

Maintaining Believability

One characteristic true of all good stories, whether found in a book, movie or play, is believability. If a character acts in a way that does not seem plausible given his or her morals, background and circumstances, the viewer will be discomfited and may simply walk away, figuratively. There is no easier way to lose an audience than to violate this standard. So, with that in mind, I discovered a change I needed to make in my novel, *Empty Luck*.

I removed Todd Baron and substituted Eric Zinkawich. These figures appeared in my previous book, *Carrie's Secret*. We learned there the two men were almost polar opposites, the former, very conventional and conservative, while the latter is reckless and shallow. In my book, one of the two will accompany his poker buddies on a trip to Las Vegas, a trip that all the participants would know in advance is to likely include gambling, sex, alcohol or drugs, and other potentially irresponsible behavior.

So, of the two, who is more likely to travel to Sin City with Jared, Tommy and Ricky? It would undoubtedly be Eric and not Todd. I originally had Todd going, simply because he lived with Jared, but that was not enough of a reason for him to go. As I continued developing the story, I realized Todd would not be there because Tommy is a petty criminal and not someone Todd would associate with. He might play poker with him, but he would not join him on a trip like this. It just didn't feel plausible to me and it seemed far more likely that Eric would go. So I made the change.

As I have said before, a writer needs to have some of his characters make bad decisions or it is hard to create a dramatic story, but at the same time, the decisions have to be reasonably consistent with the character's personality and situation. So I try to balance a character's bad choices with believability. It is a fine line to walk and one that must be negotiated carefully.

That said, there are rare times when I do violate this rule, when I want to show a radical change in a particular character. Once in a great while, someone goes against everything they believe, everything they stand for. It marks a major turning point and I would recommend only doing it once, at most, in any novel. The believability dictum still applies, but motivating circumstances must be so dire that the act is believable. Always be believable.