

# Master Class 17: K.M. Weiland

*Jerry Jenkins and K.M. Weiland*



## “Master Class With K.M. Weiland”

**\*The purpose of this transcript is to help you follow along with the lessons in the video. For this reason, the contents have not been extensively edited for grammar and punctuation.**

**Jerry:** Welcome to the Character Ark masterclass. Our guest this month is a returned visitor, novelist and writing coach, extraordinary K.M. Weiland. She trained us recently in outlining your novels. Good to have you with us again, Katie.

**K.M.:** Thank you for having me back.

**Jerry:** Can you define Character Arc for me and talk about its importance to any story?

**K.M.:** I think, if we bring character arc down to its lowest common denominator then basically what it's all about is change. Honestly, I think, if we bring story down to its lowest common denominator then what it's all about is change. We can see kind of right away how character and plots are almost one and the same thing, they are two sides of the same coin. A character arc is going to be where we find the protagonist in a story undergoing some kind of personal change over the course of the plot, and obviously, he can change from better to worse, or worse to better, but the point is that something ...

There's some dynamic kind of a change happening in the character or that he has himself imposing on the world around him.

**Jerry:** Character arc is crucial for more than just our hero and heroine, right? It's also for supporting characters. You teach that every character arc is driven by the main lie, attracted by that little bit last time, the main lie the character believes. Can you expand on that?

**K.M.:** Yes. Obviously you can have character arcs for all the characters in the story, if you want to go that in-depth. Your primary character arc of the protagonist in the change that is either happening in his life or that he's enacting around him is going to have ripple effects that's going to affect the other characters in the story, because it's not something that is happening in stasis, it's not. It's happening in a vacuum. It's something that's going to, ideally, have an effect on every corner of your story world or you kind of have to wonder, "Why is this corner here if it's not being affected."

This too is where we get to really kind of weave the character in with the theme in making sure that all of these ripple changes that are happening in the supporting cast are thematically related to the protagonists' great change, which, as you say, is based around this fundamental idea of a lie the character believes, that is the core of all character arcs because this is the reason the character has to change. If there's no reason for change, if everything's hunky-dory, then we don't need the arc, we don't need to change, but if there's something rotten in Denmark, if all is not well in paradise, then suddenly there's this great motivation for change in the character's life, even if the character himself doesn't see it in the beginning.

We start with this misconception that the protagonist has about himself or about the world around him, some innate deep and primal belief that he may not even be aware of that he is actually possessing at that early point in the story, but this is ... It's usually something we want to bring down to its lowest common denominator on a very primal level. One of my favorite examples is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, where her lie is just this fundamental idea that she is not worthy of being loved, and that is what's going to power her growth over the entire course of the story, until she's comes to that place of empowerment, where she not only realizes that she doesn't have to earn love, but that she doesn't have to sell herself in order to gain the things that she's really needing and wanting in life.

Particularly when you're dealing with a positive change character arc, where the character is moving into a better place and able to overcome that lie, you find these great stories of personal empowerment that, regardless what the surface stuff is, you've got a romance going on in *Jane Eyre*, but you could have any kind of genre approach to this and still have these wonderful and deep and meaningful themes that are happening because they're all about personal growth and empowerment and overcoming our own misconceptions about ourself in the world, which is something that we all deal with, many, many, many times over and over again our own lives as we're seeking truth and growth and meaning in what we're doing.

**Jerry:** Right. That's an excellent point you made too, about a favorite things, hunky-dory, you've got no story. I think that most common mistake I see in beginners manuscripts is nothing is happening, there's no conflict. They say, "Why is my scene lying flat there?" And I say, "At least have one of the characters insult the other or something going on. We need a set up and pay off. We need something that needs to be

resolved. Has someone been mean to someone else? You want to see them get what their due is." In your book, *Creating Character Arcs*, you've emphasized three main character arcs. What are those and how should we use them in our stories?

**K.M.:** Discovering character arcs was like a really ... I want to say it was a life changing thing for me and it really was, because it's something that has taught me a lot about life as well as just story theory. How that had all come about was I was putting together the *Writer's Digest* annotated *Jane Eyre* and obviously, as I just mentioned, *Jane Eyre* follows a very, pronounced a classic, positive change arc in growing into a stronger and better person and overcoming the lie, but obviously, not all stories follow that pattern.

