

How Writers Write Fiction 2016: Storied Women

CLASS THREE • Video Transcript

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

>>[Text on screen] Class 3: Character, Structure, Cast and Plot

>>[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 Cast and Plot:

- 1) Angela Flournoy
- 2) Rebecca Makkai
- 3) Margot Livesey

>>Now we start thinking about how that character relates to someone else. We create a cast of characters who either belong to or comprise their own community, or stand outside that community. What do you think?

>>I think it's so important for characters to have relationships. Even characters who are very solitary or who are outsiders are only outsiders by definition of being outside some community. So for instance, in ZZ Packer's deeply ironic and passionate story, "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere," the narrator and her friend Heidi separate themselves from the community at the University of Yale and define themselves as friends and lovers against the all-white, upper-middle-class community that they perceive swirling around them.

>>Yeah, and in the relationship - the management of that relationship - we see all the tensions that make up life.

>>Very much so. The narrator comes from the wrong side of the tracks in Baltimore and has got to Yale by dint of very hard work, and Heidi is white and Canadian and comes from a very different background. There's something wonderful about how they negotiate the relationship between them and how much we learn about each character as she's pressed up against the other.

>>And their voices are dramatically different.

>>They are so different. If you closed your eyes and someone read the story aloud to you, you'd know immediately who was talking.

>>Which is which. So when you're writing, starting a novel and you're assembling your cast of characters and trying to get each voice right, what sort of things are you thinking about as you're doing that?



>>Well sometimes I - and this sounds sort of strange - as a child going to school in Scotland, I had to act in a Shakespeare play almost every year, absurdly, you know, if you picture me at nine as Lady Macbeth, say. But in reading those great plays -

>>I'm thinking about that right now.

>>-and taking part in them, I did discover how brilliantly Shakespeare defines his characters as foils or opposites, and how one character throws another into relief. So when I'm writing a novel I'm always thinking: now what could this character show me about another character? You know, I'm always thinking about my characters in pairs, or sometimes triplets, helping to reveal each other.

>>So that they are illuminating different aspects of not only their characters, but the other characters, and the ways in which that relationship will unfold.

>>Yes, and I think that comes back to something E.M. Forster said, he said that: "In real life we never know anyone, but in fiction we're privileged to know characters and know their secrets." And I think when we're reading, we are hopefully finding out a character's deeper secrets, and the way we find those out is by their community and by the cast of characters around them.

>>And the relationship to that community, either in positive ways or in antagonism towards it.

>>Yes, and of course for many people, in short fiction the community is the family in some very broad definition of family.

>>[Text on screen] Angela Flournoy.

>>Angela Flournoy is the American author of *The Turner House*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. The novel was also a finalist for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction, and an NAACP Image Award. She is a National Book Foundation "5 Under 35" Honoree for 2015. Her fiction has appeared in *The Paris Review*, and she's written for *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and elsewhere. A graduate of the University of Southern California and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she has taught at the University of Iowa, The New School, and Columbia University.

>> Hi everyone, my name is Angela Flournoy and I'm here to talk to you about how to manage a large a cast of characters in a narrative. Basically how to have multiple points of view in one novel, or one narrative. If one character is like an engine for a novel, then if you have a multi-POV narrative, you have multiple engines. They all perform a different function kind of like the four stomachs of a cow. Each of them should be bringing something different to the narrative, and a goal for you is to figure out a way to have them all move the narrative forward each time you sort of jump from one to the other.

[Text on screen] Large Casts and Multiple Points of View.

I guess some writers might wonder what's the point of dealing with so many POVs, when many successful novels don't. For me, the benefit is that the writer can provide the reader with multiple sides of the same story. These different viewpoints can shed a light on aspects of character's

personalities that may be hidden or they may be able to give you different perspectives on some sort of aspect of community. For my novel in particular, *The Turner House*, the aspect of community was a family, and it was also a city. So, because I wanted to get a lot of different viewpoints, I needed to get into the head of a lot of different characters.

[Text on screen] Determining Hierarchy, Developing Interiority.

Having grown up in a family with a lot of people, it may have been easier for me than other writers to figure out a way to prioritize them. So, one thing you learn when you grow up in a big family is who's important? Who especially as your younger, who's concerns need to be met immediately? Who's sort of discipline is kind of more pressing that you sort of are concerned about? Those are all things that very young you sort of learn how to prioritize. The challenge for writers when you're dealing with multiple POVs is to figure out similarly how to prioritize your characters so that your readers understand who's the most important. Who am I following sort of the closest? And who is sort of bringing color to the narrative, but I won't die if I forget a detail of their life. I'll still be able to enjoy this narrative and feel like I understand what's happening in the story. So the question becomes, how do you figure that out? How do you figure out how to make a hierarchy?

