

How to Not Base Characters on People

Kieryn Nicolas

One of the most common questions I get asked is, "Do you base your characters on real people?"

The follow-up question is, "Oh! Can you base a character off of me?"

The answers to both of those: "sometimes and maybe."

I say "sometimes and maybe" because when I do base a character off of someone I know, it's usually accidental. Therefore, maybe I will base a character off of whomever's asking, but I'm not sure yet. Also, sometimes I reversely base characters off of people—as in, I write a character, then I meet someone who's like said character. This happened with my friend Amel. I wrote about a girl named Vivian in *Rain* and then got to know a girl named Amel, who is just as pretty, mellow, and amazing with hair.

Writing people into stories is fun, but it can be difficult. I find it easier to pull characteristics from different people and not try to fully base a character off one real person. There are a couple of reasons I do this. One I realized when my cousin Henry was ranting about how he couldn't be embodied in words so of course Character X wasn't completely him. He's right; I would find it nearly impossible to accurately describe a person in one character in one story (especially Henry). Even if I knew the person really well, I could only come close. This is especially true because, as I write fiction, the characters are put into situations I have not experienced with the real person and I do not know how they would react: I can only guess.

Another reason is that my characters have to do what is better for the story and not necessarily what the real person would do. In my new story I have a plot planned that sprouts romance between a character rooted in Henry and a character based off my friend Katie. When I mentioned this to Katie she jumped off the couch. "What?" she screeched. "Henry? No! Change it!"

I pointed out to her that when I based a character off of her it meant she had signed away her soul to me and I need not change a thing unless I so desired.

Actually, what I really said was, "Too bad, so sad." And then added, "I could always drop a piano on your character's head if that would be preferable. It's a much simpler solution and creates enough drama."

Her response (throwing a purple marker at my head) indicated that she understood my point.

Besides, the characters aren't really Katie and Henry as much as they are girl-with-Katie's-hair-and-sarcastic-attitude and boy-with-Henry's-glasses-and-contrary-moods. I couldn't help it; as I wrote, the characters developed personalities of their own. This also helps me feel less guilty about torturing my characters with literary drama and danger.

I also believe that in order to really base a character off of someone, you have to know them very, very well. I've tried writing characters based off of people that I didn't know well, and I always got frustrated, thinking, "I can't do *that*. What'll [insert real person's name here] think if he/she ever reads this? Oh no, now what? What would [real person] do next? What's [real person's favorite color]? How am I supposed to base a character off of (real person) if I don't even know his/her favorite color??"

When I know someone very well, as in years-of-deep-conversations well, like Katie or Henry or my sister, Brynna, I can write a more realistic character in their likeness. That doesn't mean it will be exact, but I can pull from their quirks and hear their voice in my head as I type the dialogue. Also, when I know someone that well, I don't worry about the person being offended if I do this or that with the character, because I feel comfortable shrugging and saying, "Too bad, so sad" and knowing it won't affect our relationship.

In my most recent novel I wrote from three different character's perspectives in alternating chapters. One of the characters was

loosley based off of my friend Natasha—she's a dancer, she's got golden hair, and she hates frills. It was interesting, trying to get inside Natasha's head to not just write *about* her, but as her. When I got stuck I'd grill her about her favorite ballet performances or the worst outfit she ever wore. Of course, I took a ton of artistic license with the character, but knowing Natasha well enough to start a character led me to knowing her even better when I finished the story.

Often my main characters have a lot of *me* thrown in, but none of them are fully and completely me. I'd get bored writing from my own perspective, because for a character to be exactly like me I'd have to have my exact town as a setting and my family and friends as characters and my exact experiences in my exact school and my exact...you get the idea. That's why my main characters are parts of my personality, teased and molded into a new world with new experiences and new characters to deal with.

So I figure, if I can't even base a character solely on myself, **how** can I base a character exactly on someone else?

There is one great story that I always tell when I'm asked the question "Do you base your characters off of real people?" After answering, "Sometimes, maybe," I'll add, "The only character in *Rain* that's based off of someone is Caidy."

I'll either get blank looks at this, if people haven't read *Rain* yet, or a confused look, if they have. "Caidy?" they'll ask. "The mean one?"

