

# How Writers Write Fiction 2016: Storied Women

CLASS FOUR • Video Transcript

>>[Text on screen] How Writers Write Fiction 2016: Storied Women

>>[Text on screen] Class 4: Character and Structure in Immersion

>>[Text on screen] We are very proud to bring you the perspectives of authors from around the world, and trust that you will find their perspectives valuable. Because some of our contributing authors are nonnative speakers of English, we suggest that you turn on video captions. You can turn on captions by clicking the “cc” button at the bottom right of the video.

>>[Text on screen] Authors on Immersion:

- 1) Lesley Jamison
- 2) Alisa Ganieva
- 3) Shenaz Patel
- 4) Naomi Jackson

>>We've created characters - a cast of characters, a community. We've found voices for these characters. We've settled - we hope - on some point of view, and perhaps we have made headway on discovering a structure for the piece of writing we are at work on now. And here comes the fun part: Where are we going to place the story? How do we find out how to make that place come to life? So if you're inventing let's say an Iowa City - a new Iowa City - how do you select the details that will resonate with the reader? What's the principle that might be behind those decisions?

>>I think it's probably trying to mention a couple of things that only someone who only had a passing acquaintance with Iowa City would recognize, and then to bring in some very unexpected and surprising details of the Iowa City you're imagining on the page, in which there are probably going to be some secret places that wouldn't appear on an actual map.

>>And because we have the Internet, we can probably verify whether those details are true or not, right?

>>Yes, and I think nowadays it's so important to check those facts because any reader could check the facts, too.

>>I was thinking that the le Carré memoir - which is so delicious - but there is one place where he has somebody traveling to America, and he's taken to a baseball match, and I thought, "Oh my gosh, really? His character didn't catch that?" Because in this country we would say a baseball "game" - you might go to a soccer "match." So part of it means getting the language of each of these places right, as well.

>>Yes and again, I think just a very small detail can throw the reader out of your fictional world, your fictional dream. So something like an English person saying "neat" for instance - in the American way - would immediately stop me reading.

>>Yeah. I'm never going to hear you say "neat."



>>Never.

>>So setting takes on a life of its own, it can govern the actions of the characters, it can provide themes and metaphors, it takes us on a journey - it does so much.

>>And sometimes it almost becomes a character in itself, or even an opponent of a character. And we see that in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," when a woman is taken by her husband to the country on doctor's orders, she's meant to rest. And the husband follows those orders by confining her to a room in which the walls are covered in yellow wallpaper. And as the woman spends day by day, mostly alone, with no companionship and no resources, the wallpaper becomes not just a companion, but an adversary. She's convinced that someone is climbing around behind the wallpaper, stalking her, the wallpaper becomes more and more sinister, and more and more frightening, and more and more confused with her own identity.

>>It becomes part of the cast of characters.

>>It does, very much. And it still - although it was written many decades ago - it's still a very harrowing story to read, in which we see the subjective triumph over the objective. Point of view is everything in that story.

>>As is the color, which is the same color as my shirt.

>>Which you judiciously chose to wear.

>>Because that is in the nature of fiction.

>>And we see that, I mean, Gilman is a particularly extreme example of the way in which setting can be such a dominant part of a character's life. But over and over, in stories and novels, we do see that how a character sees the world, how they move through the world, is deeply connected with their psyche, and that's I think why setting is such an important part of a story or novel because it's a chance to deepen the relationship with the character.

>>So go for it and write.

>>[Text on screen] Lesley Jamison.

>>Lesley Jamison is the author of two books: the novel *The Gin Closet*; and the collection of essays *The Empathy Exams*.

>>Hi, I'm Leslie Jamison, and I'm here at the University of Iowa. And what I would love to talk about a little bit today is building the world of your story. I mean this in a few different ways, but on a very basic level, what I'm interested in is how we build the physical world that the narrative inhabits. Sometimes people want different words that they use for this; sometimes people talk about setting. I prefer the word "world" to the word "setting" because to me world suggests something active, and something interactive, and something that is actually playing a role in the story. When we think of setting, or sometimes when I think of setting, I think of something that's much more static, something that's in the background. But, what I'd like to suggest about a world is that it's not just

the physical objects that populate your story but a set of dynamic variables that can actually change the way that you're seeing your characters and change the way that their plot lines are unfolding. So, if you build your world right, it can be something that surprises you, turns against you in interesting ways. And that's what I'd like to explore a little bit today.

[Text on screen] Creating a World Glossary.

