

Amy Hassinger Transcript

>>[Text on screen] Cate Dicharry

>>Cate Dicharry, American author of *The Fine Art of Fucking Up*, is a graduate of Lewis and Clark College and holds an MFA from University of California at Riverside. She is also the coordinator of the IWP's *Between the Lines*, the residential summer program that brings together aspiring writers aged 16 to 19 for creative writing and cultural exchange.

>>I am Cate Dicharry and I am back again to talk to you about character, point of view, and structure.

[Text on screen] *Setting Goals: Your Desires, Your Characters' Desires.*

So I do think that sort of two of the essential ingredients to writing a successful piece of creative writing, whatever it might be, are that - if it's fiction - you know your character's core yearnings. That's how I always think of them, it's a way for me to kind of conceptualize it. But to think about your characters' core yearnings and know deeply what they want so that you know what's pushing and motivating the narrative. And also to know, on the other side of that same sort of coin, you as the writer what it is you want to accomplish and what you're hoping to do with the piece. This can be difficult, I think, because with both of these two things it can be - potentially even after a complete first draft, before you really get a handle on what it is exactly you want to do. But I do think that those are the two elements you have to have because, to me, if they're not present, it's clear to the reader immediately.

I'm talking about the intellectual and emotional core of the character at the deepest level. Right, so that first part of character, all those details are very multi-layered for me, and they have everything to do with detail, thinking in detail, and thinking about how and when to deploy those details for the most successful use, right? But the important point for me is always that these little things - even the

smallest details - are informed by, or somehow relate back to, that character's intellectual and emotional interior. And often that will remain unseen by the reader, or up until a point unseen. But that doesn't mean that it isn't informing everything you see about that character.

And so I'm going to use my novel as an example.

[Text on screen] Choosing Detail to Inform Character Interiority: The Fine Art of Fucking Up by Cate Dicharry.

We'll talk a little bit about some specific examples to ground some of these more abstract conceptions of character. So novels and stories can come about in any number of ways - with just one line or one idea - and for me, they almost always start with a character, the idea of a person. And so with my novel, I knew I wanted to write comedy and I thought I would probably use an academic setting because it suited the sort of comedy I wanted to write, but I really didn't have an actual idea behind that. But then I had this idea about a tenured art professor who has been blacklisted from his department, and for revenge he sneaks into the art building and he secretly cooks bacon so that the whole building smells like bacon, right? That was the idea. And he slips away before anyone catches him, and that's his revenge. So I had this one sort of silly little idea and that was it, and that began the story. And so I just started by writing two sentences as you do when you have a small idea, and they go like this:

"I am sitting behind my desk watching the downpour when I catch the scent of bacon. Dunbar is in the building again, despite the restraining order."

So those sentences were the first I wrote and they never changed, they always remained the first two sentences. And after I wrote them, all of a sudden, I have another character: I have this "I" in those sentences. And so then I had to make a few other decisions.

[Text on screen] Choosing a Point of View to Create a Structure.

I decided I wanted to write a novel that zoomed in on the very moment when a person realizes that her life is a total wreck. I wanted to just zoom in on just the crisis moment. I didn't want to write anything leading up to that moment, I didn't want to write about the resolution, the aftermath and everything that came later; I just wanted to write about that moment of realization, just that snapshot of crisis. And so I had this hero - who is this "I" - and now I have this idea about this crisis, and I knew I wanted to write comedy, right? So I knew I had this character who I didn't know very well yet, but in order to achieve the things I wanted to do with the book, I decided I wanted to write in first-person, which came from this idea of wanting to show a person - this particular person, who I really didn't know yet - in this moment of crisis. So the reason I wanted to write it in firstperson - and the character was eventually named Nina, so I'll call her that - was so that I could get at the nuances and the judgments and the sorrows and everything in the most interior way possible, of this character. And I also chose first-person because I wanted there to be discord between Nina's perception of the things that were happening - all the present action in the story - and what a more objective person might see. I wanted there to be a disconnect there because that, to me, would amplify this sense of crisis, and skew the story in a way that would give it some urgency, right, and a little bit of a distorted version of things, which is how crisis often feels. And so when I thought about that, I realized I needed other characters, right, who could present these other versions of reality. Now, all of a sudden, I have a best friend, I have a husband, I have other characters who are not just showing up for no reason - they're serving this purpose, right, they're amplifying something that I'm trying to do with this book. So that's sort of how I decided to write from that perspective in that way. And having those secondary characters allowed me to also to write this character in firstperson - and I wrote in present tense because I wanted that urgency - who had this kind of skewed version of reality, and now I have these secondary characters who are more objective who can respond to what she's saying and give some insight and kind of balance things for the reader so they don't feel sort of totally out of their depth or unclear as to what's going on. And so that was really helpful for me - those secondary characters became these essential tools for me to sort of frame what was happening with the central character.