For me the first thing I did was decide who was important. Because mine was a family story, the easiest thing to do was to make a family tree. If you're doing a story that's based on a group of friends or maybe even a story that is based on a group of people who don't know each other. You have to figure out who's the character that's the most important to you and then you transfer that to the reader. That might be the character that came to you first. That might be the character that you think you have the most sort of narrative potential. You see the most narrative potential there like they are going to drive the plot forward the most. Or they have, if you think on a thematic level, which I usually don't do until like very sort of late in the vision, but if you are someone who thinks on the thematic level early it might be the person who sort of embodies whatever capital T themes that you want to pull out. So that person is sort of at the top of the family tree even if they're not the father or the mother. They're sort of the top, and then everyone else's relationship can be mapped out in relationship to them because, as we'll see in a minute, that's sort of how you can organize what happens when, and who interacts with whom, in the novel.

[Text on screen] Finding Examples of Large Casts: *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith; *The Emperor's Children* by Claire Messud; *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones.

So after you make a map, if you're like me what you do is you read a whole bunch of books that do what you want to do right. So a lot of time that I spent working on this novel in the beginning, when I was thinking about structure, was just trying to figure out what other novels had I read that had a big cast of characters and moved the plot forward in a way that I wasn't sort of skipping past the boring guys. Like, oh this person's chapter, I hate this person, and so I'm just reading it really quickly. That's not what you want. So there were a few novels that stood out for me when I was thinking about this idea for today. One of them is Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*. Another one is Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*. And then another is one of my all-time favorites novels Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*. All of them have a sort of third person omniscient narrative, but they get close to several different POVs. Some of these novels, it's sort of a pattern and it's like every few chapters you have the same character again who is leading you through the chapter. But some of them you only see the character once, the character never comes back. But you're in his or her POV for maybe fifteen pages. And you don't feel like it's random or that that person doesn't belong.

[Text on screen] The Town Point of View: *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith.

So, today I'd like to focus on the example of Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* because I think that it has a large cast of characters, but not so large that it's something that it's something that is kind of hard to break down into its parts. It's very easy to see the way that she created a hierarchy between all of these people. Zadie Smith's novel employs that third person narration style that's similar to what John Gardner in the *Art of Fiction* calls the town point of view. The town point of view is one in which the story is told by some unnamed spokesperson for the community. Among the most famous examples is Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*. That storytelling style might have the immediate effect of grounding the story's controlling idea. Conflicting community values, versus personal values. So, in the town point of view, that collective voice might be the only voice you get in the story. But, in *On Beauty* what happens is a town point of view sort of opens the story, and comes in at various points throughout the story. But each character gets their own sort of moment to shine in various chapters. And there's not really a town in her novel, instead it's a family, it's the Belsey family. By focusing on different parts of the family she can look at what does it feel like to be in this family? What does it mean to be a part of that family? And what are sort of the pressures? In the very beginning she pinpoints the two parents, the Belsey parents as the main characters. And their children are the secondary characters. So that's a total of about five POVs already. You have the two parents and then you have their three kids. So one of the ways that she prioritizes them is through interiority. There's two big ways that I want to talk to you guys today about how to prioritize your characters, one is interiority, which means, basically, how deep you get into your characters' minds. So, if you're in their POV, what sort of information is coming directly through them, and how is that sort of influencing how close we feel to the character? And the second way is just the quality of the sort of conflicts that they get into. Like, what are their desires? What are their goals? Are they huge or are they small?

So, in *On Beauty* the two main characters are afforded interiority that encompasses thoughts about other characters as well as thoughts about themselves. And it dips into their past memories, and then you just get information that helps you understand what sort of person they are. Like, what color car they prefer, what is their taste in music and art and all sorts of things. So that's what the main characters are afforded.

[Text on screen] Making Use of Primary Characters.