One thing that I often do when I'm building the worlds of my stories, either in fiction or nonfiction, is I write up something that I call a "world glossary." I was inspired in this endeavor by the author Ben Marcus, who has a book called *The Age of Wire and String*, and certain sections of that book are labeled as glossaries. The world of that book is a very strange book. It's a world where things happen that don't happen in our world. The people are powered by hunger and wind; people eat things we don't eat in our world. But, what I love about these glossary sections is that you'll have basically a kind of map made with words. He'll define places, he'll define objects, and through those definitions, you don't just get a sense of what you might touch or see or smell, you get a sense of the rules of his world, how people play together, how people fight each other. So sometimes when I'm sitting down to build a world, I will create something like a world glossary. I've written things that take place in strange worlds, and that can be one interesting use for that glossary. But you can use a glossary even if the world of your story is something as ordinary as a coffee shop or a classroom. The idea behind the glossary is just: pick out a lot of different elements of that world and as you focus in on each element, just let your mind play. Let your mind play with all the possibilities for, if you're describing a chair, let your mind play with all the different things that chair could mean to various characters. Whose feelings were hurt in that chair? Who was betrayed in that chair? Who broke into his estranged father's property to chop down the tree whose wood was used to build that chair? Let these different parts extend in different directions; follow the various vectors of possibility. That's kind of the idea of the glossaries, that you'd have a series of discrete units, that each unit is spilling over and exploding in ways you might not have expected. I think one of the things that I really appreciate about the glossary exercise and about brainstorming exercises, in general, is that when I'm in the process of drafting, it can get exhausting to just sit down every day in front of your computer and push the narrative forward, write another scene, push yourself, push your characters into dialogue, push your action to the next stage of unfolding. So sometimes if I'm feeling exhausted by that part of the process, the pushing the story forward part of the process, I can see things like building a glossary as a way to take a break from that forward momentum. It often takes the pressure off of me for the space of a day or a morning or an hour because I won't be thinking in terms of theme or plot. I'll be thinking, for that period of time, in terms of exploration, and that can give me a good feeling of relief, and it can give me a good feeling of liberation and just break open the possibilities of the story a little bit more. So that's something to think about as a way to kind of take a sabbatical from the forward trajectory of what you're doing when you're writing.

[Text on screen] Creating a Physical World and an Emotional World.

And another thing that I often think about when I'm trying to consider how the world of a story can be more than just a backdrop, is trying to think about the relationship between these two worlds that are always taking place simultaneously on the page, and that's the physical world of a story and the emotional world of that story. And to me one of the most exciting parts of writing is thinking about how those two worlds are intersecting. So, often this comes back to a question of perspective for me. Something I think about in terms of, I used to have a writer friend with whom I would talk about this idea of heartbreak sunglasses, by which we meant, the way that whatever the emotional

reality is for a character in your story, that's going to completely set the terms of how they're engaging with the physical landscape of that story. So, if you're in the midst of heartbreak, you're essentially wearing a pair of sunglasses that is shading and inflecting everything around you with the kind of force of that emotional experience. So there are a ton of different ways to kind of play around that. But one thing that I like to do, actually I do it as a writer, and I do it as a teacher, is taking a single physical object and thinking about what elements of that object would come to the foreground, would become visible, prominent, remarkable in the context of different emotional experiences. So, how would the same table look to somebody who is totally triumphant after just running the fastest cross country race of his life? How would that table look to somebody whose mother has just died? How would that table look to a five-year-old girl, who'd just gotten a new puppy? You can imagine all the different ways that table would play out. Everything from, something as simple as, a table to somebody who just finished a huge cross country race might look like a really amazing place to take a nap. Or a table, to a little girl who'd just gotten a puppy, might look like a really good place to spread out a bunch of dog food. A table, for somebody who just lost their mother, might remind them of every single childhood dinner they'd ever shared with her. So thinking about how, when you're describing the world of a story, you're doing multiple kinds of creative labor at once. You're not just setting into place pieces of landscape in which your characters are moving around. You're also getting the chance to do some major work to sort of show the gears that are turning inside of those characters. Show what's important to them. Show what's haunting them so fully that nothing in their gaze, nothing in their perspective, is escaping the sway of whatever that emotional situation is.

[Text on screen] Emotional World Building Through Point of View: *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy.

And one of the passages, to me, in all of literature, that got me thinking about the power of emotion to determine how we engage with the physical landscape of a narrative is a passage from *Anna Karenina*. And I'll just set it up really briefly, although it's a pretty simple emotional situation to understand. There's a character named Levin, who has been in love with a woman named Kitty for a very long time, and he proposed to her at one point and was refused. And at this point in the course of the novel he has proposed to her a second time, in a very wonderful way, and she has accepted. But they're in this strange in-between space, where she's accepted his proposal, so he knows that this thing he's long wanted to happen is actually going to happen, but they haven't told her family yet. So there's basically this space of an evening and a dawn where he knows that this good thing is going to come true, but it kind of hasn't become official yet. So he's in that space where his joy is still a private thing, it's still something he has sole custody over. And he's basically wandering the streets to kill time before he goes back to her home to formally request her hand in marriage.