We have stories of characters who grow from, maybe not such a great place, but definitely then they end up in a worse place. So, it's a devolution. It's a negative change arc where they, instead of overcoming the lie, they become more and more inured in it and to the point of complete destruction on some level of their lives. We've got the positive change arc and the negative change arc and then ... I'm thinking, I can think of so many stories that don't fit either of these models. What does that leave? No character arc?

That just didn't make sense to me because, as I said, story is change. If there's nothing changing in the story then what's the point? You're certainly not going to get any deeper insight into life out of a changeless story, but then I realized that we have a lot of these hero archetype characters, who do not change, but that's because they don't believe a lie. They are already in possession of the truth and they use that truth to change the worlds around them, to change the supporting casts and the minor characters. Even in stories where maybe

your protagonist isn't the one changing, you still have this dynamic change going on, in the worlds around the character.

That's going to be your flat arc. So, the three variations of the character arc are the positive change arc, where the character is going to end in a better place, the negative change arc, where the character is going to end in the worst place, and the flat arc, where a character who already possesses the story's truth is going to be able to use that to positively affect the world around him.

**Jerry:** I think that's something we often see in that Marvel comic movies, where you've got a superhero, they're tested, but they stand true. Maybe they are tempted to move to the dark side or do something that's out of character and as you're watching, you're hoping they won't do it because you hero-worship them. That must be the flat character arc or one where they, as I say, they're flexing, but they return to the position, as you say, they already own the truth. How do you determine which is best for each character? Does one of the other better resonate with readers?

**K.M.:** I definitely think that they're all completely valid story forms, primarily because they're all completely true to life. They are situations that we see happening in our own lives and we resonate with that. I think they're all completely valid and worth doing as long as they're done well and in a realistic way that mimics the real life change we see going on around us. I do think that sometimes ... Well, I mean, honestly, we see people discounting both the positive change arc and the negative change arc.

We see people who don't like the positive arc because, "Oh, it's goody-goody. It's happily ever after and it's unrealistic. It's cliched." And certainly that can be true, particularly when it's not handled correctly in making sure you're hitting all the

appropriate emotional beats to simulate the growth that the character needs to be going through. But honestly, I mean, I think, and most people, I think, would agree with this, that that would be the arc that they gravitate toward just because it's an empowering arc. It's an arc that we resonate with in our own lives because they're stories about people who are overcoming the deep fundamental problems in their lives, that are holding them back and making them miserable.

Then being able to learn, through a process of pain and usually self-sacrifice, to overcome that and to rise above it. So, of course we all resonate with that and we want to be able to see that happening in our own lives, but I also think definitely that there is value in the negative change arc. I think there's a reason that so many of our great classics that have endured down through the years that many, many of them are negative change arcs. I referenced several of them in the book including the Great Gatsby and Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights.

These are dark stories, but I think the reason we still resonate with them is because we recognize the truth in them, because the lies that are presented in them are presented in all of their darkness and we recognize that and we understand the truth, that if someone follows this to the end of the road, that they're going to suffer the destruction, that we then witness and the story's ending. Even that we don't like that necessarily, I think it's kind of like a cleansing of the palate, like say taking vinegar or something to cleanse your palate, and we recognize that truth because we see that as well in the world around us.

I think those stories in some sense, are just as powerful, if not more powerful than the happy endings, when they're done correctly and when they're honest about the lies and the truths that they're dealing with thematically.

**Jerry:** Since this is the second time I've had you on, I hope to have you on again because I think we've only scratched the surface of how deeply you think about all this stuff, which is really fun for me. But I immerse myself in ... I read everything there is to read about writing, so that means I've been reading a lot of your stuff, because you've written a lot about it. I came across something that I wanted to ask you about. Talk about what a character wants versus what a character needs.

**K.M.:** As we talked about, the foundation of character arcs is a lie the character believes and opposing that, the truth that he's going to either reject or come to believe over the course of the story, but those are very metaphoric internal things, they're not concrete things within the external plot. I really like to think of the external plot as kind of a visual metaphor for what the real story is, which is what's happening inside the character.

How we kind of externalize that and visualize it and put it into a concrete place within that external plot is by ... We always talk about a show versus tell. So, we want to show that lie, and how we do that is by turning it into the thing the character wants. In contrasting that, we want to show the truth as the thing the character needs. Often the character will be motivated by this lie that's deep within his psyche to pursue something in the external plot. He wants something deeply that he feels is going to fill this hole that has been created by the lie.

