Intro Transcript

>> Margot, I guess I want to begin by asking what draws you in both as a writer and as a reader into

one work or another?

>> I think voice is a crucial aspect of what draws me in. Of course I read for characters and

situation and exciting plots. But it's when I read a sentence that I think "only this writer could have

written this sentence." The some unusual word, some particularly precise way of describing a red car

- that is often really what makes me keep reading and want to enter into this righteous sensibility.

>> What is it that makes that voice come to life for you?

>> Well I think for instance of a writer like, Grace Paley who in her story “Conversation with My

Father” describes her father's heart as a bloody motor. And it's a very simple phrase but it's so

startlingly accurate that at once I want to keep reading that story to see what this narrator will tell me

next about the world that I thought I knew.

>> I know you've also had a, you have other ideas about, voice that voice that a writer adopts or

discovers in her writing. Do you want to say a word about that?

>> I think it's so interesting how some writers can transform themselves from story to story and

novel to novel and other writers remain very much the same. Like many people I've spent a lot of

the last year reading Elaine Ferranti's quartet of novels set in Naples and in Italy. And one of the

things that drew into that - it must be well over 1000 pages - was the very strong voice of her

narrator and the way in which she portrays the friendship between these two passionate women, one

of whom becomes a writer and the other who never exactly fulfills her enormous potential.

>> So voice becomes a matter of authenticity. When we complain about for example how in a

political campaign Hillary Clinton is always described in terms of the pant suit she's wearing. These

are conventional ways to make a character come to life - conventional kinds of markers, but you're

after something more authentic, something deeper that can make the character vivid.

>> I am, I think that voices I mean just as our speaking voices are a very personal part of us. So our

writerly voice is a very intimate part of us and everyone has their own unique writerly voice. And I

think one of the things we're looking for when we study writing when we practice writing is to make

that voice stronger, more vivid, more our own. And when we fall into for instance describing Hillary

Clinton in terms of her pantsuits, we're not really using our own voice. We're falling into a cliché or

a stereotype. And that's one of the several reasons why that such an aggravating description of a

major politician.

>> Because it's superficial and we imagine fiction to be taking us to deepest levels of what a

character is.

>> Absolutely and we are looking to discover something about both authors and characters. I think

that makes sense of the world and that gives us as readers a sense of being let into the secrets of the

author, the narrator, the character.

I think we go for models of how to do this to the writers we love and to thinking that usually our

first thought is not our best thought. Sometimes our tenth thought is our best thought. And I think

it can be quite helpful to write in public places, cafes, libraries, because then we're reminded how

really diverse, and different people are from the rather flimsy way we sometimes describe them on

the page.

>> People are always more inventive than we give them credit for.

>> Exactly and they also have more attitude than we give them credit for.

I think one of the things that's most interesting about voice in fiction is how we think of voice in

two different ways. We think of, on the one hand, the voice of the writer and some writers, like for

example Grace Paley or Junot Diaz, have such strong authorial voices that we recognize them

almost immediately in every story they write. And then there are other writers like Francine Prose

and Toni Morrison who are much more chameleon like and take on a different voice with every

novel. So that's one way we think about voice and then on the other hand, we think about voice as

an author giving voice to her or his characters. And allowing them to speak for themselves and often

that's a very exciting part of fiction.

>> And when you think about your own work I can't help but ask, are you more chameleon like or

do you imagine hearing one voices you're writing in?

>> I fear that I'm not a chameleon, though I would love to be, but I do really, really enjoy writing

dialogue. And I like letting my characters hold forth and it sometimes takes them a little while to

speak up. Sometimes they behave like boring British people and just talk about the weather and

offer each other cups of tea. But if I just get them to rant or complain about someone or something,

they usually become much more voluble.

>> Makes me think of that wonderful story that John O'Hara told about how he would start a story

with, he would put two characters in a conversation. He wouldn't know anything about them and

after a couple of pages of small chitchat, he would have one of them say something dramatic, to

push the conversation along. Is that the kind of thing that you do when you're getting a sense of

who these characters might be?

>> Yes, I think that's very much what I do. I usually, as in real life, there's usually quite a bit of

preliminary chat and politeness. And then the characters get down to business. And one of my tasks

in revision is to get rid of all those, or many of those, preliminaries, because I do feel that politeness

is a great virtue in daily life, but it can be a little boring on the page.

>> So I'm guessing when you were editing fiction for Ploughshares and reading so many stories, you

had that experience that so many editors speak of, that you discover a new voice you haven't heard

before, which might at first put you off, but then immediately you cannot help listening.

>> Yes, as the fiction editor at Ploughshares Magazine, we were getting about 1,000 stories a month

coming in, of which I was maybe reading about 150. And what made me stop was, well, it's was

when I heard a new voice, or sometimes an established writer writing very wonderfully in a voice I

had already heard before. And I think that's connected with what Virginia Woolf says in her essay

Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown. She says: “Life is changing so fast, fiction has to change to keep up

with life. We can't keep writing the same old fiction, when everything around us is changing.” And

we see that reflected in the voices of young writers. Writers, for instance, like Sapphire or Teju Cole.

>> And what better example of it than to be in a MOOC with writers from all around the world,

each of whom will have a different voice to contribute to the conversation?