"All that night and morning Levin lived perfectly unconsciously, and felt perfectly lifted out of the conditions of material life. He had eaten nothing for a whole day, he had not slept for two nights, had spent several hours undressed in the frozen air, and felt not simply fresher and stronger than ever, but felt utterly independent of his body; he moved without muscular effort, and felt as if he could do anything. He was convinced he could fly upwards or lift the corner of the house, if need be. He spent the remainder of the time in the street, incessantly looking at his watch and gazing about him. And what he saw then, he never saw again after. The children especially going to school, the bluish doves flying down from the roofs to the pavement, and the little loaves covered with flour, thrust out by an unseen hand, touched him. Those loaves, those doves, and those two boys were not earthly creatures. It all happened at the same time: a boy ran towards a dove and glanced smiling at Levin; the dove, with a whirl of her wings, darted away, flashing in the sun, amid grains of

snow that quivered in the air, while from a little window there came a smell of fresh-baked bread, and the loaves were put out."

So, a few things that struck me the first time I ever read that passage, and actually still strike me every time I read it, are this idea that gets articulated part way through: "And what he saw then, he never saw again after." That is a powerful idea to me for a couple of reasons. And one is that these things that he saw then, if you think about what they really are in that passage, they're very ordinary things. They're children on the street; they're loaves of bread being put out; they're doves flying, grains of snow quivering in the air. I mean, these are things that he's seen before and he no doubt will see again, but the point is he'll never see them again like he's seeing them in this moment. He'll never see them again suffused with this particular intensity, this quality of joy. And that's what I think this passage is such a beautiful illustration of, the way that what we're getting after, whenever we paint the physical environment of a narrative, is that kind of singularity. Show us a world we've never seen before and we've never seen again. And you don't have to create that world, create that kind of singularity, by constructing a world that is completely outlandish and defies every law of physics we've ever learned or believed in. You can create that kind of singularity simply by overlaying an emotional reality over that physical reality in a way that's never been done before in quite that sense. So, put that intersection of character experience and physicality. Get those vectors crossed in a way that's unique, and in a way that yields something like the intensity of this passage, the way that we're seeing an ordinary street-scape animated by a particular set of emotions. So to me, one of the things that's so rewarding about that, about figuring out how the emotional and physical worlds of a story connect, is that it creates this symbiotic relationship where your understanding of the physical world and your understanding of the character's emotional situation, it's like a feedback loop where each is informing the other. So let's say you come into a particular scene in a story with a really clear sense of what the room looks like. You know what the couch is like. You know that there's a cup of old coffee that's partway gone cold in the corner. You know the mom smells weird because her kids are too afraid to tell her that she smells weird because she'll feel bad about it. You know all these things, but maybe once you start writing the scene, the physical world comes alive in ways that you hadn't quite expected. So, maybe say if you're writing a scene between a son and his mother that's happening in that room, that room you'd imagined so specifically, in the course of their unfolding interactions, let's say they have some kind of fight. Things are rising up out of that physical scene that maybe you hadn't imagined or hadn't anticipated. Maybe the son, in the course of that fight, notices a set of cigarette burns on the couch and starts wondering who else has been hanging out there. Maybe that occasions a new revelation in his conversation with this mother. There are ways that physical details can kind of rise up, unbidden, out of the course of a scene unfolding in a way that lets the physical world you've made becomes something more like a character, something more like a character in its ability to surprise you.

And so that's this really electric possibility I think, that comes out of the fact that you're constantly juggling both the emotional and the physical textures of a given scene or of a given story. And sometimes I like to, I mean you can certainly explore that on the level of an entire narrative, but sometimes I find it pretty exciting and generative to think about that on a much smaller scale. So, like the example I gave earlier of the table, limiting yourself to one particular object and then describing that object from five or six very, very different emotional situations, how would it be seen from inside those situations? Or you can sort of expand from the scale of an object to something more like an entire physical environment: a cabin in the woods, a canoe on a lake, a rodeo in the middle of the summer. And think about again how that entire, how the physicality of that entire environment would be shaped by a character kind of being trapped inside some kind of strong

emotional situation, how you can seek that feeling when you build a physical world of this world, with this character is being seen and experienced in a way that's never happened before and will never happen again, after.

>>[Text on screen] Alisa Ganieva.

>>Alisa Ganieva is a Russian fiction writer and essayist from Dagestan, now based in Moscow. A graduate of the Maxim Gorky Institute for Literature and Creative Writing, she published *Salaam, Dalgat!*, her controversial first book, under a male pseudonym, winning a 2009 National Debut Prize. Her next novel was published in the United States as *The Mountain and The Wall*, and her most recent novel, *The Bride and The Bridegroom*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Russian Booker. In 2015, *The Guardian* listed her among the 30 most talented young people living in Moscow. Her stories, articles, and reviews are widely published, translated, and anthologized.

