

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

SESSION TWO—Transcript

Carol Spindel Transcript

Hi, I'm Carol Spindel and I'm going to talk about structure in non-fiction. Non-fiction is an art of selection and omission rather than invention. So, you have to work with what you have, and that's a creative challenge that I really enjoy. When I was young, I had the remarkable experience of living in a rural farming community in Northern Ivory Coast in West Africa. Sort of a remarkable experience for a young American. And when I came back and began to write about that experience, I realized that I would have to write non-fiction because fiction would simply not challenge the misperceptions and stereotypes that American readers would have and that they would bring to a book about my neighbors in West Africa. And so that's how I started writing non-fiction. And along the way, writing this book, I really fell in love with writing non-fiction, I really fell in love with the creative challenge of having to work with what you have. Writing non-fiction usually brings together two points of view. One is the inner perspective of the narrator, the writer. The other is an outer perspective. The writer's take on the world or on ideas, and so usually literary non-fiction brings together these two ways of looking, inner and outer, to create one whole with a dual perspective. And it gives us, also, a very personal take on the world, or on an idea, or in some time in history, some place, whatever the topic is that the non-fiction writer is writing about. To tell a complex non-fiction story, and most interesting stories are very complex, you need to have structure. Otherwise, you, and even worse, your reader, will be wandering around in the forest of words and they won't know where the trail is. They'll be lost. And so, structure is very important. Structure imposes a frame, I have a little frame. Structure imposes a frame on our stories and information. It creates a path and it helps the reader find her way through this forest of words, images, ideas, that we're creating. And we have to realize that every structural choice has advantages and disadvantages. Now, the simple structure is a frame, you see my little frame, now the frame around the story says, "everything inside this frame is a story I'm telling you, so listen up." It's also a way of acknowledging the omission. A way of saying, "Yes, everything outside my frame exists, is real, happened. But it's not part of this particular story that I'm telling you today." And a short essay, sometimes a frame is all you need. The beginning and the ending share a link. So, often the end of the story echoes in some way the beginning. Or perhaps it echoes an important moment or an important theme in the story. This provides a really satisfying sense of closure for the reader. We want a beginning, we want a middle, we want an end. Personally, I don't like frames that sort of snap shut. I like a more literary ending where the frame echoes the beginning, or echoes an important moment, but then opens out so that the reader can see a new horizon and keep thinking about the ideas and the observations and the insights that the piece has given her. A frame is a very simple structure and often for a short piece, works really well and it does give a naissance of closure for our readers. So many write this kind of literary non-fiction, you put together what you know about your world, what you know about yourself and the ideas that you want to share with readers. And then, because it's kind of messy and complicated and there are so many threads and so many characters and so many ideas and so many ways of looking at things, you have to put a frame around some small corner of the story and decide that that's the part you're going to tell. And then once you've got your frame around it, you've got to simplify it for your reader. You've got to pick out just a few narrative threads and just focus on those, and that creates the structure of the story. So, remember our credo of selection and omission. And give only what's inside the frame to your reader. So, once you've selected, omitted, simplified, and framed the small corner of the story that you're going to tell, then you have to decide, "OK, how am I going to create a path through this story for my reader? How am I going to create a structure/ Who will be the narrator?" This decision often affects the kind of structure you choose. "Am I going to be a visible narrator and act as a character in the story so that you see me, see things happening to me? Or am I going to be an invisible narrator who just stays around the corner and just comments on things and shows things through my viewpoint, but doesn't appear?" If your experience, your personal experience is a large part of the story, then clearly you clearly are going to have to be a physical narrator. Maybe there's a way to do it without it, but I don't know, most likely you're going to be a character in the story. If you're writing memoir, memoir is usually about a certain period in a person's life.

