

# hi, it's me

...

*writing female anti-heroines we root for*



*sponsored by*

The Rebel MFA  
Sanctuary



# CRAFTING ANTI-HERO STORYLINES

- Balancing relatability with unpredictability
- Adding Anti-Hero Pressure
- Incorporating character flaws and moral ambiguity
- Writing Exercises



03



An easy way to think about the unpredictable nature of your anti-hero is to think of a situation and what others (or even themselves) might think they **would** do and instead choose an **opposite** reaction, behavior, or action.

Give your anti-hero a unique set of **motivations** and **values** that drive their actions.

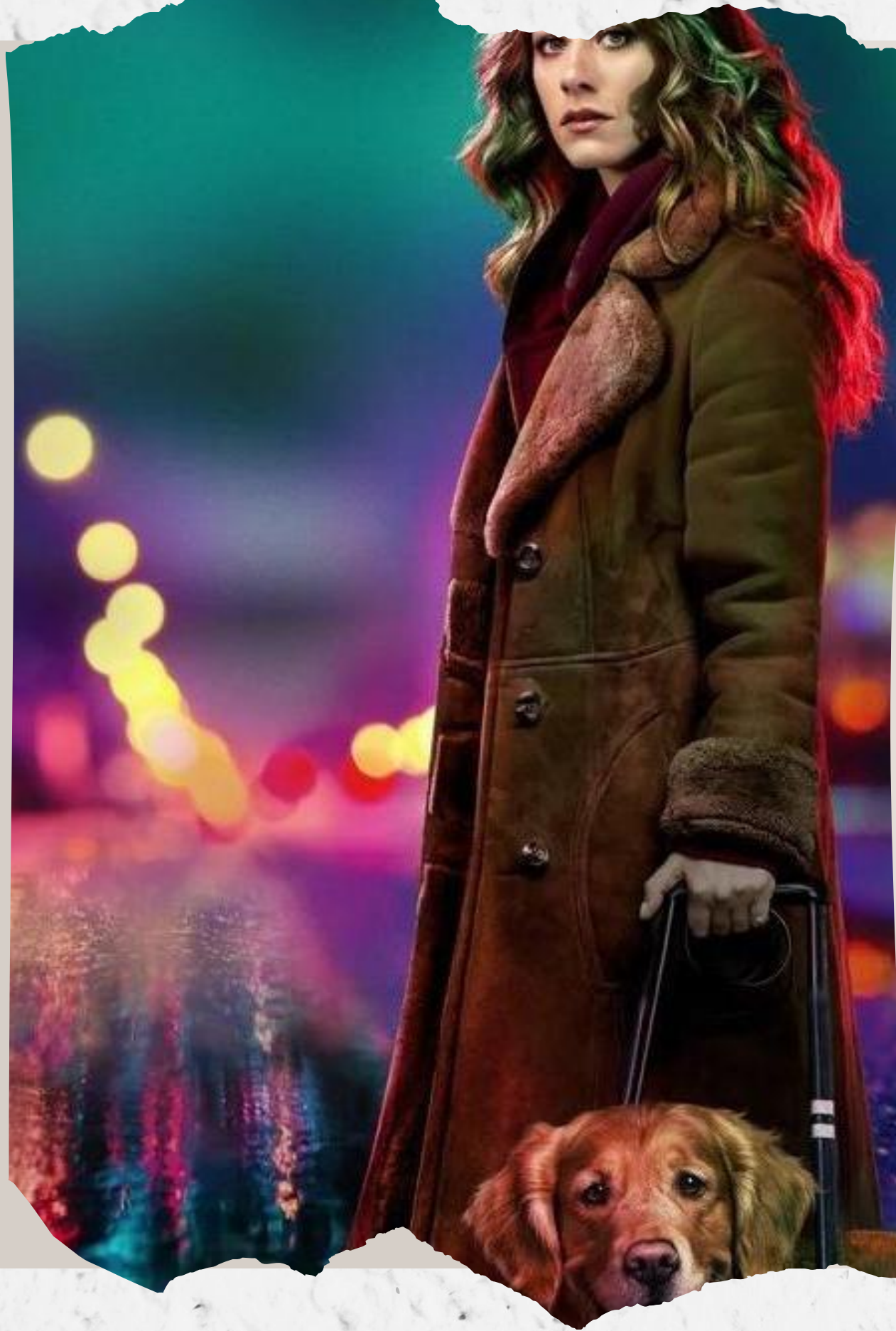
Allow your anti-heroes to **surprise** themselves with unpredictability and then explore the **consequences**.

