

Episode Title: Take Me to Your Writer | Build an Alien

Synopsis:

In this podcast episode, the first part of 'Take Me to Your Writer' Tim and LeeAnna guide you through the process of creating a truly unique and terrifying alien character. The goal is to craft an extraterrestrial being that goes beyond the cliché alien designs, one that pushes the boundaries of imagination and leaves your readers both horrified and intrigued.

The alien-building process is broken down into 13 key parameters. These are essential for crafting a character that feels alien in every sense, not just physically but in its culture, motivations, and interactions with humans.

The 13 parameters are:

1. **Resolving the Fermi Paradox:** Objective: Why haven't we encountered aliens, despite the vastness of the universe?
2. **Moral Dread:** Objective: What fear does your alien evoke in humans?
3. **Holding a Mirror to Our Fears:** Objective: How does your alien mirror our worst fears?
4. **Cautionary Tale:** Objective: What lesson does your alien teach humans?
5. **The Alien's World:** Objective: Where does your alien come from, and how does its environment shape it?
6. **Physical Characteristics:** Objective: What does your alien look like, and why?
7. **Communication:** Objective: How does your alien communicate, and how does that affect its interaction with humans?
8. **Culture:** Objective: What is the alien's culture like, and how does it affect its actions?
9. **Religion:** Objective: Does your alien have a religion, and how does it view humanity's spiritual beliefs?
10. **Technology:** Objective: What kind of technology does your alien possess, and how does it differ from human technology?
11. **Alien History:** Objective: What is the alien's backstory, and what has it learned from its interactions with other civilizations?
12. **First Contact:** Objective: How do humans and aliens encounter each other?
13. **The Alien's Name:** Objective: What is your alien called, and does it have any significance?

Discussion Questions

Use these questions to spark conversation and reflection in the classroom:

- Discuss the Fermi Paradox: What are the implications of the Fermi Paradox on your alien? How do you think the alien's behavior or lack of contact with humanity can be shaped by the idea that "they might be in fear of us" or "they're just visiting the zoo called... Earth"?

- **Moral Dread:** How does your alien serve as a mirror to humanity's fears? Do you think your alien should evoke empathy or terror, or pity, or a mixture of all of these? Why?
- **Cultural Understanding:** Discuss how you would handle the first encounter between your alien and humanity. Do they understand us, or is their form of communication something we can never grasp? How would that affect your alien's behavior?

Writer's Prompts

Creative exercises to help students apply the themes of the topic:

- **Prompt 1:** Picture your alien in a scene: What does it look like? How does it make humans feel when they encounter it? Focus on moral dread, fears, and cautionary tales—your alien should stir up deep existential discomfort and leave your readers questioning the very fabric of their reality. Don't hold back—let your imagination run riot?
- **Prompt 2:** Imagine a peaceful first contact scenario between humans and an alien species. How do both parties react to each other? What assumptions do they make about one another, and how do those assumptions challenge their views of themselves? Write a scene or short story in which both species discover they have misjudged each other in some way. How does this encounter change them?
- **Prompt 3:** Aliens are often used as metaphors for fear, difference, and the unknown. Write a story or essay where an alien invasion takes place, but instead of destruction, it prompts societal change. How does the threat of an alien species challenge human values, technology, and politics? What changes in human culture could arise from this external force? Does humanity unite in fear, or does it tear itself apart?
- **Prompt 4:** Consider a world where alien life has been discovered, but it is so radically different from our own that it challenges our understanding of life itself. Write a story where humanity must figure out how to interact with this alien life while also grappling with the ethical implications of exploiting it or protecting it. What does this encounter teach us about our relationship to nature, the planet, and other forms of life?
- **Prompt 5:** Imagine a world where aliens have been living among us for generations, blending into human society without our knowledge. Write a story in which the truth is suddenly revealed. How does humanity react? Are aliens accepted and embraced, or are they resisted and feared? Explore the dynamics of assimilation, prejudice, and the struggles of a minority trying to prove its worth in a hostile environment.

Class Activities

These activities will help expand on the themes of the episode:

- **Group Discussion:** Split the class into groups and assign each group one or more of the 13 parameters from the alien-building guide (e.g., Moral Dread, Holding a Mirror to Our Fears, Alien Technology). Each group will explore how their assigned parameter could shape the alien's personality, actions, and its interactions with humans. Have each group present their

findings to the class, highlighting how their parameter influences the alien's character and story.

- **Alien Design Exercise:** Have each student design their own alien using the 13 parameters. They should sketch their alien's physical features, create a backstory for its culture, and identify the alien's core fear or moral dread. Students will then write a short scene (300-600 words) where their alien first encounters humanity. Encourage them to focus on how the alien's traits, such as moral dread or technology, impact the interaction. This exercise helps students develop a deep, nuanced alien character.
- **Debate:** In small groups, have a debate on whether aliens in fiction should be portrayed as completely different from humans or if aliens that are too "human-like" make for more compelling stories. Encourage students to argue whether the strangeness of an alien should create awe and fear, or if they should have qualities that readers can relate to in order to explore universal themes.
- **Collaborative Alien Story-Building:** In small groups, have students collaborate on building an alien species using the 13 parameters. Each student will contribute one (or more) element to the alien's design (e.g., one writes the alien's culture, another creates its moral dread, another designs its appearance). After each contribution, the group will write a short story in which their alien first encounters humanity. The challenge is to integrate each student's alien design into a cohesive narrative and explore how each of the alien's characteristics affects the story.

Closing note from the Podcasters, Tim & LeeAnna

So there you have it, scribblers—13 parameters to build your very own alien. Remember, don't settle for the clichés. Go deep, go weird, and create something that will unsettle and intrigue your readers. When we think about what it means to encounter something truly otherworldly: What would it do to us? How would it affect the way we see ourselves and our place in the universe? That's the kind of alien that will stick with you long after you finish the story. Happy alien-building!