>>My name is Alisa Ganieva. So I'm the author of the book which is translated as *The Mountain and The Wall*. The original title of the book is *The Festive Mountain*. So I'm writing about this separation taking place, and about different ethnic minorities trying to win power. There are more than a hundred of them in the small republic of Dagestan, and there are several republics in the North Caucuses. So it's quite a mess, there are lots of parties, each dragging people to its own side. So besides this form of dystopia, I was trying to mix comedy and tragedy as it is in our everyday life. Because if you are trying to write about something serious and tragic very solemnly, it becomes a soap-box thing. You have to mix - you have to counter-balance - the solemnity and the tragic with some absurdity of life. So I'm showing some... my novel is separated into lots of scenes, and it has lots of characters. In fact, there is no main character in my novel; there are lots - there are dozens - of characters. So the main character is the place, the region itself.

[Text on screen] Orchestra of Voices.

Not to turn my fiction into something very essayistic, banal, I used a multi-voice device, so I turned my novel into an orchestra of voices. There were lots of mass meetings, lots of crowds, quarreling, arguing with each other; there are clippings of newspapers involved in my narrative; there are little manuscripts written by my characters involved - integrated - in my main text. So my text is made up of many minor subtexts, which have different styles, which are worked up in different styles: some of them are parodies, others are stylizations, so it's a big linguistic game. But my main effort was to show that there is no big truth, there is no black and white, there is no paradise and hell. Everybody can have their justification; even a big hero has his own stains and blemishes.

[Text on screen] Orchestra of Languages.

So in order to show this multiple, colorful life, where everything is so complex, so mixed together, so merged into each other, I'm working with different segments of language, and I'm mixing this language together. There are lots of dialogues, lots of inclusion of others' words, of another person's words, of alien words. So that is another device which you can use to show that the absolute truth is something ineffable, something hard to gain.

[Text on screen] Setting Speaking for Immersion Through Silence and Quiet.

So in order to make the region speak for itself, you have to make the town speak, the streets speak, the square - the public square - attain its own voice. That is why it's very important to listen to people around you, just maybe to write down some things you've heard while walking around. And some writers really have this inherent ability to remember the speech in the way it really exists. Especially, it's very important to remember and to fix multiple voices when the crowd is speaking. And my crowd is a multi-national, multi-lingual crowd, so there are interspersions of local voice, of some jargon - young people are using their own jargon and slang - and when I'm showing some nationalistic movements of local ethnic minorities, I'm using some words from their languages, borrowed from their vernacular or vocabulary. So it's also work with language and your ability to hear and to listen to somebody else. And when I'm talking about the mountain regions of the Caucasus - and the Caucasus is a mountainous region, in fact - I'm describing, I'm using the description which is the speech of silent, abandoned houses and villages where nobody lives. But there are only ghosts of somebody, images appearing in my character's imagination, and nobody knows if they are true or not. So it's a contrast of very crowded planes of contemporary civilization - with cellphones, TV sets, mobile phones, Internet, propaganda spreading around, mosques and boutiques and shops, and consumerism all mixed together - and there is the silent space of mountains, where there are only rocks and nature. So I think in order to make the region speak, you have to intersperse poses with yelling, something calm with something very rigorous. So after crowded scenes where the crowd is involved, where there are lots of cryings, an orchestra of voices, I'm showing something very confined and very calm, I use descriptions. You have to make poses to emphasize the active parts. But these poses might be very small and short. So I use my descriptions in very concentrated, very small amounts. So if there is a big scene with, for example, a mass meeting on a public square, then I have a dialect of two or three characters, and then I have a very short description consisting of several passages. So it's always diminishing, it's a certain rhythm of my fiction, which can be mathematically and arithmetically counted, like 3/2/1, so three makes colloquium, two makes a calm conversation, and one is just silence.

[Text on screen] Immersion in the Political Novel in the 21st Century.