## RELATABLE BUT UNPREDICTABLE

Crafting an anti-hero storyline requires a careful balance of relatability and unpredictability.

The character must be relatable enough for the audience to empathize with their struggles and challenges, but also unpredictable enough to keep the story interesting and prevent it from becoming too predictable.



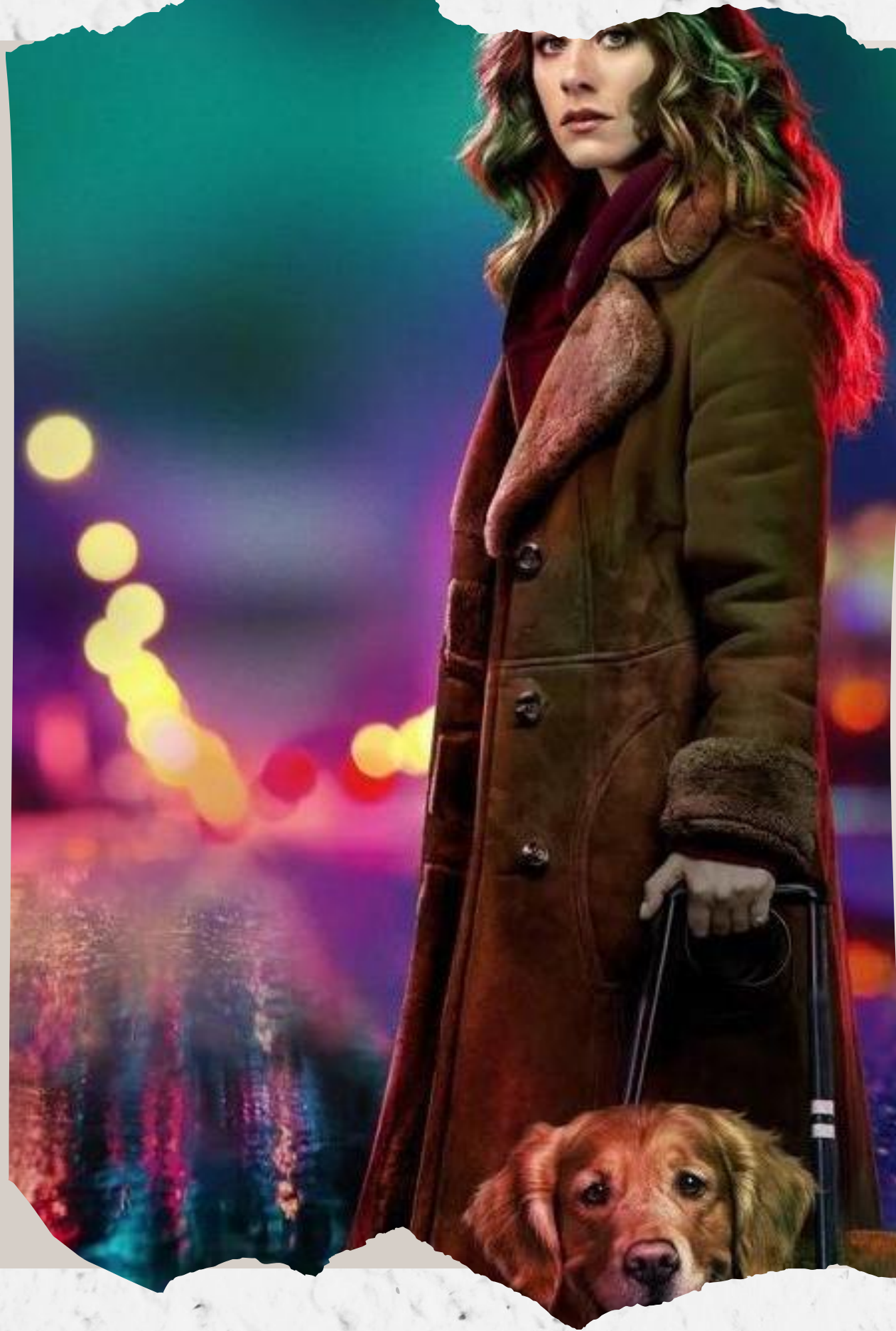


# MURPHY MASON

From *In The Dark*

Murphy Mason is a relatable character because she has low self-esteem that she disguises as confidence because of her disability. She doesn't want others to know how vulnerable, so she acts as if she knows everything and doesn't need help to do anything.

As a young woman, she faces so many of the same struggles all young adult women struggle with - her identity, her friendships and romantic relationships, her sense of purpose in life, and how she wants to show up in the world. All of these make Murphy a three-dimensional character with relatable qualities.



# MURPHY MASON

From *In The Dark*

Her unpredictability comes in many flavors though. As someone with a disability, she constantly puts herself into risky and dangerous situations that she cannot get herself out of without help from others, often coercing or even forcing them to help her at their own detriment.

She also makes terrible choices but will shift the blame or causation to others instead of owning up to her own role in the experience. Her shifting alliances also make her unpredictable when it comes to her choices. Sometimes, she will be loyal to someone for all the wrong reasons, or will simply stop being loyal when it begins to affect her own self-fulfilling needs.



# BETH DUTTON

From *Yellowstone*

Beth Dutton is a woman who faces many internal struggles from childhood trauma to the often dangerous and insidious world she's been raised in on the Dutton ranch.