For instance, in Howard's POV, Howard's POV is the first distinct POV we get in the novel, and it establishes one with the ability to think in depth, not only about the current action, but also about Howard sees other characters and Howard's thoughts about his past. The thoughts about the past don't always even relate to the immediate conflict, they just serve to sort of round out his character. So, here's an example of Howard talking with his son, Levi. Remember his son is one of the secondary characters. Levi has problems with his boss and Howard offers to go to Levi's job and talk to the boss. Levi's embarrassed and like "Dad no, I don't want you to go." So this is what we go in terms of interiority from Howard: "Howard assumes his son was embarrassed by him. Shame seemed to be the male inheritance of the Belsey line. How excruciating Howard had found his own father at the same age. He had wished for someone other than a butcher, or someone who had used his brain at work, rather than knives and scales. Someone more like the man Howard was today." So from this little instance of, "Oh son, can I go talk to your boss?" You get all of this information about Howard's history with father son relationships. Also kind of what he values as far as what sort

of work he values. He doesn't think a butcher is as great of a job as he's a professor. So you get a lot of information that doesn't have to do with the immediate interaction that you see him in.

We can contrast that to another scene with a secondary character. Another one of the kids, Zora, his daughter. It's a similar sort of situation where it's through her POV but we don't get any information that's outside of what is happening at that moment. You get very little information. Let me just read it for you. "Fifteen minutes later, Zora peeled her clothes all off again in the women's locker room of Wellington's college pool. This was part of the new Zora improvement program for the fall. Wake early. Swim. Class. Light lunch. Class. Library. Home. She crushed her hat into the locker and pulled her bathing cap down low over her ears." So the interiority sort of remains at the surface level. We don't get information about Zora's past. We don't get any information as to why she needs a self-improvement program. We just get enough to know that she's insecure, vaguely, and that she wants to fix it. We never really in the novel get more information. We don't get a flashback like you get with Howard. Immediately you have this image of him as a butcher's son, having kind of angst. You don't get that. You just know. And it's enough to put in your pocket for Zora. This is Zora's character and she has insecurity and she's trying to fix these things about herself. And then you move on.

[Text on screen] Making Use of Tertiary Characters.

For tertiary characters, which are a few, you don't really get any interiority about them. Not even things kind of to put in your pocket, like one defining thing that doesn't directly relate to the main characters. So, for instance, there's one of Howard's assistants at the college he teaches at. He has interactions with other family members throughout the book. And some of those are told through his POV. But in all of those POVs, all we are getting are his observations about the person he is talking to. If he is talking to Howard, we're not getting flashbacks about the assistant's life. We're only getting information about Howard. If he's talking to Zora, we're not getting flashbacks about anyone else but Zora. It's a way for us to sort of add layers to the character that are important, but you still get a view of them from the outside world, a view you wouldn't be able to get. Howard doesn't, there's no way he can know how his employee feels about him, that's just not possible. He can guess but he can't know. So if you put it in that other person's POV, now we know. But we don't know anything about that employee really, we just know his relationship to Howard.

[Text on screen] Determining Character Conflicts.

So after you've decided who is entitled to what level of interiority, the next big challenge is to assign the appropriate levels of conflict depending on how important each of those characters is to the narrative. The conflicts that surround the two most important characters in *On Beauty* are not easy to resolve. They're open ended and, basically, existential in nature. They're these sort of big problems. They're problems about who am I, how do I fit in with the world, how am I living my life? They're not ones that you would expect sort of a packed conclusion to and you would just trust that if the writer gave you a very easy epiphany, especially before the book was completely done, you would distrust that. The big problems, or the big conflicts, for your most important characters, they're going to be introduced in the first, I would say, maybe, quarter of the book, but the reader fully expects for the entire book to kind of reflect those issues and reflect those questions that those most important characters have. In *On Beauty*, some of Howard's big issues are, what is the role of religion in my life? How do I feel about art theory? How do I feel about art theory? How do I feel about romantic love? How do I feel about this marriage that I've been in for most of my adult life? How

do I feel about being a British man living in the States? He has these big issues that is not going to be just sort of one run in he has that makes him change his mind. By contrast, his kids have moments of interiority that helps us understand that they're important, but their conflicts are the sort that one or two well-crafted scenes can make come to a conclusion, or help you feel it, at least. Obviously we know it's just, you know, it's fiction so it's like the artifice of a conclusion more than how it happens in real life. But for a reader, you'll be satisfied. Okay, this person is on the right track. This person is doing the right thing. For instance, the daughter Zora who I used in example earlier, she's insecure and she's overly ambitious and she's hurtful to others. Those are the things that she does in the book. They're not very existential, especially considering her age. Everybody is a little insecure at that age. One can arguably see a scene where you can get over that. You might be able to pinpoint yourself and you're thinking about your sort of younger years, what was the thing that helped you sort of make you feel like you came into your own, what was that instance? And then *On Beauty*, there is a scene where at a party, where she has this crush who she's also been sort of hurtful to at the same time. And he kind of calls her out her behavior. And after that scene, we feel as if her issues have been resolved. And now we're sort of only waiting for the big guns, the two most important characters, their issues to be resolved.

