

Peter Orner Transcript

>> Hi. I'm here at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, and honored to be here. And it's great to be back in Iowa City. And I was asked to give a brief, very brief, craft talk. And in thinking about what I was going to talk about today, I've been coming to the conclusion over the years, especially lately, that it's very difficult for me to talk about craft divorced of content, so that a craft issue, point of view, or something that is technical, it's hard for me to sort of isolate on that without talking about actual content, some thing. I need content to get into it.

So, with that in mind I'm gonna read a short piece and then say a few things about it. One thing that I've been thinking about lately is why certain images, certain scenes, certain aspects of books stick for many, many years. What is it about the moments in some fiction that, as we read in our lives, what is it about some things that just, they never quite go away? And I've been trying to isolate on some of those scenes, those moments.

So, lately I've been thinking a lot about a scene in a great novel by the British novelist Henry Green. The novel is called *Loving*. Green was a great novelist who wrote some of the strangest books I know of, and I cherish them. He was published by, among other people, Virginia Woolf, the Hogarth Press. He sold a few books in his lifetime, not that many, but he was revered by certain writers for how incredibly different his approach to fiction was.

And so, I'm going to read this passage, but first, I'm going to tell you a little bit about it. And that is that, this is something I remember, for years and years after reading it. It's the waltzing scene in *Loving*. It involves two maids in an Irish castle during World War II, who go into a closed part of the castle that they're working in. It's closed off because they are sort of circling the wagons. They have this castle, but the entire castle isn't being used. So, they go to a disused part of the castle, they turn on some music, and they dance a waltz. And in my mind, this scene, this moment takes up a great deal of space, and I can totally visualize it. And lately I went back and actually read the scene. And it's no more than 11 lines and much smaller in real life on the page than it is in my head.

"They were wheeling in each other's arms heedless at the far end where they had drawn up one of the white blinds. Above from a rather low ceiling five great chandeliers swept one after the other to the waxed parquet floor reflecting in their hundred thousand drops the single sparkle of a distant day, again and again red velvet paneled walls, and two girls, minute and purple, dancing multiplied to eternity in these trembling pears of glass.

'You're daft,' Raunce called out. They stopped with their arms about each other. Then as he walked up they disengaged to rearrange their hair and still the waltz thundered. He switched it off. The needle grated."

Period, that's it. That is the entire great and, to my mind, famous waltzing scene in *loving*. And in my mind it's like totally exploded and I see them back and forth, back and forth, in this empty room with the chandelier and the light, and these two beautiful women dancing together, while the butler, who is in love with one of them, comes and interrupts them, wrecks the scene, and destroys the moment.

But what I'm saying is, something that I've been thinking a lot about in my own stuff, and for you all, whoever's going to watch this, is to think about those scenes, those moments in books that you return to again and again in your mind. And it maybe something as small, in some sense, as this tiny waltzing scene. But for me, it's blown up in my imagination. It really is my memory of that book. And I think that that's probably true for a lot of readers. And so, I think as writers, I think it's our job to create these kinds of scenes. And we can do so with not so many words. If you get the right words right.

And for me, when I think about the reflecting off of the chandelier, the light reflecting in a hundred thousand drops the single sparkle of distant day again and again, it's that reflection, it's that multiplication, that seems to me to be one of the elements of this incredibly beautiful passage that makes it stick. But the question isn't how technically we get it to stick. It's how, somehow magically,

we, with just a very few words, were able to make something last, and that is a mystery that I'm still trying to solve.

Thanks a lot.