

# The Technique and Role of Physical Descriptions in Genre Fiction

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This paper will examine physical descriptions from a variety of genre fiction to research the role the physical description in advancing the plot and reinforcing the narrative elements of the story. We will examine the language used and see that the language used in the physical description of characters and people is not neutral, but has been selected to suit the genre type

## 1. Introduction

In a 2015 interview in the Guardian newspaper, Booker prize winning author David Mitchell declared that readers and critics trying to separate genre from literary fiction were committing a “bizarre act of self-mutilation.” Still, Joshua Rothman, literary critic for the New Yorker magazine, makes a useful distinction. The English novel first appeared in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century with publication of Robinson Crusoe. Within one hundred years, the novel had become an established form and big business. Such big business that a further hundred years on, the writers who composed the Modernist movement, rebelled against the strictures and commercialism of the Victorian press. Modernists, such as Virginia Woolf, wanted to end the Victorian emphasis on social commentary and general truths and describe the experiences of the individual.

This dynamic tension still exists. We can imagine the authors genre fiction employing archetypes more than individuals, but the distinction can be tricky, more like a Venn diagram than a clear break.

## 2. Sword and sandal characters in SF and Fantasy

In this age when movies like Logan about a Marvel comic book superhero with an adamantium (not a real element) skeleton are being nominated for Academy Awards, it is still useful to keep this distinction in mind. First, let's look at the physical descriptions of characters in the SF and Fantasy genre.

She was silent – a small, quiet, self-possessed little creature, her dark hair now long enough to plait into a little braid halfway down her shoulder blades but so fine and straight that it slipped out into loose elf locks around her shoulders. Her eyes were dark and serious, and her eyebrows straight and level, so heavy already that they were the most definite feature of her face. A little fairy woman. Igraine thought, not human at all; a pixie. She was no larger than the shepherd girl's babe who was not yet two, though Morgaine was nearing four, and spoke as clearly and thoughtfully as a great girl of eight or nine.

Even from this short passage there are several hints as to the genre and themes of the novel. First, the use of the word “creature” places the narration of the story in a world beyond or distinct from the one we currently inhabit. Similarly, the words “elf locks” to describe the character's hair style and her eyebrows as those of a “little fairy woman,” and in total “a pixie” as though elves and fairies were legitimate beings that one would encounter in one's daily life and recognize as possessing these characteristics, let the reader know that he or she is not in Kansas anymore, as it were.

If the use of mythical creatures were not sufficient to move the reader from the current world, the reference to “the shepherd girl's babe” is another sign that the reader is not in the modern world. While shepherds are certainly real, the reference moves the action from a modern landscape to a pastoral one. Similarly there seems to be an implication of status, although Morgaine was almost four, the lower status shepherd's child is larger and possibly stronger, reinforcing the intelligence, delicacy, and grace

of the smaller, higher status child.

### 3. Female characters in contemporary settings

Probably most readers will have by now figured out that the above passage is from a fantasy novel, in fact *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley. So what does a character description from a contemporary piece of fiction look like?

She was beautiful, too. That's almost secondary; but still, she was. When she came to New York fresh from Kansas, she worked part-time as a model though she was too uneasy in front of the camera to be very good at it; whatever she had, it didn't translate to film.

And yet she was wholly herself; a rarity. I cannot recall ever seeing another person who really resembled her. She had black hair, fair skin that freckled in summer, china-blue eyes with a lot of light in them; and in the slant of her cheekbones there was such an eccentric mixture of the tribal and the Celtic Twilight that sometimes people guessed she was Icelandic. In fact, she was half Irish, half Cherokee, from a town in Kansas near the Oklahoma border; and she liked to make me laugh by calling herself an Okie even though she was as glossy and nery and stylish as a racehorse. That exotic character unfortunately comes out a little too stark and unforgiving in photographs – and what doesn't come across at all is her warmth, her merry, unpredictable quality, which is what I loved about her most. It's clear, from the stillness she emanates in pictures, how much she mistrusted the camera; she gives off a watchful, tigerish air of steeling herself against attack. But in life she wasn't like that. She moved with a thrilling quickness, gestures sudden and light, always perched on the edge of her chair like some long elegant marsh-bird about to startle and fly away. I loved the sandalwood perfume she wore, rough and unexpected, and I loved the rustle

of her starched shirt when she swooped down to kiss me on the forehead. And her laugh was enough to make you want to kick over what you were doing and follow her down the street. Wherever she went, men looked at her out of the corner of their eyes, and sometimes they used to look at her in a way that bothered me a little.

The description here is quite different and there are enough hints to place it squarely in our contemporary reality. Furthermore we can tell that the speaker is her child, but the language is not that of her child today. We can tell that this is a child, a male child, remembering his mother. And the fact that the memories are those of a child and have not been supplanted by more recent memories, we can infer that something has happened to the mother, mostly likely something tragic.

At first blush, the two passages appear quite different. The first is the description of a child while the second is that of a mature woman by a child. But the two passages also have several similarities, if not in style and tone but in content or implication.

The first passage clearly implies that the girl is unusual or possessed both of unique appearance and unusual character. The second passage does not reference mythical creatures such as pixies or elves, but the woman is clearly an exotic, "Celtic," "Icelandic," and "tribal." The choice of the words moves the woman outside her contemporary urban setting and into the world of, perhaps not mythological, but not so very different either. In fact for both women, the physical description asserts their uniqueness not only of appearance but appearance as proof of character. They are individuals. This is their most important descriptive point and the authors assert this by invoking the supernatural in their descriptions. The second description is from *Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt which is variously described as literary fiction or coming of age genre fiction.

#### 4. **Detective Fiction**

Having looked at characters in contemporary fiction, a final genre might

prove useful, detective fiction.

She sold a little dope and used the proceeds to catch a plane to L.A., where, unable to compete with applicants who looked like starlets, she couldn't even get a job as a waitress. She ended up in San Francisco wearing her hair in spikes and riding a bike for Speedy's Messenger Service. On that unlikely job, she realized for the first time (and only after many months) that her size – her athletic build – was something in which she could take pleasure.

The description here, from *New Orleans Mourning* by Julie Smith is sparse but we do know that the character wears her hair in an aggressive punk fashion and that her physique could be considered unusual for a woman, strong and athletic. She feels herself to be unattractive in at least the conventional sense, unable to compete for employment with more conventionally attractive women. Indeed she comments on feeling that until she started her bike messenger job, she felt that her strength and size were things in which she could take no pleasure. Earlier in the book, the author refers to the protagonist as an “alien” and an outsider on “this planet” reinforcing her loner status. Even in the contemporary world of murder detectives, the necessity of the exotic is felt.

## 7. Conclusion

We took a look at three of the more common types of genre fiction, Sword and Sandal Fantasy, coming of age fiction, and the mystery novel. Each of these books was written by a female author and includes a female protagonist. Each of the characters in these descriptions is regarded as an exotic or in the least unusual.

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