For the tertiary characters, like Howard's assistant, we get enough information about him that we assume he does have personal, sort of existential issues, but the reader is under sort of no expectation that they'll be solved. The only things that need to be solved are any sort of conflicts or open ended issues he has with the main characters. It sounds kind of cruel but if he has personal issues, that's not for this book. That's a different book. You don't have to worry about that.

[Text on screen] Differentiating Your Characters.

The biggest thing to keep in mind when managing a large cast of characters is that every single time we see a character. Is a chance to make them feel differentiated. You want markers for those characters that helps your readers sort of store them in the back of their mind and carry them. So that if they don't see them for another 30 pages, all you have to do is sort of pull out that marker again and they'll remember who this person is and what they want, and what their relationship is to the bigger characters. That can be as easy as if you have a character, for instance, In *On Beauty*, Howard's assistant that I mentioned, he has a southern accent. So he's the only character in the book with an accent that's rendered in dialect in the text, sort of to that extreme. But it's not done, really, in a character way but it's done in enough of a way that we immediately know: "okay this is this guy, this what he thinks about Howard, this is where he is in the story." So language is a good way, sort of dialect is a good way to do that, but there's also ways you can do that, just as far as how they treat your main characters. How does your main character feel as soon as that person steps in the room? That may be the way that that person is always differentiated. I can imagine if it's sort of a YA story and you have the bully. Even if it's a bully who's not very present in the story, as soon as he walks in the room we remember him because of his relationship to the other people in the room and how he makes them sort of tense up. It could also be done through clothing, which is, I think, a little bit maybe, depending on how much time you have. In a short story, clothing might be, might be fine enough. In a longer narrative, you want to do something that's a little bit more tied to the person than just, sort of, what they have on. But once you figure out sort of what that marker could be, you want to solidify it and reinforce it often. Not so much that it's a gimmick, but so much that every time I see that person, everything I need to know about that person, it's like instant recall, I remember all of it. And that will help you not have to do that work of recreating them later in the story. Specificity is really key.

So basically, sort of to conclude, I would say that the most important thing is that before you start mapping out something with a large cast of characters, ask yourself why you want to have so many people in your narrative. It's not necessarily more work for me, there was no other way that I could write this story. It sort of came organically. But you want to make sure that they're all sort of reflecting some other point you're trying to get across. It might be the town point of view, you want everyone's, sort of, opinion about a similar element of their life. Whether it's where they live, or what part of a group they are in, or even the age or generation they're a part of. But you want to figure out why that is. Because that helps you figure out who's the most important, who's sort of second line in importance, and who's tertiary. And is only there to kind of add layers and texture to those other characters. Thank you.

>>[Text on screen] Rebecca Makkai on Plot and Structure.

>>Rebecca Makkai is an American author whose work includes the short-story collection *Music for Wartime*, and the novels *The Hundred-Year House*, winner of the Chicago Writers' Association Award; and *The Borrower*, a *Booklist* Top Ten Debut, which has been translated into eight languages. Her short fiction won a 2017 Pushcart Prize and was chosen for the *Best American Short Stories* for four consecutive years, 2008 to 2011. The recipient of a 2014 NEA fellowship, Makkai is on the MFA Faculty of Sierra Nevada College and has taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Tin House, and Northwestern University.

>>Hi, I'm Rebecca Makkai, I'm a fiction writer, I'm the author of the novels *The Borrower* and *The Hundred-Year House*, and the short-story collection *Music for Wartime*. And what I'm going to talk about today is not writing, but acting - the theater. But I'm going to talk about how it applies to writing.

I was one of those people who acted in a lot of shows in high school and college. I wasn't a theater major, but I loved it, and I learned so much about writing from being in those shows that when young writers ask me for writing advice, of course the first thing I tell them is to read, as much as you can, good literature, read broadly, etc. The second thing that I tell them is if you can, get involved in the theater. It doesn't have to be acting - that's not for everybody - backstage, hammering planks, as long as you're involved in the life of a show night after night, you get something incredible from it.

Of course there are other ways to go about it. Not every writer has acted. But here's what you would get from it, and I'm going to give you the Cliff Notes version so maybe if you never go near a theater you'll still be able to learn from what I'm going to tell you.

[Text on screen] Backstage Decisions and Story Structure.

