

# How Writers Write Fiction 2015

CLASS FOUR • Video Transcript

>>Welcome back. For this session, we're going to talk about storytelling in a larger sense: how we use character to produce a frame in the arc of a narrative, why some stories stay with us and others do not.

>>Yes. There's definitely a difference between the stories that become legends and that we pass on for generations and the stories that, sort of, they mean a lot to us but we're never quite capable of communicating their importance to other people.

So this session, we'll learn maybe why that is and how we can make stories that are more resonant with a larger audience. Andrew Sean Greer will talk about how one can frame a story, and about the point of view and how, when you decide what the point of entry is, that can really shift how effective the story is overall.

>>And the Ghanaian writer Mamle Kabu will talk about characters as the embodiment of the writer's ideas and how these ideas might move the action forward and become a vehicle for exploration. And she's the author of the young adult novel, "The Kaya-Girl." Her stories have been short-listed for the Caine Prize, and anthologized across Africa, the US, and the UK. She's the associate director of The Writers Project of Ghana.

>>And Andrew Sean Greer is the author of four novels and one short story collection, most recently, "The Impossible Lives of Greta Wells." He is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and the O'Henry Award for Short Fiction. He has taught in Berlin and at the Iowa Writers Workshop.

>>Enjoy.

>>I thought I would talk about stories and storytelling, which may seem incredibly basic, because it might be the first urge you have when you want to write a story. But it also, I find, that a lot of advanced writers and even many published writers I know, we talk about storytelling: it's all we talk about. And they seem like they're going to be the same thing, because what is a story without a storyteller or the opposite.

All of us know a great storyteller, like "the grandpa" or something, or maybe just one of our friends, whenever we see them at the end of the day they have some amazing story to tell. And you just think, how do all these great things happen to them? Where do they get these stories? They must have gathered them over the years and they're just so lucky that they have great things happen to them or maybe they're messed up and make great things happen to them.

And I think two things are going on with these people, and one is maybe they're instigating stories around them, but probably they're paying attention to absolutely everything, and they're filling it away as a possible story. So even the smallest incident on the subway or buying food at McDonald's turns into a story because they were paying attention to the interaction and that it was funny to them. In the way that there are some people on Facebook that always have some amazing picture or



something like that on the street. It's not that they're walking down amazing streets, it's that they're paying attention.

And then the other thing they're doing is that they either have the talent or they are working on being a storyteller, and that means that they are telling the story in a particular way. And that's what a writer has to figure out beyond just the impulse to tell the story: to connect to the audience and have them feel the impact of the story.

And we've all done this in joke-telling, like where you're a kid and you hear some great joke, and you try to repeat it, and it doesn't work. And something feels unfair about the universe when that happens. And so you try it again on your parents and you try it again, you change it a little bit, and that changing a little bit is you figuring out how to tell the story properly and make the joke land, get the timing right, and you finally got a solid joke. And I have a bunch of jokes that I think are really funny and that no one ever laughs and I am clearly telling them wrong and they're clearly just jokes for me, myself, not to share with others. And sometimes we write stories like that: they just don't connect even though they're perfect, but they're just for us.

And there is something beautiful in the immediacy of the story that we have an urge to tell, which I think, when we're a beginning writer, there is some story, often our own story, that we are longing to tell. And to try to manipulate it in any way would sort of ruin the purity of it in some way. If you have that story and you have that luck to have that impulse, then by all means, put it down.

But a lot of the time what we need in order to tell a personal story best, to connect with other people, is to have a kind of distance. And that's why we think, "so this funny thing happened to me today," and then there's, "this sad thing happened to me twenty years ago." You know? There's a difference. The comedy thing, it's funniest if it sounds like it just happened to you, but often when you read great works, they are looking: "I sit here in the old age home looking back on..." (Well, that doesn't sound like a great book, but you know.) But like "To Kill a Mockingbird" is really not, "I'm a little girl in the South," but "I remember that kind of town that is gone forever now and the things that happened to me then."

And that distance allows the narrator, you, to tell the story any way you want, because if it's happening right now then it has to happen in the exact order it happens. But if you are looking back on the past, you can say, "let me start further back," or "let me start in the middle," or "now I have to go back and tell you all about my brother."

