

Boris Fishman Transcript

>> Hi, my name is Boris Fishman. I'm the author of the novel *A Replacement Life*. And today I'm gonna talk to you about plot.

Plot is like the common cold. It's ubiquitous, but no one can figure it out.

The first thing I wanna say to you is don't be a snob about plot. And that's said by someone who is a recovering snob about plot. Let's say a recovered snob about plot. I realized I was a snob about plot some years ago when my then girlfriend handed me a copy of a new book called *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert.

And I'd gotten wind of what this book was about, and with great smug self-satisfaction I said, "Not for me." My loss. It wasn't for a number of years that I actually picked up that book, and by now I've read it twice: once because it's wonderful and smart and once because it's really smart about plot.

So, here is an author who makes you really invested in her character's journey. It makes you wonder what's going to happen next. I don't know that an author can do much better when it comes to plot.

In brief, if plot was good enough for Dostoevsky, and Elmore Leonard, and Graham Greene, and J. M. Coetzee, and a million other people who have managed to marry a propulsive plot to great prose and complex characters and big ideas, I would like to propose that it's good enough for you, at least at this stage in your writing career.

You don't have to have plot, but if you don't, you better have gorgeous writing, incredible and extremely interesting characters, a really interesting mind, and no great interest in reaching a wide audience. If those things are not super important to you, you're off

the hook and you don't have to listen to the rest of this lecture. But, if you want to write the smartest possible book, for the broadest possible audience, which is what I tried to do with my novel, then listen up.

In fact, my novel makes for a good departure point in talking about what exactly is plot. Plot can be reduced down to one sentence. Plot is making the reader wonder what is going to happen next. It's the same thing that motivates a comedian when he's telling a joke. It's the same thing that motivates a filmmaker when he or she is making a movie. And it's the same thing that motivates a writer, be he a short story writer or a novelist. You want to make the reader turn the page.

Let's use the opening scenes of my novel as a kind of quick case study in how that might work. You don't need to know that much about it, other than, again, in a sentence, it's about a young man, a failed writer, who starts forging Holocaust restitution claims for old Russians in Brooklyn. These are the payouts that the German government has been giving to survivors of the Holocaust since the 1950s. All you need to know because you're just opening this book.

You open the book, and the first thing that happens is, this young man's grandmother dies. And that might sound really dramatic. You might think, "Aha! We've got some plot brewing." But actually, we don't know anything about this grandmother, so the fact that she has died, we don't care about this character yet. So, we've registered it, but we're not feeling a great amount of sympathy for the character just yet. However, in the opening pages, you, the reader, have been told that this young man, Slava is his name, has had one great desire, which is to break away from his immigrant past and the old neighborhood down in Brooklyn where everyone is Russian.

And so he's run off to Manhattan and has kind of been hiding out there for over a year now. But the fact that his grandmother dies, and she of course lives down there, means that

he has to return. This thing that he's been avoiding for a very long time, this thing that he badly wants to get away from, he now has to return to.

How is that gonna go? There's probably going to be tension. There's probably going to be conflict. And whenever you have tension and whenever you have conflict, you have plot. And so our hero heads down to Brooklyn. And, by the way, we've got to show him moving from Manhattan to Brooklyn, and so just there, I've bought myself several pages of description. I've given you a potential conflict to look forward to. In the meantime I can take several pages, I can eat up several pages describing his life, what South Brooklyn looks like, etc. But you know what, now we've arrived in South Brooklyn and new stuff has to happen. And so I've got Slava interacting with his elders, his family members, his relatives, some of it is funny, some of it is tragic. The encounter is as tense as you hoped it would be. But now more needs to happen in order to keep involving you in the story and making you turn the page.

So, what did I come up with? Slava's grandfather confronts him with a most unsavory proposal. The grandmother, right before she died, became eligible to apply for this restitution from the German government, but she died before she could go through with it. So the grandfather says to Slava, "Why don't you write this claim about me instead?"

And Slava says, "But you don't qualify; you were evacuated to safety."

And the grandfather says to Slava, "You're a writer, aren't you?"

And all of the sudden you've got, a whole new world opens up. What's Slava going to do? Is he going to say yes? Is he going to say no? And of course, the dramatic thing to happen, the plot-friendly thing to happen, is for Slava to say, yes. And get embroiled in a scheme to forge Holocaust restitution claims, not only for Grandfather, but anyone else in the neighborhood who wants it.

And that is ultimately what happens. But not just yet because it's not a straight line for me. I wanna keep teasing you a little bit, keep you reading. So at first, Slava,

who's been hiding out in Manhattan and trying to be a moral American, as he sees it, says, "Absolutely not! I refuse. On moral grounds this is wrong, I won't do this."