So most of what I'm going to talk about today has to do with what I call "backstage decisions," the decisions the actor makes - and the director makes - in rehearsal that comes out on stage. But I'm not going to get to that yet - I'm going to talk about something else first, which is the structure of a story, the structure of a scene. You learn something by doing a show night after night after night, and seeing the shape of a story, seeing how every scene is essential. If you took that one scene out, the structure would fall apart. If you took one line out of a scene, the scene would fall apart - which is why it's scary and you can't forget your lines and why some people have nightmares about the

theater, of course. But one thing that becomes instantly clear when you're living in a story and that should become clear from reading, from writing, from seeing the same things on the page, is that every character has to come out of a scene changed. Everyone who is on stage is there for a reason. People aren't just there to decorate the scenery. And even if that change is really minor - even if it's really superficial, like when the scene started I didn't have my groceries and by the end of it I have my groceries - or if it's much more profound - at the beginning of the scene I trusted this woman and by the end of the scene I don't. Maybe it's both. And for every single character on the stage, something has to change, otherwise why is the scene there? Why couldn't it have been cut? I sometimes ask my students to think not like actors or playwrights, but like movie directors, where there's a sort of evil producer leaning over your shoulder thinking only about money, saying: "Why can't we cut this scene? Why can't this scene go? We're short on budget." And that your job, as the director, would be to justify it, to say: "Well, if we took this scene out, nothing would make sense because then... this is the scene where they move to Mexico." Whereas if your reason for keeping the scene is, well, because it's funny, or because I like it, or because I worked really hard on writing it, or because it demonstrates what someone might be like - those are things that a scene accomplishes, but they're not what a scene is doing for the whole structure. So sometimes we say "show" rather than "tell." When it comes to a scene, it's really "do" rather than "show." What does the scene do?

[Text on screen] Using Character Motivations to Make Backstage Decisions.

So what I'm going to talk about now are these backstage decisions, some of which have to do with that structure of the scene, with the way a scene is built. So if you're going to be in a show, if you're going to be a character, there's a discussion between you and the director - and you're basing a lot on the script of course, as well - about exactly what your character is, how your character moves. There's that old "what's my motivation" line, people throw that around as a joke, like something a diva actor would say, "what's my motivation?" But it's a really important question. You can't just be wandering around on the stage with no direction. Every character has to have something they want, and if that's not there in the script, you have to make that decision yourself, backstage. And in many cases - just as in a show, just as in the theater - we aren't going to explicitly write out what a character wants on the page. Say I'm writing a scene of fiction. I'm not going to say: "Mary was sitting there at the dinner table, and what she wanted more than anything in the world was to tell Joe that she loved her." But it needs to come through in other ways - it needs to come through in what she says to Joe, and the way she feels when Joe's girlfriend comes into the room. It needs to come through in her physical actions, in how much she's eating, in what she's doing. So in the same way an actor needs to make those decisions backstage or in the rehearsal, and then - even if they're not in the script - let's say it's Mary and Joe again, Mary has to act on stage like she's in love with Joe, and the audience is going to get it even though it's not there in the dialogue.

[Text on screen] Using Research to Inform Backstage Decisions.

In fiction, the writer sometimes needs to make these decisions off the page. Maybe before we write, maybe it's after we've written a scene and we're looking at it and know there's more work to do when we're revising it, and we need to step back and make some of those off-the-page decisions. We're not going to come out and explain it fully, directly, on the page, but it's going to show through. There's a famous Hemingway quote that I won't give you, partly because I'll butcher it and also because it's really convoluted to begin with. Hemingway wrote so simply and then in his interviews he had these really cumbersome sentences. This is from his *Paris Review* interview, which is worth reading for anyone who likes Hemingway, or doesn't, for that matter. Basically what he said

was that what an author doesn't know, and therefore doesn't put on the page, will show like a hole in the story; what an author does know, but doesn't put on the page, will shine through. So to give you an example, I always think of this with research. If I'm writing about a dentist, and I don't know anything about being a dentist, it's going to sound in my story like I don't know anything about being a dentist - I'm going to say things like, "He grabbed the tweezer thingies and started to do the scrubby thing." And anyone reading it could tell that I don't know anything about being a dentist. If I've done a ton of research on dentistry, it probably wouldn't be useful to put all that into my story, but just knowing that stuff means I'm going to write that scene with authority, and the one word that I use that comes out of my extensive research on dentistry - like the name of the thingy, which I actually don't know - that will shine through. It'll be obvious that I do know about dentistry, even though I didn't prove it to you by writing it all.

[Text on screen] Character Desire in Reverse: Using Fear to Inform Backstage Decisions.

