Stock Characters

Excerpt #1: From Sharon Creech's *Ruby Holler*

Boxton was a tired town, a neglected place that looked as if it was in danger of collapsing in on itself. A tangle of old homes and shacks clustered around small stores and buildings that had seen better days. One of these buildings was the Boxton Creek Home for Children, a ramshackle house that tilted toward the train tracks and the hills beyond. In this building lived the bungling managers, Mr. and Mrs. Trepid; their assistant, Morgan; and thirteen children, ranging in age from six months to thirteen years. . . .

The managers of the Home, Mr. and Mrs. Trepid, were middle-aged, cranky and tired, and growing stiff and cold as winter-bound trees. They believed in rules, and their rules were posted on doorways and in hallways and above each child's bed. There were general rules and kitchen rules, bathroom rules and stairway rules, basement rules and outside rules, upstairs rules and downstairs rules, clothing rules, washing rules, cleaning rules, rules upon rules upon rules.

"If we didn't have rules," Mr. Trepid liked to say, "everything would be chaos."

"If we didn't have rules," his wife would say, "these children would eat us alive."

[...] "How can we live every day of our lives without running or shouting or throwing or talking or dropping or spilling?" Dallas had once asked Mr. Trepid.

"Thinking Corner. Two hours," was Mr. Trepid's reply. . . .

When Florida was caught breaking one of the rules, she was more likely to argue and, as a result, to earn extra punishments. She could not sit still, could not walk when her feet wanted to run, and so on a fairly regular basis, she'd be running down the hall and Mrs. Trepid's long skinny arm would dart out from a doorway, snare Florida, and lead her to the nearest copy of The Rules.

"What does that say?" Mrs. Trepid demanded.

Florida squinted at the sign. "No stupid running."

"It does not say that," Mrs. Trepid said, urging Florida's face closer to the sign. "Read it again."

"No stinking stupid running."

"Down to the basement. Two hours in the Thinking Corner."

"That's stupid."

"Followed by two hours of floor scrubbing."

"Putrid."

"Followed by two hours of weed pulling."

Dallas and Florida had racked up hundreds of hours in the Thinking Corner, the damp, dark, cobwebbed corner of the basement. They had worn the scratchy *I've Been Bad* shirts, shoveled manure, crawled across acres of fields pulling weeds. They had also peeled potatoes, scrubbed pots and floors, washed windows, and hauled boxes and broken furniture.

"Good hard thinking and good hard work never hurt anybody," Mr. Trepid would say. Mr. Trepid, who was a short, squat man with an awkward walk like a crab scuttling across the ocean floor, did not particularly like thinking or working himself, but he firmly believed these were good things for children. (pp. 3–6)

Protagonist and Antagonist

Excerpt #2: From Lisa Lewis Tyre's *Hope in the Holler*

We watched as a woman with long, frizzy blond hair got out and walked toward us. A grumpy-looking teenager stayed in the car, slumped against the window.

"Why is that woman dressed like a cat?" I asked.

"That's called leopard print," Mrs. Chipman said.

Leopard Lady was top-heavy, with broad shoulders and skinny legs. She wore leopard-print leggings under a leopard-print sweater.

When she got to the car, she motioned for Mrs. Chipman to open the window, then bent down and stared into the backseat.

"Wavie? Wavie Conley? Is that you?"

I leaned back against the seat. "Yes?"

"Why, I'm your aunt, Samantha Rose! I've come to take care of you." . . .

Everything about Leopard Lady was loud—her bright, bleached hair, the bracelets that jangled when she moved her arms, and especially her voice. Half of Castle Fields was probably outside our trailer, listening to our business.

She sat sprawled in Mama's chair. It looked so wrong that I felt my heart start to sink, weighted down, into my body. Like that time the Baptists held a free dental clinic and they put a heavy apron-thing on me so I wouldn't get radiation poisoning. They ought to make an apron to guard against people poisoning.

"I swear, Hoyt, she looks just like her mama!" . . .

"I'm Samantha Rose, honey, the older sister of your departed mother. This here's your cousin Hoyt." She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "I can't believe we have to meet under these terrible circumstances." She stood up and grabbed me in a big bear hug.

My head was smashed into the leopard bosom and I got a nose full of onions and stale smoke before Mrs. Chipman cleared her throat and Samantha Rose released me. . . .