And he takes great satisfaction from saying no to his grandfather, because his grandfather hasn't had a great deal of faith in his career choice. And so the funeral dinner concludes. We meet some people from the neighborhood, and Slava goes off to Manhattan. It's a kind of anti-dramatic moment; it's kind of anti-plot.

But when Slava gets to Manhattan and goes to work at the magazine, back to the magazine where he works there, he endures a terrible humiliation. He was up for a writing opportunity, it doesn't work out, and all these great hopes that he had for becoming a kind of vaunted, exalted writer at this fancy publication where he works, they're dashed. And so his tail between his legs, he calls his grandfather and he says, "Okay, I'll do it." And now the story begins.

Now you're wondering, how is this all gonna turn out? How will Slava forge these claims? Where will he get the information? Is he going to get caught? How will this transform his relationship with the old neighborhood? How will it compromise his relationship with this American side of himself that he's been trying to inhabit? And so on, and so forth. You can't really answer these questions if he forges only Grandfather's claim. So even though he makes Grandfather swear to tell no one that he's falsified this claim for him, what happens the next morning when Slava goes back to the office? The phone rings and it's Grandfather's friend who says, "Hey, I've heard you have been forging claims. Can you do a letter for me?" And that way the story begins to develop.

And so it bears mentioning here, two models, two great writers and things they've said about how one gets the plot going in a story. And hopefully they will make sense to you now that I've told you about how I did it.

There's E. L. Doctorow who has a well known quote that has always felt very wise to me. The quote is, writing a novel, or a short story for that matter, is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as the headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way. And what he's saying is you don't need to know what's gonna happen on page 300;; you just need to know what happens on page 1 and maybe on page 5. In fact, if you know what happens on page 300, it's very likely to end up straitjacketing you. You don't want too concrete a map, for what's gonna happen in the story. You wanna know generally, the big idea, something about the major characters and how it all begins.

I knew that Slava was eventually gonna forge these claims. My question was, how am I gonna get there? In my case, I sort of knew what happens on page 100. And I had to fill in the blanks in terms of characters and events and setting until we got there. All along, I knew that I would have to have things happen in order to get him to a place where this, which initially seemed unacceptable to him, would now seem desirable.

Now I'm going to mention the other writer, his name is Ron Carlson, he's a well known short story writer. He has a great little book that I urge you to pick up called Ron Carlson Writes A Short Story where he takes you through the writing of his short story, The Governor's Ball, sentence by sentence. And what Ron shows you is that he never knows beyond the first sentence; he didn't know what was going to happen in the second sentence. How did he come up with the story idea? Probably nothing more concrete than the ideas that you have when you wonder, can I make a story out of this? He had a visual of driving across a bridge in Salt Lake City, Utah, in a pick up truck, with a massive, soaked mattress in the bed of the truck. That was his image. You'll agree, it's not much, but out of this, he was able to weave a whole story.

How? Well, first of all, by not worrying too much about what happens. When you've got the first visual, when you've got the first sentence, your only job is to figure out what happens in the second.

And so Ron has given himself quite a few tools in this first sentence. What city are we in? What does the pickup truck say about the person driving it? Is he a working class person? Is he a rancher? And most importantly, why is there this soaked mattress in the backseat? Did the pipes burst? Is this a weekend day, when someone has the time to drive to the dump and get rid of it? Or is it a weekday and you just have to take off of work? You see how a very simple visual raises all kinds of questions that you then need to answer in the succeeding sentences. And by answering them, by coming up with answers to these questions, you are giving yourself more material to work with, and you're giving yourself ideas for how the story can advance and move forward.

Now one other thing that I consider really important, sometimes when we we think about plot, we overestimate how dramatic it needs to be. You see I started my novel with a character dying, but that actually isn't what makes the plot. It's the human drama of Slava having to go back to this neighborhood that he wants to stay out of and having to confront everyone there who he was so proud to abandon and leave behind. Whenever we've sort of gone back to a place we don't wanna go back to, if that's happened to you, you'll recognize the inherent tension and drama there.

And for me, human drama, the conflict that arises, the tension that arises between people wanting different things, or doing something they don't want to do, or having to endure something that is undesired by them, that is always much more, in the long run, intriguing than some kind of dramatic happening like a death, or a car crash, or aliens showing up on Earth, or anything like that. Because, for me, it's always more effective to create mystery by--if your story has a secret--my advice is, reveal it from the top. Give it away at the top. Because if you withhold that information for 20 pages and finally, on page 20, you reveal that, aha, it was Smith who killed Jones, you've been building it up for so long, you've raised your reader's expectations so high that that smoking gun better be smoking so hard.