So writing a political novel in our time, the beginning of the 21st Century, is not an easy thing because we know too much - in fact, we know everything, everything is available. I mean sources of information, lifestyles, and the boundaries between the countries, they have dissolved, and there is a big globalized road, and sharing universal and general and common problems, this problem of Islamic fundamentalism became universal, unfortunately many people from the Western society - especially young ones - are leaving their houses and families to fight for Jihad, for example. So my local introduction of very local topics, a very small region of the Caucasus and the south of Russia, turns out to be something universal and comprehended by people beyond boundaries. But on the other hand, the walls are still erected and created. So we have this globalization and Internet, but on the other side we have many illusions dissolved, illusions of a big capitalism paradise in Russia, for example, illusions of the European Union after Brexit, illusions of economic victory of liberalism, illusions of the end of history after the Cold War as Fukuyama had predicted at some point. So many illusions are dissolved and ruined, so it's very hard to talk about these things. And the only thing left, I think, is not being too serious, even talking about serious things. And in order not to be too serious - as I've already mentioned - you have to be ironical, self-ironical, you have to use comical characters and situations, and you have to mingle big, serious problems - political problems - with very the very personal. And for me, personally, my favorite literary device is gossip and rumor. Big political issues are usually discussed by people around a table, drinking tea, having their dinner or just going on their errands, buying something at the market. And at the same time, they're

gossiping about something very serious. So I'm counter-balancing the topics they're talking about by the circumstances around them, by the setting, and by this very unreliable method of rumor or gossip, because you never know what is true or what is wrong, and that is one of the fixtures of the contemporary world when, on the one hand, there is lots of information, but on the other, you never know if it is true or not. And each piece of information can be regarded as wrong and false and spurious on another day. So it's a big vulnerability, we can't rely on anything in these circumstances. But we can use this vulnerability as a literary device, as something strong, as something positive, so using gossip is one of the methods. So I wish you all the best in your creative writing, and I wish you to extend your boundaries and to learn new devices and to learn more about yourself and the world around. Goodbye.

>>[Text on screen] Shenaz Patel.

>>Shenaz Patel is a Mauritian fiction writer and playwright. She has written many novels, plays, and short stories in both French and Mauritian Creole. Best known is her 2005 novel *The Silence of The Chagos*, which tells the story of the islanders exiled from what is now known as Diego Garcia, an American military base in the Indian Ocean. As a working journalist, she writes about social and cultural issues, much of her writing seeks to unearth the unsaid and untold.

>>Hello, my name is Shenaz Patel, I'm a writer - well, I much prefer, I think, to describe myself as an explorer, exploring the different ways and means you can write novels or short stories or plays or children's books, to try and convey what seems important or interesting for me in the world. I come from the island of Mauritius, which is an island state in the middle of the Indian Ocean, off the eastern coast of Africa.

[Text on screen] The Writer as God.

One day a friend told me - and I was very disappointed by it - he told me "*tu n'es pas dieu*," or, in other words, "you are not God." And I was very disappointed because I think we all want to be God in some way or another. But that was when I realized that I could still be God in a way when writing, because when you write you can... if you don't like someone you can kill him, and if you miss him the next day, you can call him back and bring him back. So in a way, when you write you're God, and that's what's great about literature and creating characters is that you can really have an impact on what you would like to see and what you would like to get from the world in a way because I think that basically I write because I'm not content with the world as it is, and writing and creating characters is a way of trying to make things different, in a sense.

[Text on screen] Creating Characters.

I learned the other day from a Venezuelan writer a new word that I didn't know, it's the Spanish word "*verosímil*." And I found that very adapted to what I wanted to convey because if something is *verosímil*, it means that it is true in the word of the book, even if it's not true outside. And I was thinking about the characters of writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie, who have these kind of characters who are totally... you know that they couldn't exist in real life, and you couldn't meet them in real life, but in the space of the book they are real, and they are really alive, and you feel like they're walking with you afterwards, even a long time after you've put down the book they're still with you, and they kind of walk with you and are a companion to you and have echoes in you. So I think that's what's important about creating characters also, is that you don't

have to care about whether they would be real in real life or believable in real life as long as through your writing you can make them become real and have a real existence, a real life, in the space of the book. And creating characters is a very challenging thing because there are so many things that come, and it's a very strange, a very mysterious process for me - I must say that I don't always know how characters come to me. I just have a few examples perhaps to share. I know that the other day I was having a dream at night and I was following someone in a kind of monastery that was very dark, and suddenly that person turned around and looked at me and her face was so striking that I knew that if I had met that person in real life, I would have remembered her face. So I don't know where that face came from, but I think at some point it will be there in my writing. Things are often impacted by what we believe and what we see and what we hear. For example, in the second novel that I wrote, which is called *Sensitive*, there is a young girl, who's about ten, and she writes letters to a god that she's created for herself. And that little girl came to me, she was kind of walking in my head for days, and weeks, and months, and I didn't know where she came from but she was just there walking in my head, until at one moment I felt like I had to sit down and take her story out. I've been asked if it was my life and of course it's not my life, it's not an autobiography. It's not one person in particular, it's a lot of little girls I've met at different stages, at different points; it's a little girl that doesn't exist also, there are things that you just imagine and continue, you don't know really why but then all this comes together and creates one character.

[Text on screen] Immersion in a Child's Point of View: *Sensitive* by Shenaz Patel.