Just this last weekend I was up in a rural community in Canada where my nieces live, in Argenta, Canada which is this tiny little town of 50 people -- 50 families, but 100 people -- and they're not wired to electricity and they're not wired to the water system. They do their own stuff and raise goats and have cheese. And I asked them about crime in their town, and my niece who's 15 years old, she said, "oh this amazing thing happened to me. I had this scarf stolen from me when I was walking down this path."

And her dad said, "Wait, wait, wait. Let me tell it." And he said, "Long ago, in the 90s, there was a professor in New Hampshire." And she's like, "Why are you starting back there?!"

And he said, "Just wait! Let me tell it!" He went all the way out of the town into New Hampshire to this professor who had, I think he had done something terribly illegal, and he fled with his two sons

off to this small town, and then they were extradited -- there's this long story that ended up with one of the sons, with a pregnant bride, in this small town, fleeing the Canada police, who are trying to get her to a hospital. And they hid in the woods, and this scarf was stolen by this man in order to swaddle their new baby who they had in the forest. And that was the story.

The story's not "I had a scarf stolen for a baby born." The story is the hardship and the tough path these people had and the strange choices they made and the kind of heartwarming Little House on the Prairie ending of swaddling the baby in the scarf. And who cares about the scarf right? The story's not the scarf. And the dad knew that, and that's why he took it away from his daughter even though it didn't happen to him. And I think that's the kind of patience and thoughtfulness that you take when you go to a story.

One thing to do is to consider a family story of your own. There's these family stories that are always told and that don't make sense to any outsiders because they don't know the people involved and what they mostly don't know are the dynamics involved in the family. If you take a family story and you try to tell it from another person's point of view, it can be revealing.

There is a family story that I never understood. It was about me, and when I was four years old, my grandparents from the rural South in the United States came to visit me -- not me, my family -- me and my twin brother and my parents. And we went to an Italian restaurant which was a very outrageous thing to go to back then for them. And I think spaghetti was very exotic to them. And I ordered calamari, which was not common in the 1970s. And I was four and I ordered squid. And my grandmother just could not - this was the funniest thing in the world. She asked me how it tasted, and I said happily, "it tastes like rubber bands!" And I don't think it's a funny story. I don't get it.

But she would tell that every time I saw her until she died; she thought that was the funniest thing. And I thought, "Why is she telling that story?" I mean, it . . . said something about country city folk I guess, maybe? And I wrote it down. And I wrote the story from the perspective of the waiter in the Italian restaurant, watching the family. And I put - somehow that allowed me to have this other person imagine the dynamic in the family. And I discovered in writing the story that it was really my grandmother singling me out as someone she thought of as different -- peculiar but special in the family -- and that she was marking me by that story from when I was four years old and maybe adventurous or something. And which delighted and scared her and so that - she didn't know why she liked that detail but this waiter did and I manage because of that outside view.

And by telling this story not when I was four years old, like I told you, I mean probably you didn't laugh when I told that story. Telling it out of order and looping back into the past of the characters as this waiter imagined them, and going back to them getting into the car in the snow and driving into the restaurant - telling it any way I wanted for what suited the emotion I wanted the reader to feel. And I will tell you that's the first story I ever got published - in Esquire magazine.

So it's a success story, but I think part of it was that enough time had passed that I had read enough to know that stories could be made in different ways. Because when you first start reading fiction the joy of it is to think that it just sprung out of the writer's mind directly like a beam of light onto the page and inspiration. And it feels like that for a long time when you first start writing. And only after a long time do you realize that these people thought before they wrote down how they were going to tell it and the best way to do it.

The point of view, the tense, the point of telling (which is how far in the future you are from when it actually happened), and the order of the sequences of events -- they think about that before they put it down. And only when you realize that can you go back and maybe reread your favorite books. And this time, not be swept away by the magic of the storytelling and the Narnia, lions, and witches. But look at how it's told. And by that I mean specifically, technically, paragraph by paragraph the order in which things occur, the transitions between an emotional moment and a description and when dialogue shows up and when it's just reported.

We talk about two hours about various things rather than five pages of talking about things. Those choices, which you could have in multiple sessions here about what all those are, but the first stage is just to start reading your favorite books -- rereading them -- this time looking at how it was made; the way that a carpenter would go into a shop and or museum and look at the way something's made - that they could imitate it themselves.