It really creates very high demands of a writer and also it helps if you specialize in mysteries.

I've always felt that withholding information is far less effective in drawing in the reader than giving it away--Smith killed Jones--and then taking the reader through 20 pages of the psychological aftermath of Smith having killed Jones.

You remember Crime and Punishment? We know that Raskolnikov killed the old pawn shop lady right from the beginning. The drama of that novel is not in who did it. It's in the cat and mouse game between the investigator and Raskolnikov. And for me, that part of the novel was so intriguing, and so edifying that I ripped it off for my own novel, where there's a kind of cat and mouse game between Slava and an investigator for the claims conference, which is the organization that dispenses these payouts after someone has ratted out to the claims conference that someone has been forging these claims. If I never revealed to you who was forging these claims, and you found out on page 336, my hunch is that you would feel a little bit cheated, like you went through a whole lot of trouble for I don't know how big a payout. The excitement of my novel isn't in who did it, but why, and how they handle the aftermath.

So, the next question, naturally, is how do you come up with stories? How do you come up with ideas? How do you come up with plot for your own stories or novels? As you know, it's a commonplace. The best way to become better at writing is A, to practice and B, to read the writing of others. So since we're talking about your writing, the other thing here is learning from others.

Watch or re-watch five of your favorite movies. But don't just watch them. Sit with a notepad and note on the notepad every single time that something happens. A movie's actually a great example, because unlike novels, which are a little bit more baggy and permissive and have room for detours and digressions and scenes that don't necessarily have to do with plot narrowly, movies don't have that luxury, especially Hollywood movies. And here

is one excuse to watch Hollywood movies instead of art films. Map out every single thing that happens in the movie.

You can do the same thing with a short story. Read a short story not for entertainment or information, read it for plot. See what happens in the story. Put a tick mark in the margins every time that the plot gets moved forward. If you can simultaneously read the story and sort of keep yourself outside of it enough to notice every time your attention perks up and you start reading a little bit faster--of course that's hard to do because you're reading faster and the last thing you wanna do is stop and put a check mark next to what you're reading--but if you can be mindful in that way, and just put a little mark every time your attention accelerates, you will be creating a map of how plot works in a given story. After you've finished reading the story, take a fresh piece of paper, number it one through ten, and write down the ten things that drive this story forward. Imagine that you are telling someone you know about this story, and you just wanna tell them what it's about. Write down the 10 things, or 7, or 5, or 12, but around there, that your friend would need to know about what happens in this story in order to make sense of it; no more and no less.

I think it won't surprise you when I say that the key thing here is action verbs and concreteness. If this story is about Smith, and Smith is untrustworthy, it doesn't help your friend who doesn't know anything about the story, to hear that Smith is untrustworthy. There's a great test that I love for whether something is concrete or abstract, and the test is, can you pour chocolate sauce on it? Can you pour chocolate sauce on untrustworthy? No, you cannot. Can you pour chocolate sauce on an untrustworthy person? Yes, you can. What I mean is, instead of saying Smith is untrustworthy, say Smith lies to his wife. His wife leaves him. Smith feels very lonely and goes out looking for dates. Or whatever. But action verbs here are key.

After you've itemized from 1 to 10 what happens in a story, another thing that you can do

is now expand that information to narrative form. Write a digest of the story you've just read in 100 words. In fact, you can go beyond that and make it 500 words. You see what I'm getting at. You've read a 5,000 word short story, you've boiled it down somewhat reductively to the main things that happen in it, and now you're re-expanding it back into what it became in the hands of the author when they wrote the story. The idea here is for you to now do the same without the model for your own story.

You've heard me say earlier in this talk, don't map out too far in advance what happens. That is absolutely true, but we need a little practice first. And there's nothing wrong with deciding in advance everything that's going to happen in your story, for the purposes of this exercise, and to write it down, 1 through 10.

And in my story for example, I had number 6, Slava agrees to forge these restitution claims. My job was to figure out how he gets from 1 to 6, then what happens from 6 to 10. But you see here how, if you create these signposts along the road for yourself, you've sort of done half your job. And the only thing that remains is, to put it unkindly, filler: drawing characters, creating setting, things like that.

Again, I would never advise this as a long-term solution. I did this with my first novel, the one that I've been speaking to you about. And then sort of had to undo it because the story was feeling suffocated and over-determined.

