

IN THEIR VOICE

When your objective is to bring alive a character who truly lived and motivated history the most important first steps are to dive into their life and world with every resource you can muster and then discover the shared spark between you and him/her.

I will simply state that there is no substitute for good authentic research. I must enable you to not only understand who your character is, what they did, and why they did it, but understand them in the context of the culture they functioned in. This is one half your work. It is the work of a good academic. The other task is often much more difficult. When creating stories about the lives and times of others, we must make an extra effort to acknowledge our niggling predispositions and make room for something new, something that is authentically generated out of the character whose life we have been entrusted to represent.

“Everywhere he looks he sees his own opinion.” We laugh, and yet how many of us fit this description? I certainly do. It is our nature to want to see our own ideas, preconceptions, and biases played out in the world. How can we move from own opinions to a broader perspective of the character and not lose any of the passion or detail that makes storytelling what it is?

Last year, the *Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities* commissioned a first person piece about Lucy Stone. Born in Brookfield, Massachusetts in 1818, she was a peer of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and, in her time, as well known and influential as these women. The ‘shining star’ of both the Abolitionist and the Women’s Rights movements, Lucy Stone helped change the world into which she was born. This was all I knew of her at the project’s start. I assumed that because I was a passionate supporter of the movements she promoted, hers would be a life I could easily identify with and portray. The gods are always laughing at us.

After many weeks of wading knee deep in primary documents at the Schlesinger Library, I came home and announced: “I don’t like her.” “She is stylistically a Calvinist in everything but her belief in a deity.” “I discern no humor in this woman.” “She didn’t like sex!” I was not drawn to Lucy Stone. She was a brilliant scholar, tenacious, held and practiced lofty values, and worked tirelessly in a world that most often scorned her. All of this I respected, but she was no fun. Alas, she was not like me! It was, however, my job to represent who **she** was and what **she** did, so I kept at it. Each day,

back to the books, articles, historic societies, and it felt like dragging a fat drunk up a flight of stairs. Then a window appeared. A window is where who you are and who the character was strike flint. It is a place where they grab you, heart, or mind, or soul and you light up. It is the basis of a relationship without which you will have a hard time slipping authentically into their being and their world. An academic could execute the biographical work well and never make this connection. We cannot, because our work calls upon us to find a deep underpinning for the stories we tell, a heart connection that enables us to communicate not only words or images, but a world that can be embraced.

My window into Lucy Stone's world developed out of a growing admiration. When she began her career, women simply did not speak out in public and never to promiscuous (mixed male and female) audiences. One reason she was a highly successful speaker, creating favorable public sentiment for the most controversial issues of the era, is that she hugged, rather than battered her listeners. Men would gather at her speeches and heckle, pelt her with debris, and threaten physical violence. If you were there to pass on your most dearly held beliefs, what would you do in response to this treatment? Alas, this honorable journal would not print the slew of pejoratives I would sling back at these fools. Not so Lucy. She would dress and walk and use speech patterns that were the model of femininity, and when a man would call out something like:

"Get off the platform you hussy. I don't own no darkies and I don't care who does....."

She praised him for his courage to attend the talk. She acknowledged that her topic was a dangerous one and that he had come here to protect his loved ones from that perceived danger. She assumed him to be a loving father and husband and would go on "**You men who love your wives and children could you get used to having them put up for public auction in a slave market? Sold one by one to the highest bidder? Sold and taken away, You know not where? Their screams silenced by the lash, their imploring hands fettered, their reluctant bodies dragged away at the order of a new master?**" Lucy Stone created allies out of enemies wherever she went. I have come to call her style 'emotional aikido' and this was the window that drew me willingly, hungrily into her world.

I have been her student for almost 3 years now. She possessed a deep intelligence and a creative spark that allowed her to envision a world yet to be. These things only became real and available for me to explore once the window had been open. When you find yourself face to face with a being that

you are called upon to explore and illuminate for others, be honest. Acknowledge what you don't understand about them, what you don't share about their style, life view, or practices, and move on to find that window that will allow who you are to enter who they are and begin the exploration.