

Rebecca Makkai 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'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.