Anyone with a dysfunctional family and childhood trauma can relate to Beth's struggle. Additionally, spoiler alert, when Beth discovers that her ability to have children has been taken from her, her deep pain and anger around the issue is sadly a familiar experience for many women. Beth's highly ambitious drive and dedication to protecting her family's legacy is also something many women have found relatable of her character.



# BETH DUTTON

From *Yellowstone*

Beth's unpredictability shows up in her callous and often impulsive decision making.

She routinely makes poor choices and then wonders why things are turning out the way they are.

When Beth sets out to achieve a goal, she will often do so at the expense of whoever is in her way or can help her get it. She'll sleep with a man to get what she wants.

She'll cross another woman to tear her down so Beth can benefit from her downfall. Beth is also notorious for speaking cruel and hurtful things to others to make a point.



# SCARLETT O'HARA

From *Gone with the Wind*

One reason Scarlett O'Hara is such a timeless character is because of her relatability as a woman in a patriarchal world that wants to be free and removed from her "womanly" duties. This was particularly relatable to women in the time period the book took place and the societal implications of what it meant to be a woman.

Scarlett's tenderness and love of her home and land is extremely relatable to anyone else who has experienced this deep sense of "belonging" to a physical location and having it taken from them. Additionally, Scarlett's ambition and drive is often felt deeply for other women.

Even Scarlett's romantic entanglements can feel relatable to women who have endured unrequited love. Scarlett's survival instinct though is what most female readers quote as her most relatable and positive trait.



# SCARLETT O'HARA

From *Gone with the Wind*

Scarlett, like the other examples in this workshop, is unpredictable in her impulsiveness and decision making.

She often makes decisions based solely on her emotions and tends to only care about something if it directly relates to her.