"Why didn't Mama mention having a sister before?" I asked Mrs. Chipman. "When she filled out the paperwork?" For all we knew this woman was a crazy child abductor who trolled cemeteries.

"Wavie's right. Our first priority when finding a home for children is to place them with family," Mrs. Chipman said. "We asked Ronelda if she had relatives and she said there was no one."

Samantha Rose folded the note carefully and handed it back. "Unfortunately me and Ronelda had a falling-out a few years ago. She probably figured we wouldn't help. And now it's too late to make up with her and say all the things I wanted to say to my little sister." She blew her nose with a loud honk. "But I *can* make it up to her. I can take care of her sweet baby girl."

Mrs. Chipman's cell phone rang. "Excuse me. This will be the office."

Samantha Rose stared at me through lashes thick with mascara. For somebody who'd been so upset, she didn't have any black streaks on her cheeks to show for it. (pp. 6–8)

Excerpt #3: From Lisa Lewis Tyre's *Last in a Long Line of Rebels*

As soon as I saw Daddy's dump truck sitting in the car line, shaking and rattling like it was about to throw a rod, I knew Sally Martin would have something snide to say. Mama usually drove me home, but Daddy had mentioned at breakfast that he had to pick up an old section of bleachers from the football field and might as well save her a trip. I could see a rusty end of it sticking up behind the cab.

"Nice ride, Louise," she said. "You headed to the dump?" A couple of kids laughed, and I calculated the chances of getting suspended for fighting on the last day of school. . . .

"I don't know how you stand it," Sally sighed. "Being surrounded by junk would be bad enough, but it looks like your house is about to fall down around your ears. My father says it's a crime to have such an eyesore right smack in the middle of town."

I rolled my eyes. My house was a common target with Sally. I'd told her before that it looked old because it was—it had its 175th birthday last year. I wouldn't waste my breath mentioning it again.

Sally smoothed down her skirt with one hand and smiled.

Uh-oh. When Sally smiled, bad things usually followed.

"Benzer," she said sweetly, turning to face him, "are you coming to the pool this weekend? My dad is having a cookout for all the kids." She looked at me. "All the kids in the neighborhood, I mean."

Benzer and Sally lived in the only subdivision in town, or as my grandmother called it, "the Yankee enclave." It was full of new brick homes and had a swimming pool and tennis courts with no cracks in them, unlike the ones at the city park.

"I doubt it," Benzer answered. "I'm helping Lou's dad over the weekend."

Sally pouted. "Oh, that's too bad. I guess you're going to have another boring summer. What did you write last year for your 'My Summer Vacation' essay?" she laughed. "Oh, yeah. 'Watching Paint Peel with Lou and Other Adventures in Boredom.'"

I could feel my face turning red. . . .

Sally murmured something to the girls around her about "Lou and her active imagination." I could hear them all laughing as we pulled away. (pp. 1–5)

Round and Flat Characters

Excerpt #4: From Cynthia Rylant's *Missing May*

Home was, still is, a rusty old trailer stuck on the face of a mountain in Deep Water, in the heart of Fayette County. It looked to me, the first time, like a toy that God had been playing with and accidentally dropped out of heaven. Down and down and down it came and landed, thunk, on this mountain, sort of cockeyed and shaky and grateful to be all in one piece. Well, sort of one piece. Not counting that part in the back where the aluminum's peeling off, or the one missing window, or the front steps that are sinking.

That first night in it with Ob and May was as close to paradise as I may ever come in my life. Paradise because these two old people—who never dreamed they'd be bringing a little girl back from their visit with the relatives in Ohio—started, from the minute we pulled up in Ob's old Valiant, to turn their rusty, falling-down place into a house just meant for a child. May started talking about where they'd hang the swing as soon as she hoisted herself out of the front seat (May was a big woman), and Ob was designing a tree house in his head before he even got the car shut off. I was still so sick to my stomach from traveling all those curvy West Virginia roads that all I could do was swallow and nod, swallow and nod. Try to smile without puking.

But when we got inside the trailer, it became plain to me at once that they didn't need to do any great changing to make a little girl happy. First thing I saw when May switched on the light were those shelves and shelves—seemed every wall was covered with them—of whirligigs. I knew what they were right off even though they weren't like any whirligigs I'd ever seen. Back in Ohio people had them hooked to their fences or stuck out in their gardens to scare off the birds. And they'd be mostly the same everywhere: a roadrunner whose legs spun in the wind, or maybe a chicken or a duck. Cartoon characters were popular—Garfield was in a lot of gardens with his arms whirling in the breeze.