For that particular story, I chose to have a character of a child - a young child - because I felt that it would enable me in a way - that her voice would enable me - to say things deeper. I was thinking about an Irish author that I like very much, who is Edna O'Brien, and she had this incredible thing she said about a writer... she said, "A writer should never forget the child in himself and the voice of a child because it's not a way of being oversensitive or anything, it's just a way of seeing things in a cruder way." And I think that's, for that particular book because I wanted to talk about certain social imbalances and social injustices, and I think that seen through the eyes of a child, it's even more powerful than seeing through the eyes of an adult. But then it's a very difficult challenge because getting the voice of a child is always very precarious, it's like you're walking on a thread all the time, and any moment you could fall on either side because you get something wrong, and you have to be extremely cautious with that. It's a real challenge, but I think that in the end it's kind of very powerful. Also it's sort of the fact that I didn't want it to be a desperate book, I wanted to take into account some very dark things and situations, but I also wanted it to have kind of a wonder for the world and for people, and I think that the character of the child enables us to get that voice along, too. Writing to a god or someone else is a very strong tool for me because I think that even if you don't use dialogue, it's a way of having the inner voice express itself and be heard. It's dialogue in a way, even if the other doesn't answer. It's only not spoken dialogue but written dialogue. So it enables you to put in more things in the sense of perhaps rhythm and things that wouldn't be... you wouldn't hear someone talking like that, it wouldn't seem believable at all. But when writing I think you can introduce a lot of things in terms of reflections, in terms of poetry, also, that really enriches the story you want to tell and the way you're telling it, and that makes the voice in a very powerful and rich way because it's layered and you can introduce a lot of things.

[Text on screen] Impact of a Child's Point of View.

It doesn't begin with the girl, but she's writing anyways, she tells from the start that she's writing to another, she calls Bon Dieu - in Creole it's *Bondye* - so she has a Bon Dieu who she can write to and

talk to, to tell about her life because it's a young child - she's around ten - and she's living a very - for very social reasons and economic reasons - she's living a very difficult life in Mauritius nowadays, but it could be anywhere, in any country where some social conditions weigh down on people very heavily. And at the same time it's a little girl who has a very strong sense of wonder. And so she's always kind of oscillating between the two of them, and to the end you ask yourself which one is going to win. And that's interesting also about that character because when I reached, near the end, at one moment, I stopped and I said to myself, "now what are you going to do? Are you going to save her? Or are you going to let her fall?" And it took me weeks and months to decide what I was going to do because I said, "well in real life, she would have been totally doomed, in a way. But as I'm the writer - as I'm God here - I can save her. So what am I going to do?" And I just fought with that for months, because I had grown attached to that character and something in me really wanted to save her. But in the end, I got the feeling that, in a way, it would be too easy. Okay, things end well and you close the book and you put it on the side and you go along with your life, it's just fine, nothing happened. But it doesn't end well, and I think it gives a deeper echo somewhere to that story. And what I wanted to have also, through it, was that perhaps one day someone walking across the street would see a little girl like that and say, "Well, that looks like the little girl in *Sensitive*," and perhaps just stop and perhaps that could make a change, in a way. And it's very utopic in a way, to think that, but I think profoundly that literature can change the world, I think that literature can change people, it has changed me, it has changed the way I look at people, it has changed the way I feel people, the way I interact with people, and so if it happens to me, why can't it happen to a lot of other people and, yes, change the world.

[Text on screen] How to Use Research.

That's a big challenge because, when you're writing on a subject that has a historical perspective, you can't take all the liberties, you can't just say, "Okay, I'm going to write about it." It has to have something that is very anchored in that time, in that place, so you really have to do a lot of research to be sure that, for example, you won't describe a piece of clothing that wasn't used at that time because it cannot be anachronistic because it defeats then the whole of your story. It could ruin your story if you get into something that's not part of that particular period of history. It's a great responsibility also because you can't just go around using real facts and taking all the liberties with them, although I think in fiction you have all the liberties, but it has to be coherent, also. It's really very, very important to spend all the time needed and spend all the research needed, get all the materials, go through it. It may take months, it may take years, but it's very important to really get the feeling of what it was and through different means, different points of view, get the maximum information that you can put your hands on. But then - and it's the most important - there is one point when you must learn to put that aside. And that's the most difficult thing to do, I think, because it's so convenient and so comfortable, in a way, to just use what is already written and what is safe and compact, in a way. But then you're not writing a document; you're writing a novel. And that's the challenge: to put all that aside and to let the voice of the novel come through. That's a very interesting and difficult process because it can be interrupted by all that documentation you have on your shoulders, in your head, but I think that's where the importance of the voice of the characters come in.

>>[Text on screen] Naomi Jackson on Direct Research.