She is manipulative and has no qualms about taking from someone else if it benefits her. She's also a contradictory character -- at turns seeming loyal and then betraying a character.



# JESSICA JONES

From *Marvel's Jessica Jones*

Jessica Jones fully embodies what it means to have CPTSD from her childhood trauma. Her descent into addiction and self-harm to cope with survivor's guilt, her trauma, and the events in her life mirror that of many other women who have endured severe childhood trauma.

As a trauma survivor, her inclination to keep people at a distance and put up walls are traits many women possess and struggle with.

Jessica's self-loathing and twisted sense of self are common traits for trauma survivors and as such, many women can relate to it. Her cynicism and quick temper also add to the list of relatable character traits.



# JESSICA JONES

From *Marvel's Jessica Jones*

Jessica's unpredictability shows up in her unconventional problem-solving approaches. Rather than take an "easy" approach or a more conventional approach, she will often rely on her street smarts, her general distrust of people, and her own survival skills to find the solution to a problem.

She is also unpredictably tender to certain people in her life, especially her friends. Unlike most of the characters on this list, Jessica believes she deserves nothing and therefore will save or come to the rescue of others before she will accept help or rescue from anyone else.

# ADDING ANTI-HERO PRESSURE

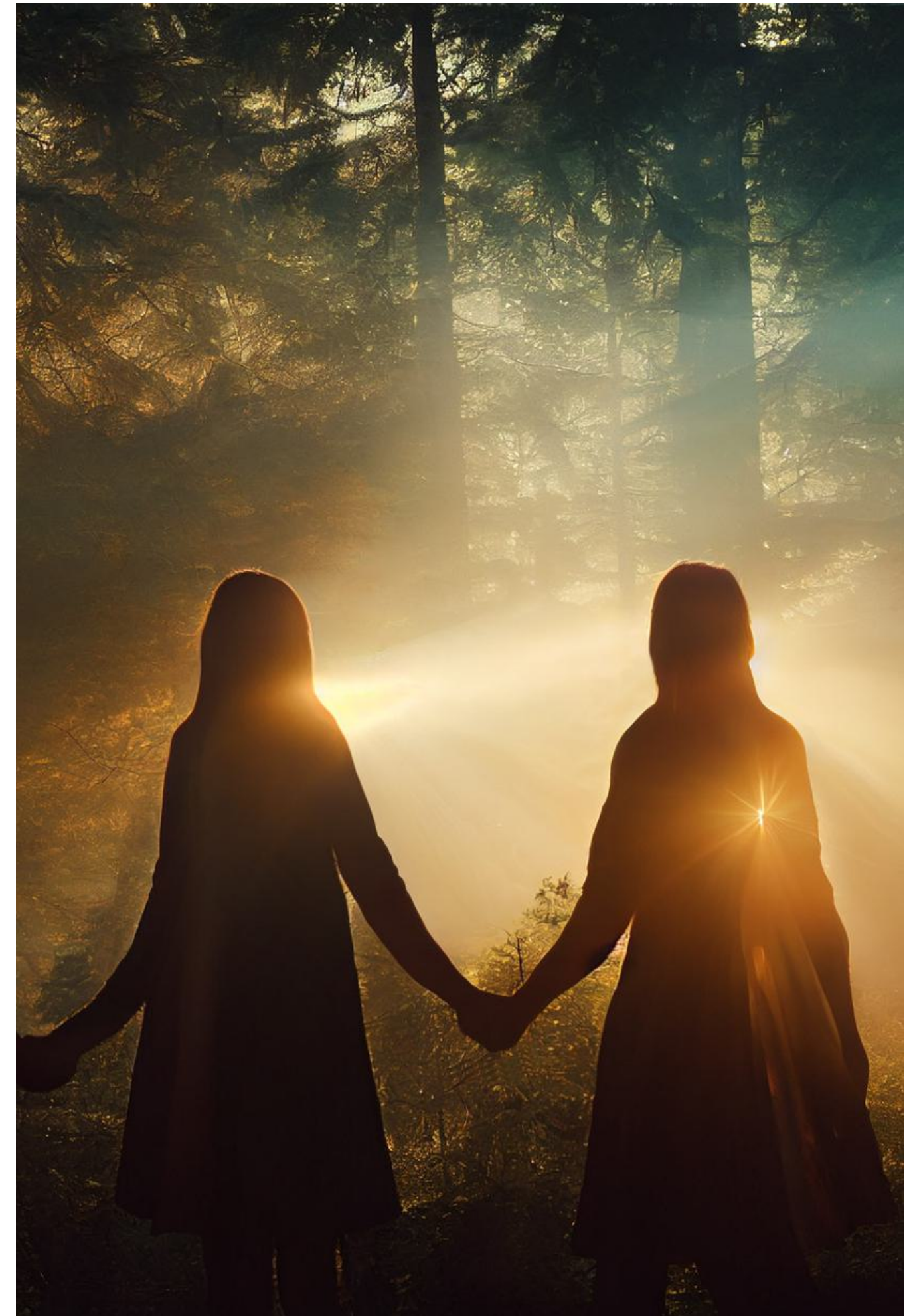
Another key to crafting an anti-hero storyline is to ensure that the character faces challenges and obstacles throughout the story. These should test the character's values and motivations, and force them to make difficult decisions that could have serious consequences.