Usually this is something really big and too big to be contained within the story itself, like say Jane Eyre, the things she wants would be, she wants to be loved. Then we bring that down into a concrete plot goal, which is, of course, for her, she wants to be with Rochester. That, again, is where we get to tie in character arc and plot because suddenly the character arc is completely driving the external conflict and the characters



chasing after this thing he wants, that he thinks is the answer to his lie, is going to be causing him more problems as he goes along because it's not going to fix his problems. Even if it's an essentially good thing in itself, it's not the answer to his lie.

He's going to have to come to a gradual realization that what he's really after, what he should be after is the thing he needs, which is the truth. There comes a point in every story where the character has to be willing to completely sacrifice this thing he wants. Sometimes he may end up getting it later on in the story, but when he reaches that dark moment in the story he has to make an absolute choice between the lie or the truth and that's going to set up all of the third act confrontations.

In Jane Eyre we have where she discovers that Rochester is married to a mad woman that he keeps locked of the attic and she has to make that choice that she is not going to pursue the things she wants, which is to be with him, because at that point she realizes it means completely sacrificing the things she needs, which is to claim her own personal empowerment and to realize she doesn't have to sell herself, her morality, her sense of personal freedom in order to be in this relationship.

She has to completely give up the things she wants in order to claim the thing she needs, and this is wonderfully painful moment of sacrifice, that I think is very cathartic for readers because we all recognize that in our own lives. We don't get to have both in that moment. We have to choose one or the other. Then, of course, in many happy stories, such as Jane Eyre, eventually, once the character fully grows into that truth, she is then able to go back and claim the things she wants from that place of truth driven empowerment. Of course, Jane Eyre gets to be with Rochester in the end, but it's

only after she was willing to reject him and completely claim the truth and all of that, that implicated for her.

**Jerry:** When you urge establishing what you call a characteristic moment at the start of the story, is that different from James Scott Bell's inciting incident or Dean Koontz's plunging your character into terrible trouble as soon as possible, and if so, how?

**K.M.:** Obviously, it's slightly different. Let me just say, first of all, that my take on the inciting event is a little different than a lot of other writers that I've heard. Inciting event is kind of a confusing thing, I think, to a lot of people. I definitely went through various stages where I thought it was one thing and then another. First, it's like, well, it's the first plot point at the end of the first act, at the 25% mark. No, it can't be that, it must be the very first event in the story, the first domino that gets flipped over. I think that's the common misunderstanding that most people hold.

I, through reading some of Robert McKee stuff, I tend to think that the inciting event and how I define it is the turning point halfway through the first, act at the 12% mark, because if you really start studying story structure and how it works in actual stories, it becomes clear that the protagonist won't actually encounter the main conflict until halfway through the first act. The plot will have started, things will be happening to lead him up to that moment, but that's the moment, that's the call to adventure where he first kind of brushes against that conflict and doesn't want anything to do with it to begin with, but that, in turn, is going to turn the plot and set him up for the first plot point at the first act. The way I teach story structure, the inciting event happens halfway through the first act, at the 12% mark.

The characteristic moment is something that I like to see happen right away in the first chapter, preferably in the first paragraph is where you're going to start it, because this is going to be the introduction of your protagonist. It could definitely be lined up with and have something to do with what Koontz is talking about. But particularly, this is just something where you want to be able to try to define and encapsulate this character in a defining moment, something that immediately is going to hook readers' attention, tell them why they should care about this person and also just kind of set up everything that's going to happen to him over the story, to tell people, "This is what he's about. This is where he's at. This is the lie that he believes right now. This is how we see it manifesting in his life." So that we have this episode that's exciting and interesting and then kind of just introduces readers to that first domino in this character's progression through the plot.

**Jerry:** You, like McKee, advocate a three act structure. What do we need to remember if we're setting up our character arc in the first act, continuing it in the second and completing it in the third.

**K.M.:** Obviously, the first act is going to be primarily about set up. This is the period of the story when the character is going to be in the normal world and particularly this is going to be at the normal world of the lie. This is where he lives, where he's able to live in this lie and maintain some sort of, at least complacency. He's not been forced to actually grapple with this lie and the negative effects that it's having in his life at this point. This is going to be, usually not such a great place, obviously, because it is empowering this lie, but it's not something where it's forcing the character to move on and move out into the world, which is what happens at the first

plot point at roughly the 25% mark, which is then our turning point into the second act.