>>Naomi Jackson is an American author raised by West Indian parents. Author of *The Star Side of Bird Hill*, which was nominated for an NAACP Image Award and the Hurston/Wright Legacy

Award in Debut Fiction, and long-listed for the National Book Critics Circle's John Leonard Prize and the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize. It won Late Night Library's Debut-lit prize, was named an Honor Book for Fiction by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, and was selected for the American Booksellers Association's Indies Introduce and Indies Next List programs.

>>Hi. My name is Naomi Jackson, and I'm the author of a book called *The Star Side of Bird Hill*. It was recently released by Penguin Press in June 2015. It's such a pleasure to talk to you today.

[Text on screen] *The Star Side of Bird Hill* by Naomi Jackson.

So this novel is a coming of age story about two sisters, Phaedra who's 10, Dionne who's 16, and their grandmother Hyacinth, who turned 63 the summer that they arrived in Barbados. It's the summer of 1989 in Barbados, which is a very small island in the Caribbean. And in my story, the two sisters, Phaedra and Dionne, travel to Barbados for the summer when their mother can't care for them. So they think they're just going to spend the summer with their grandmother, hang out, maybe get into a little trouble, and then as the novel ends they're facing a future living with their grandmother full time in Barbados. So the novel really charts their disappointments, their grief, their friendships, their loves, their crushes, and a lot of the drama between them, their mother back home, and their grandmother in Barbados. So it's of love and family and friendship.

[Text on screen] Researching Setting and Culture “On Location.”

When I first started working on this novel, I thought that I knew everything that I need to know to write it. And the truth is that there was a lot of research that I needed to do in order to make this project really work and to make the characters, the setting, the voice in this book feel authentic. One of my major anxieties in writing this book actually was authenticity. So I grew up in Brooklyn, the child of West Indian parents. My mother's family is Bajan, and therefore this book is set in Barbados. And I had spent several summers in Barbados and in Antigua, where my dad's family's from, so I certainly had some childhood experience living in Barbados, and I knew what it was to be an American kid in Barbados. But I still had lots of work to do to get things in this book right. So the biggest challenge was that I hadn't really spent an entire summer in Barbados since I was a child. So I went to that island in the summer of 2012, with a grant from the University of Iowa's Stanley Graduate Awards program. And my task that summer was to do two things: one, to research the novel and to get the sounds and the smells and the feeling of the place right, and the second was to write a full first draft of the novel. I think the joy of being not from a place but writing about it, is that you really get to experience the place as an outsider and to develop what I call purposeful inquisitiveness. So, not like the curiosity that's just like, “I wonder why those folks do that.” But the curiosity that asks questions with an eye to using it in your novel. And you might use only 10% of what you find out. But these questions can really enrich your novel. And so I think developing a stance of inquisitiveness towards the world, particularly towards the world you are trying to build in your novel, is a really important strategy while you're writing and researching. So because again I wasn't from Barbados and I had actually spent less time with my mother's family who was Bajan, I had a lot to learn. I wanted to understand the very distinct Bajan dialect. I wanted to understand the vocabulary that Bajans use, the proverbs and sayings. It was as if I was stepping into an entirely new language. It was English but it was a very distinctly Bajan English, and I wanted to make sure that that English showed up authentically in the novel.

[Text on screen] Using All Sense to Research.

I also want to talk a little bit about using research through all the senses to develop the language in the world of your novel. So, I'm going to talk about sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste, because I certainly used all these senses when I was feeling my way through this novel. And I say, feeling my way through this novel because, there was kind of a logical sense where I was putting things together, plotting the book out, developing character arcs, thinking about narrative structure. So, that was certainly a part of it, but then there was a lot of intuitive work that I needed to do. And I would say that the research was way more intuitive and less about reading books about Barbados, and more about getting out into the country and hearing how people talked, how they acted, and looking at people with an outsider's eye. And a friendly outsider's eye, one that was compassionate and curious, not one that was judgmental.

[Text on screen] Sight and Sound of Setting.

Just traveling everywhere and taking lots of pictures was really important. So for example, there's a scene in the opening of the book, where Phaedra and her best friend that summer, Chris, are looking out onto the east coast, and they see these beautiful rocks at Bathsheba, which is a gorgeous part of the east coast in Barbados. And so I took pictures of Bathsheba and those came with me. Every time I would think about the opening scene, I would refer back to those pictures. So I think having pictures and using a sense of sight to develop setting is important. Certainly sound, I listened to people talk, and I was interested not just in the vocabulary, so the words like bubbies, but also the ways that people would put sentences together. So the rhythm of the sentences, the way that they used a different syntax than American English, I was trying to feel through that rather than dissect it. So I'm not someone who is a linguist and can do all that kind of syntactical work, but I was trying to get familiar with the way that people constructed their sentences naturally and use that for the voices of the Bajan characters.