And I think there is caution always in imitating other writers because we're ourselves. We're expressing ourselves, and we want to just be - we don't want to be an imitation of another writer. But if you do that you end up reinventing the wheel, and you'll end up picking up a book that figured something out, technically, that you've been working on for months.

And I always look at my bookshelf. If I'm having trouble with my writing I look at my bookshelf and I think, "The answer's here somewhere. And if I'm attuned enough, I can look along the bookshelf and pick out the books I think it might be in, and I read those books, and if it's not working for me, then I toss it aside. But the important thing is -- I don't think it's bad for a beginning writer to specifically and purposefully imitate a writer they admire, as long as they know they're doing it and they signal to everyone that they are doing it, just to see what that writer is doing and kind of trace what they're doing.

And the next step would be just to look at their technique and notice that you're allowed to take that technique, because they didn't necessarily invent it. They used it. For instance, one that I've taken a lot is, I think I read it in *A Handful of Dust* by Evelyn Waugh, which is to withhold an important piece of information.

You would say she leaned down and then she told me something that would change my life forever. I walked out of the room and went into the winter night and looked at the, and you're like describing this long thing and the reader is like, what was it? What was it?

And you are creating suspense that doesn't actually exist in the moment. It only exists in the way you're telling it. And he walks down the winter sky, remembering the things she said, I will never love you, or whatever it was. I realized that if you withhold it, you create sort of artificial suspense on the page for the reader waiting for the story to be fully told.

Now, it's a crutch, I shouldn't use it too much, but it was one of the first moments when I saw how something was made. And I thought it was delightful that the storytelling was better than the story itself. And I think once you start reading books and listening to good storytellers for how they put it together, you can take on those skills and start to make your own storytelling style, with its own technical quirks and interest, influenced by all of the writers that you love.

Even writers that you don't love, but you admire their techniques. And then your bookshelf is like all of your great professors. You don't actually have to take year long graduate courses. You really just have to read as many books as you can, paying attention to how they're made.

And if you do that then you become your own storyteller and you're able to take the stories that happen to you by paying attention to the world and make them into something that connects with the people who read.

>> Hi, I'm Mamle Kabu from Ghana. I write fiction, poetry, drama, and I also write fiction for young adults and for children.

I've written one novel for young adults, *The Kaya-Girl*, which was written in 2009, and or 2010. And this year, I also wrote a children's story called *Flying Through Water*, for younger readers, from age 9 to 11. And that story which I wrote in June has been long-listed for the Golden Baobab Award, which is a children's writing prize for Africa.

I'm going to talk about creative writing and embodiment in the context of some of my writing. I'm going to use three examples from my own work. And I'll start with this one, the *Kaya-Girl*. So with this one, I'd like to talk about the embodiment of the writer's ideas.

I've taken the definition of embodiment to mean the representation or expression of something in a tangible or visible form. There are many definitions, that's the one that I thought was okay for me. So in relating this to this particular story, I wanted to talk about the craft of actually creating the characters and coming up with characters and events that correspond to the ideas that I'm trying to express.

Because I think the process of writing in terms of sort of translation of the writer's ideas into a living sequence of events, which is the story and for me, what happens is I have some ideas that I want to convey. And then I think well, who would be the best person to convey this idea or what set of people and what set of circumstances between those people would best convey that idea that I want to convey.

And so that's the sort of embodiment process of my ideas as the author. So in this particular story one of the main things I wanted convey was the disparity between rich and poor in my country and the consequences of that. And so I decided to have two girls who would come from very different backgrounds.

Become friends and through their friendship would explore that contrast. And so we have a rich girl Southern Ghana and Faiza a poor migrant girl from Northern Ghana who meets in one of the biggest markets in and become friends. Now, the process of embodying them and embodying their story.

I approached through multiple means. We first hear their voices through the opening dialogue, I'll just read that very briefly. That's in chapter one. Hi, I said. There was no reply. [INAUDIBLE], still, she was quiet. She looked frustrated with herself for not being able to reply. She gave a shy smile to show she did not intend to be rude and lowered her large metal bowl.