We need to know with characters - as much as we need to know what they want, we need to know what they feel. This is something that I didn't realize until much later in my own writing. Sometime we phrase that as a desire: "Well what he wants is to get away from the bear." Obviously that's a fear. But sometimes it really is something that can only be expressed as a fear - what he fears is disappointing his father, what she fears in this scene is making a fool of herself, what she fears overall in the novel is being a failure. And those things inform a character's actions, they inform a character's dialogue, as much as their desires. And of course they're closely intertwined, but sometimes a fear is a helpful way to think of that.

[Text on screen] Using Character Physicality to Inform Backstage Decisions.

Backstage also - off the page - you need to make decisions about your character's physicality: the ways they move, the things they tend to do, their habits. And in that way, you can have your characters move with intention in revealing ways on the page. I'm really... I get tired of reading stories where there's dialogue... between every line of dialogue is some kind of empty, meaningless, physical gesture. So there - people are always in a restaurant, which is kind of boring, don't put your characters in restaurants all the time - but, you know, "Blah, blah, blah," she said, and forked another bite of quiche. "Blah, blah, blah," he answered, and sipped his wine. "Blah, blah, blah," she said, and wiped her lips. And that doesn't tell us anything about character, it doesn't advance the plot, and people are just going to skip it. Instead, you know, does one person have the habit of fidgeting and she's taken the straw wrapper and she's rolling it up in to a tight little ball and unrolling it, and that's idiosyncratic to that character and it reveals something about her and about the scene: she's tense, she's nervous, maybe she's distracted. And making that decision backstage - what does this character move like? What does this character do with his hands? - and letting that come through - don't stop and explain it, just have them do those things - your characters will be so much richer, so much more interesting.

[Text on screen] A Return to Point of View for Informing Cast Management.

Something that's not a character decision and that doesn't really relate to theater, but that I still think of as a backstage decision - an off-the-page decision - is point of view. And there are two sides to this, and this is the last big thing I'll talk about. We think about point of view, okay first person, second person, third person. And, you know, with third person maybe we're talking about is it omniscient, like a point of view that can jump between everyone's head and tell us things the

characters don't know, or is it limited, is it saying: "She did this," "She did this," but really we're kind of always on her shoulder, we only know what Gretchen knows in the story. There's a lot more to it than that, though. Especially for third person; let's say we're talking about that omniscient. Well does the narrative voice know things only the characters on the page know - so maybe the voice can jump from Caroline's head to Margaret's head to Joseph's head. Or does the narrative voice know more than any of the characters? Could the narrative voice say: "Meanwhile, in Alaska, this was happening. And little did any of them know, but ten years later they'd all be trapped together in an elevator." Does that voice have access to the past, does it have access to the future? Does it know things only certain characters know, or what all the characters know? Or does it know things that no human being could know? There's no right or wrong answer but we want to be consistent in the story. And there's nothing more frustrating than reading along in a story and maybe - I said we were, we're always in Gretchen's head, right, we only see what Gretchen sees - so, you know, "She looked behind her to check if there was someone there, she couldn't see anyone. 'What's going on,' she thought" - we're only in her head, and the next line is: "Her blue eyes sparkled in the sunshine." That makes no sense. If we are Gretchen in this story, how can she see her own blue eyes sparkling in the sunshine? We've broken point of view. And what it comes down to is an author who, at that point in the draft, hasn't made that backstage decision - that off-the-page decision - here's what my point of view is going to be, it's going to stay with Gretchen, and I'm going to police myself and make sure it does. Or, on the contrary, my point of view from page one is going to float all over the place, and then sticking to that and being consistent.

[Text on screen] The Flipside of Point of View: The Ear of the Story.