[Text on screen] Research Through Learning With the Characters.

But Dionne's learning how to take responsibilities for things like cooking, so she learns how to make cou-cou, she learns how to make fishcakes. And that's very much a part of the book, so I also had to use some research and the senses of taste and touch to develop that. So I spent a lot of time in Barbados eating. I was very fat when I came back from Barbados. So my friends' moms, I would ask them how they made their fish cakes. One of them even gave me batter for her fish cakes, which I destroyed. And I was like, "Okay, well clearly you're going to cook for me from now on." But it was fun just to have that experiment, so that I could be Dionne for a second and see what it might be like being a girl from Brooklyn trying to do this thing that Bajan women do.

[Text on screen] How to Research Without Traveling.

So I talked a lot about what it was like to research my novel, *The Star Side of Bird Hill*, by going to Barbados. But the reality is I worked on this novel for four years and only two months of those years were spent in Barbados. So I had to use my imagination to develop the setting during the times when I wasn't actually living there. Another challenge of this was that during most of the time when I was working on this novel, I actually wasn't living in Brooklyn, where parts in the novel are set. I was born and raised in Brooklyn, but it would have been useful, for example, to be able to walk

down the street to the corner bakery, where Phaedra and Dionne might have gotten their fish cakes in Brooklyn, and just get a sense of it. But because I wasn't there, I had to use my imagination.

So the imagination is really the writer's best friend, but there are other tools that we can use to create an imagined setting when we can't visit the place that we're writing about. So I think that there are actually some rewards of being outside of the place. One of those rewards is that you can see it more clearly. That some of the stopped-up-ness that I felt in writing about Brooklyn when I lived in Brooklyn actually was totally freed up when I moved to Iowa City and also when I was living in Philadelphia. I actually felt that I could write about the place that I was from more clearly not being all up in it every day. So there are actually some advantages to not being in the place that you are writing about. But let's be real, we do want to have some time in those places in order to write about them. Now the second best, here's some strategies that I use to develop my expertise on the place. I think maps are a really great tool. And one of my concerns, when I was writing this novel, was making sure that just on a physical level, the way that I was writing about the girls traveling around the island of Barbados made sense. So I needed to have a map of Barbados that showed me where the south coast was, how they might travel from their rural community of Bird Hill into Bridge Town, which is the commercial heart of Barbados. And so I had to get those bus routes right, make sure that they were passing the right things on the right side of the bus when I was describing them, and maps really helped me do that. One of my other concerns was getting the music right. I'm an incredibly musical person, and there's always music in my books and in my life. And so it was important to me that we signal some things about what 1989 Barbados was like by the kind of music that the girls were listening to. Because the novel takes place during Crop Over, one of the things that gets people excited during Crop Over - which is the big festival, kind of like a carnival in Barbados - one of the things that people get excited about is music. So there are all these music contests, and you're hearing the same five or ten songs for many, many months. And so I wanted to create the impression of what it was like to just hear the same songs over and over and over again. And to get excited for Grand Kadooment Day which is the big piece of Crop Over as well as all of the other smaller events. But I had not been to Crop Over in 1989, and so I needed to figure out what were the songs that were popular in that time.

And YouTube was my friend. So I asked some friends who lived in Barbados, "Do you remember what were your favorite songs at that time?" And it was very funny actually, to remember that I had some songs that I remembered that were kind of similar to what they were. But then when I would go up and look them up online, they sounded really different from what I had remembered in my mind. So YouTube is your friend. I also spent some time on YouTube looking at videos of people dancing during Crop Over because I wanted to get that piece of it right. A big piece of the novel's ending takes place during the Grand Kadooment Day parade, which is hundreds of thousands of people dancing in the streets of Barbados. And I wanted to get a sense of the vibe - of the sound, the smells, the images, how people moved, all those things - and video was a really great way to get a sense of that. In terms of sound, I think that one of the challenges is if you don't live in the place, you can't go hear people talk. But in my case there's a huge Bajan community in New York City, so if I wanted to I could just go hang out with Bajans. My parents' next door neighbor is a Bajan woman who has made me fish cakes and cou-cou and all these other things. And I just like to go hang out with her sometimes and hear her talk, and then I'll steal some things from having listened to her. And if you want to be more diligent about it, you can also do oral histories with people who might have been alive during the time period that you're writing about and could give you some insight into how people talked and dressed during that time period. I also think novels of the time period that you're writing about are really great because people are writing in the sound of that time.

Magazines are awesome because magazines in that time are probably going to be a little bit more informal, and therefore, give you a sense of like the things that people say, the things people are concerned about, obsessions, all those kinds of things.