I smiled back, and suddenly language did not seem important. It was as if we knew each other already. So, that's the opening paragraph of *The Kaya-Girl*. And so we hear their voices first, that's the first contact we ever have with them. And then when start to see their actions, and their actions give us insight into their life conditions, into the dilemmas that they're facing.

And into the daily lives that they're living, and also into the contrast between them. So for example we learn from that very first paragraph that Faiza cannot respond to the greeting from and there's a reason why she can't respond, and that's because she doesn't speak the same language, and that's because she's a migrant from Northern Ghana.

So already we've linked in the fundamental aspects of her background in a way that is descriptive but indirectly so. So, and we don't really get concrete descriptions of them until later on, the embodiment of the actual characters. That comes gradually. So, for example, okay, through their actions, let me go back to their actions first.

Through their actions we start to get some idea of their background. In the third or so paragraph, when Faiza comes into the shop, it says the girl hurried in, carrying her over sized metal bowl before her, and placed it at Auntie Lydia's feet. As she bent down, I could see that her eye was caught by the gleaming French manicure on Auntie's long, pointy toenails.

And this tells us that she's not used to this, she's coming from a background where she's not used to women having that type of grooming, so it's something that catches the eye, and so that's a little bit of insight into Faiza's background. And then further on in that same paragraph, when she's trying to lift the bowl that's quite heavy, it says, this was the awkward moment because she needed help but did not know how to ask for it.

I rushed over and grabbed the rim of the bowl to help lift it onto her head. Now Abena doesn't need to help her, because she's been called into carry goods. That's the job that she does in the market. But the fact that Abena does that, shows us that she is a compassionate person, and also that she's interested in this girl, perhaps in being her friend.

So again, that is a form of indirect description of the character. And then further on, a couple of paragraphs later, when Faiza is walking with the load on her head, the narrative voice, which is Abena's voice, says, I could not believe how straight and fast she walked with that weight on her head.

I imagined that we had put it on my head instead, my whole neck would have been pushed down into my chest, and my knees would have been pushed into my feet. So, this tells us that Faiza is capable of carrying very heavy loads, and that must be some insight into her background.

It also tells us that Abena is not, and so here, again, we have a contrast. And then in the next paragraph, a few hours later, I thought I had probably followed her because I was getting bored spending all day every day at auntie's shop. Mommy had traveled to London to have a baby, and Daddy was busy with work, and Auntie Lydia had offered to have me for the long vacation.

Now, this tells us something about Abena. That's her voice as a narrator. In Ghana, people who travel to London might be from the wealthier ranks of society, so her mother having traveled to London to have a baby in a hospital in Britain shows that they are in the middle class of society.

So all these things help to embody them in a sense, they give us a lot of insight into their background in a more indirect way, and then finally at the end of the chapter, we get some physical description. Subtle physical description, when the two girls meet the smile of Faiza is described, she smiled the same smile.

It was the second time, and I notice the same thing, that when she smiled at me, the lost look in her eyes disappeared. And so this tells us that Faiza has a lost look in her eyes, she's new in this setting, she's away from home. And then in the next paragraph, we looked at each other, and I noticed that she had a fine line etched vertically in the middle of each cheek.

This is the first time we actually get a description of Faiza's face, and again it's a very subtle description. It doesn't tell us very much. And then finally, at the last part of chapter one. She came from a place called Talon in the Northern region, and she had just arrived in the day before, and she was 14 years old, like me.

This is the last line of chapter one. So, this is finally some concrete information. It's really the first concrete information we have, which we're being sort of spoon fed by the author. But, we've had a whole chapter before this. We've had a chance to hear these characters, we've had a chance to learn from their actions and so to me this is a more rounded way to embody these characters.

I think as a result of this way of going about it, the characters are more real and more rounded and the process of getting to know them mirrors that of real life. Where you don't get to know everything about somebody all at once, you're not spoon-fed information about a person, you have to learn it through your interactions with them, through their actions, through your impressions and you might learn something about somebody years later that you never knew, but in the meantime, you'll have to form your own impressions.

And I think the second result of this is that the reader participates in the process of embodying the characters. It's not all done for the reader and I think that's more satisfying because the reader might bring in traits consciously or unconsciously of people that they know themselves that they associate with the type of character in the story.