I'd seen plenty of whirligigs, but never any like Ob's. Ob was an artist—I could tell that the minute I saw them—though *artist* isn't the word I could have used back then, so young. None of Ob's whirligigs were farm animals or cartoon characters. They were *The Mysteries*. That's what Ob told me, and I knew just what he was talking about. One whirligig was meant to be a thunderstorm and it was so like one, black and gray, beautiful and frightening. Another was Ob's idea of heaven, and I thought his angels just might come off that thing and fly around that house trailer any minute, so golden and light were they. There was Fire and Love and Dreams and Death. Even one called May, which had more little spinning parts than any of the rest of the whirligigs, and these parts all white—her spirit, he said. They were grounded to a branch from an oak tree and this, he said, was her Power.

I stood there before those shelves, watching these wonders begin to spin as May turned on the fan overhead, and I felt like a magical little girl, a chosen little girl, like Alice who has fallen into Wonderland. This feeling has yet to leave me.

And as if the whirligigs weren't enough, May turned me to the kitchen, where she pulled open all the cabinet doors, plus the refrigerator, and she said, "Summer, whatever you like you can have and whatever you like that isn't here Uncle Ob will go down to Ellet's Grocery and get you. We want you to eat, honey."

Back in Ohio, where I'd been treated like a homework assignment somebody was always having to do, eating a meal was never a joy of any kind. Every house I had ever lived in was so particular about its food, and especially when the food involved me. There's no good way to explain this. But I felt like one of those little mice who has to figure out the right button to push before its food will drop down into the cup. Caged and begging. That's how I felt sometimes.

My eyes went over May's wildly colorful cabinets, and I was free again. I saw Oreos and Ruffles and big bags of Snickers. Those little cardboard boxes of juice that I had always, just

once, wanted to try. I saw fat bags of marshmallows and cans of SpaghettiOs and a little plastic bear full of honey. There were real glass bottles of Coke looking cold as ice in the refrigerator and a great big half of a watermelon taking up space. And, best of all, a carton of real chocolate milk that said Hershey's.

Whirligigs of Fire and Dreams, glistening Coke bottles and chocolate milk cartons to greet me. I was six years old and I had come home. (pp. 5–8)

Excerpt #5: From Ruth White's *Way Down Deep*

Ruby was deep in daydreams about what she would buy on her birthday with her current batch of S&H Green Stamps, when suddenly she heard someone shrieking.

"Take that, you little monster!"

"Ouch!" Someone else yelped in pain.

Ruby stopped walking. Ahead she could see Reese Mullins from The Boxcar Grill. He was in Ruby's grade at school.

"Not again!" Ruby said out loud, for she knew what the yelling was all about. Ninety-year-old Mrs. Rife, owner of Rife's Five and Dime Store, was throwing rocks. She had been doing this off and on ever since she retired from the store about five years before.

On several occasions, Mayor Chambers had scolded Mrs. Rife about that very bad habit of hers, but she would pretend she couldn't hear him.

"Say what? Say what?" she would screech at him, holding a hand up to her ear. "You'll have to speak louder. I'm old and nearly deef!"

The mayor had been heard to comment that while some old people were hard of hearing, Mrs. Rife was simply hard of listening.

What Ruby usually did during these rock-throwing episodes was try to hide behind other people's shrubs as she approached Mrs. Rife's house—not an easy task when you're pulling a wagon. Upon reaching the Rife house, she would make a mad dash down the sidewalk.

It wasn't too hard to get out of Mrs. Rife's range. For one thing, she stood on her front porch, which was a good piece from the street, and for another, she couldn't throw hard. Furthermore, the rocks Mrs. Rife selected were not large, but they still hurt, and the old lady's age didn't seem to interfere with her aim.

Ruby sprinted just in time. A rock whizzed by her head.

"I'll get you yet!" Mrs. Rife hollered. "You mangy stray!"

Ruby caught up with Reese, who was holding his elbow. Well, at least he hadn't been hit in the head.

"You okay, Reese?"

"Yeah," he said, glancing back at Mrs. Rife with a scowl. "What's the matter with that nutty old woman?"

"You said it—she's nutty," Ruby said. (pp. 29–31)