And the flip-side of point of view, something I don't think we talk about enough, is something I think of as the ear of the story: who is the story being told to? And for a lot of stuff, the answer is, kind of: "Well, anyone who will listen." But sometimes - this would especially happen, well definitely with the second person point of view, a "you" story - but even with a first person, and "I" story, there's a sense of who the story is being told to. In a first person story, it might be written as diary entries, the person the story is intended for is the self. Or it might feel like something someone's saying only to a really, really good friend. Or it might feel like something that's being put out into the world for anyone. Vladimir Nabokov, in *Lolita*, it's a first person story but very early on he says, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," and then goes on from there. The ear of that story is us, the ladies and gentlemen of the jury. If you want a really weird example, *Winnie the Pooh*, the ear of that story is Christopher Robbin, those stories are being told to Christopher Robbin within the book, and he even comes up as "you," "You picked up Winnie the Pooh," and "You did this." Christopher Robbin, by the way, read again as an adult, a young adult, and think about narrative stuff now that you might know more about things like that, it'll blow your mind. It's also really funny. Other things, you know, it might be a... the ear of the story might be a certain type of person. Junot Díaz, in a lot of his stories, will say: "Well you know how it is when you're with some girl," and it's like, "Okay, no, I don't," but I guess for this story I am cast in a role of a guy who's with a lot of girls, that's who I am in this story, that's the ear of the story. He knows that's not his entire reading audience, we're not talking about literally who buys the book, but that's the role we've been cast in as readers. So the flip-side of deciding backstage, off-the-page, what your point of view is going to be, and getting it really firmly planted there, is deciding what the ear of the story is, who is the story being told to, who is it being told for, why is it being told, how much later in the future is this story being told, is it being told twenty-years on looking back at childhood, or is it being told almost right in the moment, or is it being told very soon after it's happened when the narrator has learned a few things she didn't know at the time, but not much, is it being told with a great sense of loss and longing looking back?

And again, there are no right or wrong answers, there are things that feel better for a certain story, and often these things don't come about until the second or third draft. Often, when you first write, you're just getting it all out there, and it's later, as you look at it - and maybe someone points out to you: "Your point of view isn't consistent," or, "I don't really get this character, why is this character here?" - that's when you might do some writing in a notebook that's not part of the story, you might just sit there and make lists, you might just think about it, and you make those decisions, and you go in and you make sure you're consistent, you make sure that you know all of this stuff, even if you're not explaining it on the page, so that it shines through. And you can do this all without actually joining the theater, but I do recommend it, I really do, it's a blast. Even if you're hammering stuff backstage - especially if you're acting, getting out there - it's a great way to learn storytelling from the inside. I wouldn't trade my theater experience for anything. I feel like I learned more in the theater than I learned in college in creative writing classes, even though those were great classes. So that is my advice to you, thank you for listening, goodbye.

>>[Text on screen] Margot Livesey.

>>My colleague, Margot Livesey, grew up in the Scottish Highlands. A graduate of the University of York in England, she is the author of the short story collection *Learning By Heart*, which I had the pleasure of reviewing with high praise a long time ago, and of seven novels, including *Eva Moves the Furniture*, *The House on Fortune Street*, and *The Flight of Gemma Hardy*. Her eighth novel, *Mercury*, has just been published. Margot has taught at many universities, including Boston University, Emerson College, and the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers. She's been the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Massachusetts Artists' Foundation, and the Canada Council for the Arts, and she currently teaches at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

>>[Text on screen] Developing a Plot by Disrupting a Stable Structure: "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor.

>> While creating characters may be complicated, creating a good plot is perhaps even harder for many writers. To think a little bit about Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," I think that story shows the development of what we might call a classic plot. The grandmother doesn't want to go to Florida. However, she also doesn't want to be left behind, and so she gets in the car with the family and off they head towards Florida. On the way, she has a bright idea: she remembers a big country house that is sure is nearby, and she manages to persuade her only son, Bailey, to turn off the road and head towards that house. And while they're on the very lonely road that leads to the house, the grandmother suddenly realizes that the house is miles away, that it's nowhere nearby. In her agitation various things happen: they have an accident, and who should appear looming over their wrecked car but a criminal called The Misfit. And he and the grandmother have a conversation about a topic that was very dear to Flannery O'Connor's heart, namely the issue of religious belief. The conversation ends with The Misfit shooting the grandmother, but also in a certain sense blessing her. We can see, reading the story, how the grandmother was perfectly designed to meet The Misfit, because on the one hand she's very lady-like - she's wearing clean underwear just in case anything happens on their journey, she goes to church faithfully, she believes in keeping up appearances - but by The Misfit's standards she's not really a true believer, and he challenges her beliefs in a wonderful way.

I think O'Connor's story embodies what we see in many stories, namely there's a family unit or a group - in this case the grandmother and her son and his family - and a stranger comes into the story and unsettles the balance, changes things. The stranger could be a person, could be a group of people, it could be a stray dog - but nearly always in a story there is a stable structure to start with, and something changes that structure: the character comes home to find an eviction notice on her door; a car breaks down and a rather peculiar woman stops and offers to help change the tire; something enters the story that has not been there before. And I think we see that happening in many, many stories. One form of it, obviously, is the "ménage à trois," or affair, very popular for the last 150 years in fiction. But there are lots of different versions.