And this makes it more real for them. And I think this contrast with film, for example, where in film so many decisions are taken for you as a viewer that you get to make when you're reading. You get to make for yourself, and I think that's often why watching a film may be a less satisfying experience than reading a novel, or reading a story.

So, I think this is quite an important point. And In this story it's not until chapter five that there are more detailed descriptions of the two main characters. So I'll just read briefly from chapter five. In this chapter, the girls have advanced in their friendship and Abena has allowed Faiza into her aunt's shop for the first time.

Which she only does when her aunt is not there, because she knows her aunt wouldn't like it. And then they start to try on the clothes in the shop, try on the clothes and the jewelry in the shop, and so we get a little description through that event.

I removed Faiza's usual small head scarf and crowned her with this majestic headpiece. We looked in the mirror again and this time nobody laughed. Faiza was beautiful. She looked like a different person. I saw things in her that I had never seen before. Her high cheekbones were accentuated by the angles of her headdress.

The rich fabrics next to her skin brought out its velvety smoothness, and the coal she always wore under her eyes stood out sharply against the whites of her eyes. Which sparkled as if competing with the jewels hanging from her ears. Even the travel marks on her cheeks now lent her an exotic look, like the queen of an ancient empire.

Faiza, I breathed. She smiled her immense smile, making this new portrait of herself even more spectacular. So, here we finally have a portrait of the main character, after five chapters. And then, on the next page, we get the very first description, and a very, very brief one, of the narrator.

We've never had any description of her at all. And the only description we get is when she dresses up as well. She dresses herself up as well. She slips on one of the robes. And then I put on another set of costume jewelry with glittering pink stones. I ran a comb through my permed hair and fluffed it out, tying the matching purple strip around it like an Alice band.

And then a little further down. We each folded our arms and stood back to back, our profiles against the mirror. For once Faiza matched my height because of her headdress. So we learned two things about Abena here. One that she has permed hair, which again indicates that she comes from a social class where she can afford to perm her hair or where it's the style to perm your hair.

And secondly that she is taller than Faiza. And these are the only two things we know about her almost throughout the book. There's very little physical description about Abena. So, and the description of Faiza is quite significant here, because she's dressed like a queen, and I think this is suggestive of her true worth.

Despite her poverty, it's an indication that it's not only material things that give people status. And in that sense, it's an embodiment of the writer's ideas, of my ideas. So that was my example from this particular story. And so now, to move onto bodily experience as part of the narrative force, a part of the, I would say existentialist.

But that means what defines characters, actions that define characters as opposed to just ready-made descriptions. So, for that I'm going to use an example from my new story *Flying Through Water*, which is not yet published. And I'm going to read you the first few opening paragraphs of the story.

This narrator is a boy and this is a first person narrative. So this is what it feels like. I always wondered, always wished I could. Do the birds feel it too, I wonder. The cool rush of air swooshing out, and their wings beat down, and the sharp surge of it flooding back in as their wings rise again as far as they can.

Like my arms right now, coming up together to part the water on either side, shooting me forward and upwards on the force of the swoosh. And do they too get lost in the rhythm, the motion, the in and the out, the rush and the flow? I think they must.

I know they do. For we forget all else when we are borne on the very breath of the elements. And I wonder too, is it the air that teaches them to fly, as the water taught me to swim? Yes, it was the water that taught me to swim.

I'd never have believed that if I hadn't learned it for myself. How can water teach you to swim? Don't people have to do that? Well, nobody taught me to swim, or at least, no human body. If I had help, it was not from those who should have taught me.

My master, the other boys. They just left me to the water, to my fate. No, if anybody helped me, it was somewhere down there in the depths, in that vortex of despair and suffocation, and the other one. My friend. His friend. Our friend. If I tell this story back home one day they will say I was bewitched.

They will talk about and I'm sure I'd have done the same too before I knew. It's amazing how much you can learn in a short time. In the past few months, I feel as if I've lived in a different world from anything I ever knew. And met someone different from anyone I ever knew.

But the most amazing thing of all is, that person is me. So those are the opening paragraphs of *Flying Through Water*. And it actually opens with a bodily experience. The character is swimming and describing what it feels like. We are aware the movements of his limbs and of his sensory experience.