So I was working with an unreliable narrator, I have this woman, Nina, she's in crisis, I knew I

wanted to sort of skew the story, and my time frame was only about four days, I wanted it to be this intense crisis period, and so I wrote in present tense to sort of really give that sense of urgency and immediacy - that was all kind of connected to this idea about this woman in crisis. I had these basics down. And then I just wrote, like everyone does, line after line, putting together some plot, and it took about a year to get that first draft done, and it was terrible and completely unsuccessful. And it had no depth, right, it read like a bad cocktail party story, a lot of plot points kind of fell flat and weren't working. And here's why: it's because while I was writing that first draft, I did not understand Nina's interior self at all, her intellectual or emotional core. I had her presentment down: I knew how she moved, I knew what she looked like, I could understand her, I knew how she would react in any situation. But I was missing the actual important stuff. I had some idea about her motivation, but I didn't have a clear answer to what I considered to be the most important character question for any fiction writer, which is: For what does she yearn? And not the simple answers, like: "For things to be easier," or "For a vacation," or "For her husband and her to get along better." But something harder than that, and it meant figuring out what caused the personal and professional crisis that I was writing about, and what is it that this character really wants at her most thoughtful, most honest, most emotional private place. And the writer has to know that; you have to be able to answer that question for your character. And, by the way, the character doesn't have to know - the character can be totally unaware of it until the end or throughout the entire time. And for my novel, actually, that is essentially the narrative arc, which is my character doesn't know what's wrong - things are wrong, something is off, and she's behaving erratically in response to that, but she can't identify what it is. I, the writer, though, have to know what it is that's going on.

So even though Nina didn't know, I had to know what was wrong. And the reason I had to is because all my other moves in the book weren't making sense and, worse than that, they weren't ringing true because I didn't have the answer to that. So I had to figure out - I was writing about a woman, an artist, and she had lost her passion for the things she loved most in her life, including, possibly, her spouse, and she was going through a specific, personal reckoning, which was: "Is everything I set up for myself in my life totally wrong?" That's what was really broiling under the surface of all the moves I was trying to make. So I had to turn back. Once I'd thought that through,

I had to turn back to that terrible first draft and think about it a lot and talk to my editor and write more bad pages and go back essentially to the start of the plot and rewrite almost everything with that answer and my central character's core yearnings in my mind. And that had to drive the rest of what I was doing on the page. It was never something I included explicitly, and I kind of wrote myself into this situation where I had a central character whose brain I was in, whose voice I was using, but who didn't know what was wrong, right? So I had to find some ways to maneuver that a little bit. So there's all this sub-surface stuff that was happening that my character didn't know, but it was informing all her decisions, right? Every decision she made - logical or not - was informed by that, and so it dictated and directed the plot for me.

[Text on screen] Using Interaction and Backstory to Reveal Character Interiority and Desire.

Okay, so as I went along and I rewrote, I began to see what information I needed to provide the reader, and how and where to do that so that the story could become true and meaningful in terms of the reader's experience of that character, even though the character didn't have all the information. So, for instance, the reader needed to see Nina when she was still impassioned as a point of comparison. Okay, so I know that I, as the writer, I need to include some backstory. I need Nina to remember moments and experiences that capture how she used to feel, and then the reader, on their own, can make that side-by-side comparison and come to conclusions on their own. I needed the reader to watch Nina when she was making some of the decisions that led her to the present action and what was happening now - so I needed to include some of those scenes. And I could do some of that work through those secondary characters I mentioned. They could say things to Nina that Nina might not be realizing, herself; they can point things out that Nina couldn't say or think because they were not yet in her conscious mind, which is where we were living. So in that way the reader could see what was happening more fully and get a clearer, deeper picture of what was happening, even though my central character - my first-person central character - did not have that information.

So the spark for this book was just this one little idea about this guy with bacon, but then over time

and revisions, Nina became the engine, and her complex personal issues became what drove the entire story. And so whatever characters you write, you have to have this clear and detailed understanding of their mental and emotional state, and really, above all, their core yearnings. You have to have that because that's what's going to push the narrative. And I just want to say it can take some time, it can take a number of drafts, it can take getting the plot figured out and then going back to these things later. But they're essential to be there if you want your story to ring true.