[Text on screen] Moving Plot Ahead by Considering Character Motivations and Limitations.

The other question I ask is: "What would a character never do or say or think or feel?" And I find that very provocative. I think we often think in terms of characters saying and doing things, but what we don't decide to do - what we hesitate to do - is such a big part of how we move through the world. And it can be a very powerful way to describe a character.

[Text on screen] "A Christmas Memory" by Truman Capote.

Truman Capote has a wonderful example in his story, "A Christmas Memory." The narrator, a young boy, is describing his elderly cousin, and he says this: "In addition to never having seen a movie, she has never: eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than five miles from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except funny papers and the Bible, worn cosmetics, cursed, wished someone harm..." And we just get such a vivid sense of the cousin in this list of all the things she would never do - it continues for a little bit longer. And so often when I'm stuck with a story or a novel, I think: "What would this character really hate to do? What would she most want not to do? Or most want not to happen?" And that is one of the ways I often discover how I should be moving my plot forward. And that, for me, is what is so exciting and important about creating vivid characters, because, for me, plot and character go hand-in-hand. And it's no good coming up with a wildly exciting plot if you don't have the characters to carry it out. You need to have people who are prepared to take on dragons and demons and disasters and a certain amount of bad behavior.

[Text on screen] Moving Plot Ahead by Raising the Stakes: "The Lady with The Little Dog" by Anton Chekhov.

I just want to add a couple of things to my thoughts about attitude and what we mean when we talk about characters having an attitude. Sometimes it seems to me the attitude is, if you will, described in the prose. So for instance, when Chekhov introduces his protagonist Gurov in "The Lady With the Little Dog," he's very explicit in describing Gurov. He says: "He was not yet forty, but he had a twelve year old daughter, two sons in school. He'd married young, while still a second-year student, and now his wife seemed half again his age. She was a tall woman with dark eyebrows, erect, imposing, dignified, and a thinking person, as she called herself. He secretly considered her none too bright, narrow-minded, graceless, was afraid of her, and disliked being home. He had begun to be unfaithful long ago, was unfaithful often, and probably for that reason almost always spoke ill of women, and when they were discussed in his presence, he would say of them: an inferior race." I think we know a great deal about Gurov's attitude to himself, to women, to the world, from these sentences. But the attitude is being told to us directly, and it's not, if you will, embodied in the prose. And I also think that thinking about what the character has to lose or gain emotionally - how I can

raise the stakes, as we often ask in workshops - is a very helpful question to thinking, well, what is going to happen next in this story? In the passage I quoted earlier about Chekhov's "Lady with The Little Dog," what happens to Gurov, who thinks of women as the inferior race, is the thing he never expected to happen: he falls in love. It wouldn't be nearly as interesting if he hadn't thought of women as the inferior race, and if he didn't have a lot to lose from falling in love.

[Text on screen] Moving Plot Ahead by Introducing New Perspectives: *Criminals* by Margot Livesey.

I think having had a wonderful idea for a story, however, it can still be hard to figure out the destination of the story and where you want the characters to end up. I have struggled with this in a number of my own works. In writing a novel called *Criminals*, about a banker who finds a baby at a bus station, I made the banker take the baby to his sister, who, unbeknownst to him, really wants a baby. The first six chapters of the novel alternated between the brother and sister, and then I hit a wall. I still thought it was a good idea, but I just didn't know what to do. I wasn't ready to go back to the banker, I wasn't ready to go back to the sister, but I didn't have a third alternative. And then I thought: "Oh, I do have a third alternative: somebody left that baby in the bus station, and that can be my third point of view." And that sort of experience - the experience of looking at something from a different angle - is often what unlocks the problems of a plot for me. Suddenly realizing there's a different way to see the situation. And it's something I come back to with the writers I work with over and over again. Of course the daughter would think this, but what would the mother think? Of course the neighbor would think this, but what would the manager of the local shop think? So it's not that I necessarily introduce those points of view into the story or the novel, but thinking about how to see the events so far from a different angle can be tremendously helpful. So I think if you're stuck with your plot, try bringing in something new, but not too radical - I mean, although I'm spending time now in the Midwest, I would say for the most part stay away from tornadoes and earthquakes and natural disasters. But really a quite small thing can change the dynamics of a story and open a new door. And as a child I always loved advent calendars - I wasn't remotely religious, but I loved opening... there was a new door for each day, and I loved opening the door and seeing lay behind the door. And I think of stories like that, as being similar to advent calendars, we're always hoping that a scene or a memory or a flashback or a thought will open a new door for us and then for our readers.