Which include a sense of being at one with the elements and that's a thing that is recurrent in the story, very important to the story. And so his description of his bodily experience in the water leads into the narration of the actual events, the beginning of the story, as such.

There is no physical description of this character at any point in the story. As suggested by the opening sequence, which as I read is full of bodily sensation, the relationship to his body to the story, and the manner in which he fulfills his role as a main character is primarily existential.

And I'll explain that existential, in my understanding, means being defined by your actions mainly. So, you are what you do as opposed to just you are. You are what you do. You don't derive an identity just from who you happen to be. It's not about description, it's about actions.

And this story is very much a story of action. So the boy is not defined by his history or where he comes from or how he looks. He is defined by his decisions and the actions that he makes on the basis of his decisions. We get to know him through these decisions and actions, and these are what propel the story forward.

So, and that's very important to the story because this is a coming of age story. And everything in it, the sequence of events, the outcomes, hinge on his actions and his decisions. So the descriptions of him in the water and of his journey in learning how to swim are an integral part of his own development and his triumph over adversity.

So, I'll give you two descriptions of him in the water, which occur during the story. And just to give you a little bit of background, this boy comes from a poor family and is forced into child labor in the fishing industry. And so when he first goes into the water, he's being pushed, he's being forced to learn how to swim by himself, without any proper instruction, without any mercy.

And so it's a very difficult time for him. So, the first description is from that time, I gasped as I hit the water which made me inhale it and lose all control. I thrashed my limbs in desperate abandon as it streamed into my mouth and nose, stifling me and seeping into my very pores, weighing me down.

So this is the first time he's pushed into the water from the boat. And then later on, through a sequence of events which I won't spoil for you in case you ever read the story. He decides that he wants to learn to swim of his own free will.

And so, he goes into the water and he decides, I'm just going to just relax and let the water show me what to do. So I'll just read a few lines from that section of the story. I closed my eyes and let myself relax until I was limp.

I felt the water bear me up, and felt my body move, undulate with the swell of it. Lift gently off the shore. It was such a natural feeling. I did not resist. I let go a bit more and felt weightless as the water took more of me. Suddenly I was floating.

So here again, he's being at one with the elements is part of the whole experience because he's giving himself to the water, and the water is bringing him up. And the story's full of his bonding with the elements. Because this is a boy who really has nothing in life and he's thrown into very difficult circumstances and experiences, and he has to call on basically the forces of nature almost to help him overcome his challenges.

So, I'd say that in the story the bodily experiences of the main character, critical element of a narrative that emphasizes action and definition through action. And then, the third one that I'd like to talk about is about the body and the spiritual experience. And for that I want to read a little extract from my short story, *The End of Skill*.

*The End of Skill* is a story about a Kente Ewe. A Kente is a hand-woven textile that is quite unique to Ghana. It's very colorful and it has a long history. Which is very much tied up with the history of Ghana, really, of a certain part of Ghana, and with the Ashanti Empire and the means through which they express their wealth.

A Kente cloth was an important part of that. So, in this story, Jimmy, who was formerly called Kweku, comes from a very traditional Akente weaving family. In the Ashanti region, but he, like many young men in Ghana today, he wants to leave his traditional background behind him and go to the city and become a sort of cool guy.

But then, when he gets to the city, he discovers that he can make money out of weaving in the new style, weaving more modern products of Kente which appealed to tourists and expatriates, and so he weaves again, and the fact is that he loves weaving. Even though he wanted to leave weaving behind him because he associated it with a sort of unglamorous traditional background, he has an innate love of it, and it's a spiritual connection that he enjoys going back to when he finally decides that he's going to read again.

So, I'm going to read an extract from that section from when he is in he has tried to get other jobs, he has failed, and then he as realized that he can actually make money through weaving in a new style. So he takes out his loom, and then he starts to weave again.

In his loom, Jimmy found a peace which he never found anywhere else. This was not a world in which he and his art became one and did not need anyone or anything else. The design flowed out of him and into the cloth. He worked for hours, feeling neither hunger nor thirst.

The disappointment of not finding a job, and the tension of his uncertain future were lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the loom as the heddles parted the warp threads, and the shuttles flew through, trailing their colors behind them. He had often secretly watched his father at work, even before he ever wove himself, he knew what other worldly look on his father's face, and understood that stopping work and climbing out of the loom was a transition from one world to another.