The best kind of plot outline, as I hinted earlier on, is the one that fills in maybe 1, 2, and 3. And then purposefully leaves 4 to 10 undesignated. Because the idea is, by the time you get to 3,, you're going to realize things about your story that you did not anticipate when you were still at 1. In the process of writing it, characters have revealed themselves to be, say, a little more stubborn than you imagined, or a little more criminal than you imagined, or slightly more confused than you imagined. All of that will give you ideas for where the story can go. So leave 4 through 10 blank, focus only on

1 and 3. This is what E. L. Doctorow meant when he said, don't look beyond the headlights. That's all that you need to see.

In closing, I want you to be paying attention around you, all the time, as you move through the day. A great writer is never off the clock.

Let's say you're at the grocery store and you're annoyed because the guy in front of you is taking forever. You've got to get home. You've got things to do. But you see that he has given the cashier a ten dollar bill, but she has given him the change as if it was a twenty. All of a sudden, this utterly innocuous moment, this utterly forgettable moment in the grocery store, I bet you're curious about what he's going to do. Did he notice? And if he noticed, is he going to pocket the unfair change? Or is he going to alert the cashier to it? And what's going to happen then?

So you see here that something really tiny and insignificant can lead to a little kernel of an idea. Now that's not gonna make a whole short story, but it can make a scene. It can certainly lead to a character portrait, that can tell your readers a whole lot about who your character is in a single, tiny moment. You can tip off your readers that here is an honorable person, if he does the honorable thing. Or you can tip them off that he's not an honorable person if he pockets the change, and simply moves off.

So, carry a notebook, carry a pen, carry a pencil, and pay attention to what happens around you at all times. Not all of it will ultimately prove the best kind of fodder for a story. But you're exercising your observation muscle, and you're exercising your eye for what creates tension and makes the reader, or in this case the viewer, wonder what's going to happen next.

The other thing that's really, really important is, and this was a great lesson taught me by a literary agent. I was still unrepresented. I was working on my first novel and I had

finished 150 pages of it. I was so proud of myself because this was more than I'd ever written, but I was also desperate for some kind of feedback. I was already out of my MFA program. I no longer had so many friends to send it to, or workshop colleagues. And so I was desperate for a referendum on whether I was barking up a good tree. So I sent it off to an agent who was willing to look at it.

And she read it, though in truth I think she read only a little of it. She wrote me back, and she said, "You know what Boris?" She said, "I don't think you're going to know what really happens in this story until you've finished it. And so I want to see this again, but the next time that I want to see it is when you've finished it. But not when you've finished the first draft, when you finished the second draft."

Because it's only after you finished the first draft, and this goes for novels and short stories alike, only then will you understand what the story was really about. And then you're going to have to back to the beginning and write it the way it was suppose to be written. Only then will you understand that in order for Jones's loss of a job on page 17 to mean something, you have to show how much the job means to Jones on page 6. In the same way, if you want us to care about grandmother's death, you can't have the story starting with her death. You've got to introduce us to grandmother, show us all the ways in which she's an awesome character, for her death to mean something on page 12. I'm now using paginations that imply this is a short story rather than a novel. This is called priming, and it's an essential aspect of what makes for good plot. In order for something to mean something on page 207, it has to be introduced on page 52. If you introduce a character on page 190, the fact that he disappears on 207 will mean almost nothing.

The last thing that I want to say before I bid you farewell and good luck is perhaps the most important. Don't beat yourself up. Take it easy on yourself. The world loves nothing more than to tell you that the thing you're producing is no good. It will miss no opportunity to do so. So leave that great privilege to the world, and don't do it yourself.

Of course, it's easy for me to say this, because when I was writing my first novel, I was a nervous wreck. And constantly, I was wondering, am I any good? Am I any good? Am I creating something that people are gonna wanna read? Is this moving forward in a compelling way? Is it bogging down? Is it slow? You have no idea how much mental energy I wasted on those kinds of questions, which I was incapable of answering anyway. No one can answer them, except the world and all of its literary representatives and literary proxies. But really the only time that question even has a right to be asked is when you've finished your second draft.

So the corollary here is don't you dare cut it off after the first draft. One thing that beginning writers often say is, I don't revise. Genius pours forth on the first draft from almost no one. Even Hemingway revised, and even Hemingway improved his work by doing it again and again and again. If you ask a thousand successful writers about one of the keys to their success and their skill, it is not some kind of muse alighting on their foreheads at 10:00 a.m. in the morning and just striking in the right way. It's revision, revision, and revision.

So, write the first one. Refrain from any questions. Write the second one, and then, when you run out of things that you can imagine doing in order to improve the narrative, then put it out into the world. I wish you the best of luck. It's a long journey but it is so worth it. Thank you.