The second act is where we really get down into the nitty gritty of having the character actually have to interact with the conflict. He's pursuing this thing he wants, that we've talked about, in the form of his plot goal, but he's, particularly in the first half of the first act, he's not having very good luck with this. He is trying to use his old lie based methods that worked for him pretty well while he was in the normal world, but now suddenly that he's been kicked out of that normal world and everything's completely changed, whether he's in a completely new physical setting or just that the circumstances around him have changed, but the lie isn't quite working for him as well.

To help me, as I'm writing, one of the things that I like to kind of use as kind of a visual aid is to think of it as, when a character tries to use his lie, he's going to get punished for that. By punished that means he's not going to have great success in using those methods to try to reach his goal, but then, as the story progresses, he's going to reach the midpoint and the moment of truth. This is, I think, possibly, the most important moment in the entire character arc, because this is going to happen at roughly the 50% mark, half way through your story. It's going to coincide with your midpoint, so it's going to be a big scene. It's a centerpiece scene.

This is where he's going to come, on one hand, to a revelation about the external plot and this is going to show him the truth about exactly what this conflict is really about, what he's really up against, where he's just kind of been failing before because he's lacked information and that is going to allow him to make that shift from reaction in the first half to action in the second half, as he begins to take control of the conflict out of his new knowledge. But paired with that, that revelation of the

external plot, he's also going to experience this moment of truth that has to do with the literal truth of the story's theme.

This is the first moment where he recognizes that truth and he recognizes that it is worth pursuing. He still hasn't completely rejected the lie, but from this point on he's going to be able to start using that truth and he's going to start being rewarded for using it. He's going to make better progress toward his scene plot goals and in overcoming the antagonistic force. That's going to lead him to the third plot point, which is the swivel, that's going to lead him into the third act.

This is that low moment for the character, where he has to make that decision. He can no longer hold both the lie in the truth simultaneously. He has to make a choice between them. Whichever one he chooses, this is going to be a really painful choice, because what he's giving up is big. In a positive change arc the character is going to choose the truth and that generally means sacrificing, on some level, the thing he wants and walking away from it. Then so we have a period of recovery going into the third act, where he kind of just solidifies the choice that he made and reaffirms to himself that, "Yes, I made the right choice. Yes, the truth was worth what I had to give up."

That's going to empower him and put him in a place where he's actually equipped to be able to handle the final confrontation with, not just the antagonistic force, but the final confrontation with the lie and everything that he's been fighting against within himself over the course of the story. The great thing, I think, about character arc and theme in all of this, is that it ties in so beautifully with story structure, beat, by beat, by beat. You realize it's not, this whole argument about character versus plot, it's a false paradigm. They're not two separate things. To really work in a story they have to be

completely integrated and you realize they're just two sides of the same coin.

**Jerry:** Is there a way we can know that a finished character arc works and will satisfy the reader?

**K.M.:** I think, first and foremost, we look at it ourselves and say, "Does this work for me? Am I resonating with this? Am I physically reacting to it?" I always know something's working in a story, I get this kind of this little seizure in my diaphragm and I know. I know this is working. If I'm responding to it I know something's right somewhere along the way, but I also think, if you're aware of, like I said, the beats of the character arc and how that works within the story structure, it kind of gives you a checklist that after you've written the story you can just kind of go through it and make sure, "My hitting the right beats have caused an effect here. That the character's motivations make sense."

This is evolution happening, piece by piece, in a way that makes sense, instead of just being a jump from one state of mind to another. I think, as long as the pieces are in place and it makes sense to readers and they're kind of able to experience that journey along with the character, then I think it's going to resonate. That's something that does take a little trial and error and I definitely think that's where beta readers are extremely helpful, since they're able to be more objective about their emotional reaction to things, but as long as you're aware of what you're doing and why you're doing it, then I think you're on the right track to a resonate character arc.

**Jerry:** That reminds me a little bit of what I say, advise writers when they're revising and they say, "When do I know I've gone from making it better to just making it different?" And I say, "Well, that's what makes you a writer." You have to trust your gut. You're writing for yourself, as you say, hoping there's a lot of

people out there like you and getting to the place where you know it works and, as you say, you get that feeling inside, that's the fun of being a writer and that's what makes you a writer.

This has been great stuff, K.M., thanks so much, again, for being with us.

**K.M.:** Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

**Jerry:** For K.M.'s guide to mastering arc, find her book on the subject on the link showing just below this video, [kmweiland.com](http://kmweiland.com) and we'll see you right here again next time.

To watch or listen to the session, [click here](#).