

Guest Blog for Book Club Classics
By Jennie Nash

How I Developed the Characters in *The Only True Genius in the Family*

The first thing I have to know about a character is what they do for a living. Even before I know what they look like or where they live or what's going to happen to them over the course of the story, I have to be able to answer the question, "What's their job?" I'm fascinated by what people do and also believe that it's incredibly indicative of who they are. (There is an issue of National Geographic on our dining room table right now, and inside the front cover is an advertisement for a program that honors emerging explorers. Here are just three of the honorees jobs: Geo-Archaeologist who collects and studies sediment cores from underwater archeological sites; Urban Planner who helps residents of Cairo's poorest neighborhoods build solar water heaters; Cultural Anthropologist who explores the ways new media and Web technology change how we connect and communicate. I read that stuff and it turns my head. Who KNEW there were such jobs!)

For *The Only True Genius in the Family*, I knew I needed three generations of artists, which meant I needed three art jobs. I picked landscape photographer and painter fairly quickly, because they are the iconic art jobs, and I also thought they would be very evocative to write about – people traipsing around the wild looking for the perfect shot, people holed up in the studio with a vibrant palette of paint. It didn't matter that I know *nothing* about either fine art or cameras and was consigning myself to months of research. I liked the jobs; I was keeping them.

For the mother in the middle, I struggled a bit more. I knew I wanted her to have an art job that wasn't "grand" in the traditional sense, because hers was going to be a story of creative awakening. I also knew I wanted her to have a job that could go dramatically wrong. I don't honestly remember when I first had the thought "food photographer," but as soon as I latched onto it, I knew it was right. I learned all about how food photographers light their subjects, and how the heat can ruin the food, and the difference between editorial photography and ad photographer – and then I had the great good fortune of being invited to sit in on a shoot with a very well known food photographer.

On the day I went to the studio, she was shooting a billboard for Panera Bread. Everything about that day just made my head explode. I filled up about three notebooks as I sat watching and listening and taking it all in. I only spent a few minutes talking to the photographer, but those few minutes were key. I understood the joys and limitations my character would have in her work, and suddenly I began to *see* her.

I often tear out magazine pages of people who look like my characters so that I can know about their hair and their clothes and whether or not they are athletic, and then I tear out pictures of places they might live. After *job*, I think *house* is the most important thing for me in terms of character development. Where do they live? How do they live? I tear out pictures of their couches, their bathrooms, their dinner tables. The home decorating magazines are fantastic for character development. I mean, would a food photographer have a gourmet kitchen and a giant dining table where she entertains lavish guests...or would she have a small kitchen and a little banquet because after shooting

food all day, she'd want nothing more to do with it? That's a big question, and seeing pictures of kitchens helps me answer it.

The hardest thing is to imagine a character's interior world – her dreams and her fears, the food she hated when she was a kid, the worst nightmare she ever had. For this, I just try to listen to the chatter around me, whether it's conversations in the grocery store, or at cocktail parties, or things people say on the radio. You can pick up all kinds of interesting ideas if you're paying attention. It's almost as if I put antennae out, and when I hear something that sounds like my character, I snatch it out of the air. It's amazing how often it works: I need a dream, and I hear a dream. I need a manner of speaking and I hear the exact voice coming from the cashier at Target.

I'm often taken aback when readers want to know how much of a story is real. They ask, *do I have a snarky daughter, a famous father, a house on the beach?* Sometimes I'm offended because I know how much work went into making up those characters, those houses, that situation, but I have learned to take it for what it is: a compliment, because it means my story seems real.