

## TIME OUT, DELETE? – THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WRITING

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Who is this?

What are your immediate impressions from what you see in this photograph? Does the photograph intimidate you? Does the photograph interest you? Are there any clues at all to this person's motive(s) and character? What gender is this person? Can you be certain of what your initial perception(s) is telling you?

We are all judges and cannot resist being judgemental when faced with these questions. We do it all the time. We see people on the street, in shops and restaurants, cafes and pubs. We see people on buses and trains. We see people going about their business in ways that may jar with our own ideals and principles. We are, in every sense, making judgements. Coupled with these judgements, is an inherent supposition as to character.

My first impression when looking at the photograph convinces me that the person is a pathological killer who is currently serving a life sentence in some awful prison. And yet, if you stare closely at the one eye visible in the photograph, the person is looking back at you, the viewer. The gaze can be interpreted in a variety of ways - sad, distant, irretrievable, inquisitive. You may have seen

Holbein's *The Ambassadors* in the National Gallery – the anamorphic skull, essentially a distorted projection that can only be seen from a certain angle, best described as an allegory of life. In many regards, that's what we are dealing with here in this photograph. Here's the next set of questions for you.

As we stare at the face of this person we may or may not know, do we care? Do we make our mind up just on appearance whether we are going to like someone or is there something in their visible make-up or the way they talk that will make us decide a different course? Do we feel the need to attack and be defensive at the same time? Are we judging the book by its cover?

Such questions and even prophecies, are important factors in our writing. Our initial impressions support and counter our characters in our books and poems – how many times have you read a book that has transferred to TV or film only to find the central character in the book has not necessarily been portrayed in quite the same way on the screen?

The photograph emphasises a crucial point in writing – as we are looking at the image, so the image looks back at us. Is there always a piece of us in our work? The answer is almost certainly, yes. We are involved. Seldom is there a full detachment.

Before we press the “delete” button on our laptops, tablets and desktop computers, let's just pause and take stock of where we are. Is there something written on the page that could be used after all? Are our characters rounded and believable? Are we giving away too much too soon in the story?

Us writers have the power!