

## Margot Livesey Transcript

>>[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 has 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.

>>To paraphrase Flannery O'Connor's famous remark about story, "I think everyone knows what a character is until he or she sits down to create one." So I started thinking more about what does make characters jump to life, what does make us respond strongly. And being a writer, of course one of the first places I looked was in books. The oldest book we have about writing is Aristotle's *Poetics*. He has twenty-six sections about writing and devotes only one of those to character - and it's only about a page long. But the short version of his page is character is action. Which I think is extremely helpful. When I was rereading *Persuasion* a few weeks ago, I noticed, yet again, that what makes Captain Wentworth fall back in love with Anne Elliot is not when she's looking especially pretty or sitting doing her embroidery, but when she helps to rescue Louisa after she has an accident and falls off the sea wall. And I think it's a great reminder that action does move readers and make characters seem like they're people we could argue with and disagree with.

[Text on screen] *Flat and Round Characters: Aspects of the Novel* by E.M. Forster.

There are lots of other books about writing that are probably on some peoples' shelves. Two that I

went back and consulted were E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* - he is the person to whom we owe our definition or division of characters into round and flat, and he says very helpful things about them. A round character, in Forster's definition, is a character who's capable of convincingly surprising us. And I think that's a very helpful thing to remember and something to aspire to in our characters, they should be surprising us, the writer, and our readers. And he has a lovely definition of flat characters: E.M. Forster says, "It is a convenience for an author," and I should say, forgive the masculine version of the author in E.M. Forster, "It is a convenience for an author when he can strike with his full force at once, and flat characters are very useful to him since they never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere. Little luminous disks of a prearranged size pushed hither and thither like counters across the void, or between the stars. Most satisfactory." In Forster's definition, a flat character can be summed up in a single sentence, but, reading his definition, you can see that a bad sentence isn't going to become a little luminous disk, it has to be a very nice sentence if it's going to become a little luminous disk. And I think often in workshops the term flat character comes across as being rather pejorative, but E.M. Forster never thought that - he thought flat characters were absolutely essential to writers and we just all needed to people our work with better, more vigorous flat characters. And to go back to Jane Austen for a moment, one of the things he praises in Jane Austen is that her characters - although they're sometimes conceived of as flat - are always capable of becoming round, they can always expand and become a little globe, he says. Which I think is a wonderful thing to aspire to, that if something were to happen, if your plot were to take a sudden swerve, one of your flat characters might be able to step forward and rise to the occasion in a gratifying and surprising way.

[Text on screen] Embodying Attitude: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison.

To look at a writer who I think does a fabulous job at embodying attitude in her prose, I turned to Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which I think she published in 1970, and it remains a wonderful book. This is not quite the opening, but very close to it: "Nuns go by as quiet as lust, and drunken men and sober eyes sing in the lobby of the Greek hotel. Rosemary Villanucci, our next

door friend who lives above her father's café, sits in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. She rolls down the window to tell my sister Frieda and me that we can't come in. We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes, and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth. When she comes out of the car, we will beat her up, make red marks on her white skin, and she will cry and ask us, do we want her to pull her pants down."

From the first sentence, with it's startling juxtaposition of nuns and lust, we recognize a very intense, poetic voice. The prose, as it were, is stepping forward, it's almost like a character in the story, over and above the character of the narrator, who is telling us that story and who is one of the main actors in it. And I think writers quite naturally turn to what suits their voice best, some writers naturally have a very strong voice that comes across in everything they write and which we welcome, and then other writers, the voice is much more transparent, and we look through that voice, as it were, like looking through a window to the characters and the story.

[Text on screen] Finishing the Work.

So you've written a few wonderful pages, and then suddenly you find that you actually have nothing to say on page four, and then you remember my good advice and you introduce a new character or situation or dilemma, and the story starts rolling along again. But you can't, unless you're planning to have a cast of thousands, introduce a new character every time you get stuck - that would begin to dilute the effect of the story. So a second strategy I would advocate is, rather than introducing something new in the shape of a new character, to introduce something new within the character you already have, to find out more about your main character, to go back into their past and think: What was the worst thing that ever happened to them? Try to write a scene in which they describe the worst thing that ever happened to them, to someone they're trying to become friends with, or try to figure out the memory that haunts them, or the thing they're most ashamed of, or the secret dream they have that completely embarrasses them but they're not able to give up on. Your big resource in fiction is always your characters, and you can nearly always go deeper into your characters. And though you don't want your story to get bogged down in flashbacks and memories - having too many can bring a story to a standstill - writing them, even for your own satisfaction, can

bring new depth to your character in the present, and enable you to go forward with the story knowing what's at stake for the character.