Yes, the mean one. Caidy is most accurately described as "witchy-with-a-b." At least, that's the term my friends and I use when in the presence of younger (or older) ears. Caidy is described in the book as "megalomaniacal" and I'll just throw in that she's reminiscent of Rachel McAdams' character in *Mean Girls*—Regina, isn't it?

Anyway. "Yes," I'll say, "Caidy is based off of someone. Katie, to be exact. Katie with a K and a T instead of a C and a D. You see what I did there? Creative, no?"

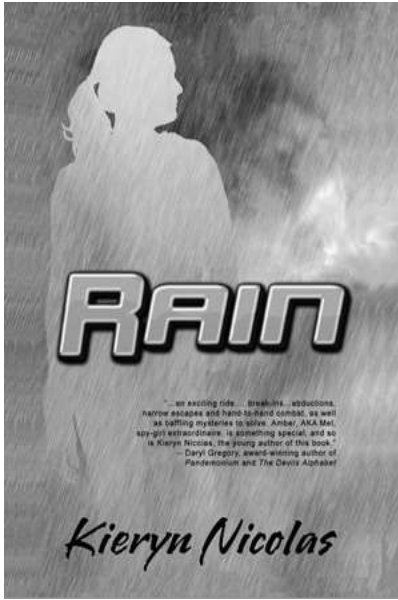
"Caidy is Katie?" they'll reply, still confused. Or, if they know Katie, they'll start to chuckle.

"Caidy was Katie," I'll correct. "See, I didn't used to be that fond of Katie."

Now, if they know me, the chuckles will turn into a burst of laughter. Katie usually smirks off to the side when she's around for this.

I'll go on to explain how, in seventh grade (the year I started writing *Rain*), I had almost every class with this girl named Katie who, for some reason, annoyed the h-e-double-hockey-sticks out of me (because, in 7th grade, I didn't say 'hell'). I don't even remember why—she just rubbed my feathers the wrong way. Maybe it was me being jealous of her singing voice or straight-a's or the fact that she could challenge my spot as best student in my 7th grade Spanish





class. Whatever it was, I found myself writing her into *Rain* as the pain-in-the-neck character.

Then, the summer before eighth grade, I actually started emailing with Katie. I discovered two things: one, she was funny and cool and not the obnoxious student I'd thought. And two, she was *sarcastic*. Sarcasm was practically an art when used by her.

It was freaking awesome. By the time I was writing the final chapters of *Rain*, Katie was one of my best friends and Caidy was a master of sarcasm as well. However, I'd forgotten that I'd originally based Caidy off of Katie, and when Katie read the rough draft of *Rain*—I'll throw in that she was the first to finish the last chapter—I didn't even

consider that she might pick up on it.

Katie confronted me the next day. "Something was bothering me last night," she told me in math class. "I mean, I emailed you yesterday and told you that I loved your book, right?"

"Right," I said, suddenly feeling nervous.

"Well, I still do. But I have a question, and you need to give me a straight answer."

She fixed her large hazel eyes on mine. Some people are under the impression that those eyes signify innocence, but boy, are they wrong. I gripped my math textbook, half of my mind ready to throw it

in front of me like a shield.

"S-sure," I stammered.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Am I Caidy?"

"Uh—Caidy?" I stammered, trying to buy time. She nodded, slowly, angelic eyes gleaming with predatory delight. "Caidy," I repeated, then the words came in a rush. "Okay, yes, you're—were. I mean, I didn't know you when I started and I didn't mean to upset you or anything because it wasn't *really* intentional and I can change the name if you want but I—"

I couldn't continue, because she'd thrown her arms around my neck. Not, I realized, to strangle me, but to give me an equally-suffocating hug.

"Omigod!" she squealed. "That is so cool! I love Caidy! She's the best character in the book!"

"I'm so glad you think so," I gasped, dizzy from relief and oxygen deprivation.

These days Katie never passes up a chance to tell people that she's Caidy, yes, *Caidy*, in *Rain* by Kieryn Nicolas.

Even though Caidy isn't totally like the real Katie (I mean, Katie's usually nicer, and she doesn't have an Australian accent), I'll still say she was based off of (my incorrect perception of) her. However, in a nutshell, I don't write characters that are exactly like anyone I know, not even myself.

However, as an author, even though the characters aren't *fully* them, you can still threaten to drop a piano on their head.

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