helps fill the other's weakness. In *Just Like Heaven*, Elizabeth is a caring doctor in need of nurturing and David is a nurturing landscape architect in need of healing. Neither believe in the paranormal, but team up with a true-believer psychic to reunite Elizabeth's spirit with her body before the ambitious doctor who wants Elizabeth's position at the hospital pulls the plug.

In your story, relationships come into play to help or hinder the main character as he seeks his goal and add interest and depth to how that pursuit plays out.

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