The closest comparison he could think of was waking from sleep. He knew that not all weavers felt this way. Back home in Odumase, weaving was an occupation that all young boys were expected to follow. And then he did so simply because it was the family tradition. They learned the technique and produced acceptable pieces of cloth but they never became masters.

True Kente masterpieces were made by weavers who entered another world when they climbed into their looms. It was not a topic one ever had discussed. He always knew which of his father's apprentices were destined to become masters. Simply by watching their faces as they walked. Here what I'm really trying to describe is the spiritual connection of the artist to his art.

I think this is something that people feel all around the world. I know that I as a writer do feel it, and many of my writing colleagues speak about it as well. People describe it in different ways, but in the Kente weaving tradition, it is articulated as a spiritual connection, and there are certain rituals and traditions that accompany the weaving of Kente cloth and especially in the past when it was all done for Kings.

It still is anyway but in the first one they have particular families that there were all kinds of rituals associated with weaving a cloth for the king or weaving a cloth for somebody who was in the king's court. Or for really weaving any Kente cloth, of course, was something that was treated with reverence and accompanied by rituals, taboos, and things that had have to be observed in order to keep it sacred.

And so for example, the weaver might pour libation before he would start weaving. If somebody fell in the loom that was regarded as an abomination and they'd have to perform rituals to cleanse the loom and to make the space sacred again. And so there was a tradition of connection with the spiritual world and the weaving of Kente, and so this is what is being described here.

And the act of weaving is what takes the weaver into that spiritual world, and so it is both a bodily and a spiritual act. And so, in this particular story, the descriptions of the main character, Jimmy, and of other characters engaged in the weaving experience, and the snapshots of them as it were their faces, their expressions.

I would lead the reader to an understanding of the spiritual aspect of the story. So, for example, when Jimmy first tells his father that he doesn't want to be a weaver, which is a terrible revelation of course. When he tells his father that and when he finally admits that he wants to leave the village and go to the town, his father doesn't understand.

And so they have a discussion about which is very painful for both of them, and he tries to convince his father that he doesn't want to be a weaver, and his father just says to him, My son I have seen the look in your eyes when you weave.

And with that he cannot deny that yes he does have a spiritual connection and he does love weaving. And he's conflicted, he's torn between different things that he wants. So the actions of the master weavers' bodies are an integral part of their journey into the spiritual realm of their art, and this is something that is very important for this particular story.

So, these are some examples from my work of the bodily experience, and the theme of embodiment in creative writing, and I hope that they've been useful. Thank you.

>> It was very interesting to hear Mangle talk about how characters can be the embodiment of ideas, because it's certainly something you see happen in a lot of novels.

You have that clearly the writer had an idea that they wanted to explore, and they used the character to do that, but it's not something that we always see talked about in a workshop setting.

>> Particularly in this country, although we have the experience of so many novels from around the world, I'm thinking of pretty much every book by Franco-Czech writer Milan Kundera.

Where the characters seemed to be the embodiment of an idea and he will stop the action, sometimes, to produce a short essay on some subject that relates to the idea he is exploring through the character. And yet, we read with baited breath because he has also created a sense of suspense, and we want to know what happens next.

>> I think that's really the key, the idea that you can have these sort of bigger goals for the novel, as far as what you want to explore, whether that's a political issue you want to explore. But it's tied to the idea of keeping your readers engaged in the narrative.

I think of Lee's book, *The Vagrance*, those characters, they're in a place that's very much like China, even though it's never explicitly stated that it's China

And each character clearly is an embodiment of a certain idea that she wants to get across about that time and place and that political climate, but because they're also fully realized, we're there with them, we don't think that they're sort of cyphers, or little avatars, we think of them as living human beings.

Their struggles feel real and the message becomes that much more personal for us.

>> And it comes back to storytelling. She's a great storyteller. And as Andrew reminds us, the story is not the scarf, we've all been around people who cannot tell good stories. But we remember the ones who can tell good stories, right?

>> It's about finding the right angle at which to kind of look at the story. And also the right point of view to bring everyone in.

>> Onward.