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

We don't try to recount our entire life, a portion of a life, you tend to think of a memoir. So, a year is an important timeframe in our cosmos. If you think about it, in one year, the earth circles the sun one time, so that's natural, that's out there, that's part of the cosmos that we live in. And we writers can take that structure and use it. And a year is also a sort of natural time in a person's life. In a year, you can make a transition, you can learn new skills, you can come to understand a subject. So, many creative non-fiction or literary non-fiction books do use this timeframe of one year. So, chronological storytelling is powerful. If you tell a story from beginning to end, you gain the advantage of narrative suspense. The reader doesn't know what's going to happen next and your readers keep reading to find out. So, I would say that writers give up chronology at their peril. Chronology can really be your friend and if you give it up, you've got to have a good reason. A good literary reason why you're going to give it up and how you're going to compensate for that stepping away from chronological suspense. Ok, so in addition to chronological structure, we have thematic structure where you don't use chronology, where you perhaps invent some other structure and use it to tell your story. So, this is when you see a structure in the world and you borrow it or you invent it. For example, the ABC's of something. The ABC's of writing literary non-fiction. So, if I were going to write that book, I would take the structure that exists in the world, the alphabet, and I would take my content about writing literary non-fiction and put it in that structure that exists. And it's a structure that people would recognize so it creates a path, they know where they are, they know at A they're at the beginning. They know at N, they're kind of at the middle and they're hoping to follow along and get to Z. So that's an example of an invented structure. In an artful telling of the narrative and of course we want our telling to be artful, there's often a connection, a leak, between the content and the form, or the structure. So that's our ideal, we want to look at that, we want to work towards that. I often think as a good example of the link between content and form, of an example by an essay for an example, by John Edgar Wideman, the American writer called "Looking at Emmett Till." This is a story about the young Chicago teenager who was killed in Mississippi by violent white supremacists and about his mother's courageous decision to open his coffin for public viewing. But of course, it's about much more than that, it's about living with racism in our society and so on. And John Edgar Wideman's personal take on this as an African-American intellectual. So, what about the structure when you read this essay? It's all tangled, knot, it loop back and forth and there's invented parts and real parts, historical parts, dream parts. And you kind of think when you first read it, "this essay has no structure." Now, Wideman says that the writing developed like a basketball game. A basketball game is improvised, but it's based on hours and hours of conscious preparation. But a structure like this that kind of seems structureless can be a little disconcerting for the reader. But when I read the essay again and thought about it, I thought how this echoes the essay's subject, which is racism. And Wideman, coming to it, must certainly feel that writing about this is difficult and is tangled up in all these loops of emotion and history. So, in that sense, perhaps the slightly disconcerting structure that you can't really get your hands around, that you can't really figure out is the perfect structure for that particular subject. Another example of an invented structure would be Susan Griffin's early and very poetic eco-feminist manifesto "Woman in Nature." Griffin creates two voices, one is for science engineering and land management, the forces in our society that want to control both woman and nature. And then she has a second more poetic voice, that speaks for both woman and nature. And she juxtaposes these two voices to create a powerful whole. When she wrote this and published this in the 1970's, the kind of connection she's making there, really startlingly original. And part of the way this spoke so strongly to people I think as this very creative structure that she came up with, that mirrored so well her ideas about this conflict. Now, you can also combine structures if it suits your content. My first book about the West African farming community where my husband was doing research had a chronological story and it started with that. By coming there, learning to live there, learning about the culture. And dealing with a conflict with my husband's interpreter. And that chronological story ended with the narrative climax. My husband had to fire this interpreter who turned out to be an alcoholic, and then it kind of ended there. After that I was there and there were kind of long days where not a lot happened. And at that point, chronology kind of ceased to serve my story, so I didn't know what to do because I had started out chronologically. So, I decided to take a little leap and change structures. I was pretty sure you weren't supposed to do this, it was my first book and I was pretty worried about it but didn't know what else to do. So after the chronological story ended with this climax, and that was resolved, then I started turning to a little series of more discrete little essays about topics

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

that interested me about that place. Instead of trying to tell what I was doing all the time, and I did a whole series of those. And then when I got to the end of my stay in this community, I returned to the chronological structure and told the story of leaving there. So, I was kind of worried about that, I sent it off, I didn't know what to do. I put "Book 1," "Book 2" as if that would make it OK. And when it was coming out, my editor said, "Carol, you don't need this 'Book 1, Book 2', it's fine the way it is, don't worry about it." And honestly, no readers have ever complained to me about it by using this hybrid structure, so I guess it works because it suits the content. It suits the material. And so, in that case, it was the right structure. I want to talk too about the idea of narrative threads. Narrative threads are important to me in understanding a piece of non-fiction I'm writing and also in helping students who are writing non-fiction. The writer's job, in my opinion, is to make connections. Especially connections that other people aren't making, aren't noticing. So, non-fiction, like much fiction actually, is often created by interweaving or juxtaposing a series of very different narrative threads and they come together to make a more complex and interesting role. So juxtaposition is a really powerful tool for the writer and one that I think is very important to think about when you think about structure. So, one thread, if you can picture one line going across the page, maybe just the voice of the self. That doesn't make a very interesting story. It's just not enough, we don't want to give our readers thin gruel, we want to give them a rich, spicy stew of images and ideas and insights. So, maybe more threads. Once you start to juxtapose two threads, weaving them in and out, it starts to get interesting, so that's just a little image of how that would kind of look. For example, just the narrative thread of what happened to you often isn't enough to make a memoir. But if you juxtapose your story with your knowledge about something else, and if it overlaps in interesting ways and creates additional meanings, then the two threads sort of comment on each other, then you start to get a book. Another book that has some more complex narrative structure, it has three threads, so that would look kind of like this. A shorter version of this idea is Jana Malamud Smith's Essay "Shipwrecked" in which she juxtaposes two threads, her mother's death and her inventory of what she has inherited from her mother in the days following her mother's death. And the story of Robinson Crusoe. So, it's a story of salvage in a way. In two very different ways. And it has a lovely ending, that kind of goes back to our idea, the frame in which after being shipwrecked by grief and had to salvage from the shipwreck, she's afloat again in her own vessel, a little kayak. So, that's another example of two threads. We can also juxtapose past and present, one thread can be the past, one thread can be something happening to the writer in the present. And you often see this in travel books, people go to a place, they recount on one thread their adventures in contemporary time. And then they'll have another thread on what happened in that place in the past and the two are interwoven in a very effective way. So, when you juxtapose two threads, or three threads and create a structure that way, you might try to think of the threads that's going all the way through. They should start at the beginning, they should go all the way through to the end. And that gives your writing unity. It gives it a kind of coherence that's very important. But, when I talk about these threads and use these images of the thread, that's not how the reader is going to experience it at all, this is how the writer thinks about it. The reader is going to come upon the threads more in chunks. One, then the other. So, there would be different chunks. So, that's kind of interesting to think about too as you write: "How's my reader going to experience these different threads and how they're juxtaposed against each other?" A line goes on and on in space, I don't know a lot about math but I think we all know that. And narrative threads do too, a story starts a long time ago and they go on a long time after. So, we have to select and frame some section. We have to pick a small corner. It's hard sometimes to come to terms with the omission. And I think writers all suffer from the parts that have to be left out. And sometimes they're such good parts, they're such good stories, such interesting characters. But when I have to leave those parts out in order to make the whole work, I tell myself "don't throw them away, don't delete them," I tell myself there will be other pieces, other essays, other opportunities to use these wonderful moments that have to be left out. So that's what I have to say about structure in non-fiction, and good luck with your writing