One unique aspect of anti-heroes is that because they are so flawed and morally ambiguous, they often create their own pressure or conflicts that enhance the storyline.

Ideally, you want to be applying pressure to your character as often and as much as possible to showcase their range of emotions, vulnerabilities, resilience, and growth.

A few easy ways to do this is:

- A formidable adversary for them
- An internal struggle that feels life or death
- A conflict that isn't easily escaped from



The **overcoming** of obstacles is often one reason people love to root for anti-heroes. We know they have **issues** but following their story to see if they can **grow** and **overcome** those obstacles is a compelling reason to keep with their story.

One important aspect to consider when writing anti-heroes is showing the **consequences** of the character's actions, both for themselves and for others around them.

Morally ambiguous characters also allow us, the audience, to **consider** what personal choices we would or wouldn't make.

## CHARACTER FLAWS AND MORAL AMBIGUITY

One of the most important elements to creating a well rounded anti-hero is to focus on their character flaws and moral ambiguity. As we've discussed previously, these flaws are often what leads a character down the wrong path or creates major conflicts with in the story.

A character's flaws and moral ambiguity are also what makes them compelling and interesting to read about or watch.



# WRITING EXERCISES

## **Exercise #1:**

1. Make a list of traits or behaviors that your anti-hero has that would be relatable to readers.
2. Make another list, this time with any unpredictable traits or behaviors your anti-hero might possess.

# WRITING EXERCISES

## **Exercise #2:**

1. Brainstorm a list of obstacles, challenges, internal struggles or conflicts that your character would have to face as it directly relates to one of their traits.

EXAMPLE: Jessica Jones goes after one of the villains in the show, but is captured with no way out. The only people who can help she refuses because of her inability to accept help from others.

# WRITING EXERCISES

## Exercise #3:

1. Consider what realistic "flaws" you may want your character to embody. This may or may not be related to the first set of exercises you did with labeling "bad" or "negative" traits. You want to brainstorm flaws that you can take through an entire story with your character and explore it in depth. You may even consider what you, the writer, struggles with on a day to day basis to inform the flaws your anti-hero may possess.

2. Consider areas where your character falls into morally ambiguous territory. If you're working on a specific story idea, you could even find ways to incorporate their moral ambiguity toward the outcome or conclusion you're looking for.

EXAMPLE: Beth Dutton has zero qualms about sleeping with a man to get what she wants or to achieve a desirable outcome. Her beliefs around sexuality and monogamy are morally grey.