

Power of the Pen: Identities and Social Issues in Fiction and Nonfiction

Week 2, Part II – Transcript

>>[Text on screen] Ruel Johnson on Connecting a Character to Their Social Setting.

>>Ruel Johnson is a journalist and editor from Guyana, and the author of several collections of poetry and short stories. In 2002, his *ARIADNE AND OTHER STORIES* won the Guyana Prize for Literature for best first book of fiction. His collection *FLECTIONS* won later the same award. A cultural advisor to the government of Guyana, he is involved in policy development and implementation, and in 2016 he was a Resident of the International Writing Program.

>>Alright, I'm Ruel Johnson. I'm one of the writers in 2016 Iowa International Writers Program fall residency. I'm here to talk about, I guess the intersection of character and plot and how it is that I've sort of dealt with those issues in my own fiction. First I should say I sort of grew up on a diet of writers like Borges, for example, and to a certain degree Émile Zola, and Stephen King. So there's a variety of voices that have sort of informed my initial beginning.

[Text on screen] Elaborate Characters in Their Settings in *ULYSSES* by James Joyce and “April” by Ruel Johnson.

Now, with regard to the, I guess, the thrust of this course, perhaps the best example I have of how it is that I very early on experimented with both character development and plot at the same time is when I was fairly young, I was 19 at the time. I was reading as much as I can up on whoever writers that they were, and one of the writers of course that were recommended was James Joyce and his *ULYSSES*. Now if it is that you would've read *ULYSSES* or heard about it, it's a very rambling book, and perhaps the most interesting part that has a lot of literature generated about it is Molly Bloom's soliloquy, which is an unpunctuated, multi-page, more than 40 pages, what you call the stream of consciousness narrative, which appears rambling at first. So one of the things that I did in a story called “April,” which sought to deal with the violence that was happening in Guyana, with the politics and ethnic conflict, was to create what I believed to be a very strong female character. And to get inside her head, and using the example of this rambling, Molly Bloom-esque, narrative and, in essence who you had was a woman who was placed within conflict, serious conflict, and who had to deal with issues of her past, et cetera. And the story actually unfolds from her perspective. Her encounter with a lover, her encounter with violence, and considering that she is from one ethnicity and her lover was from another, that was very much intertwined with the particular narrative I wanted to tell. Now, for me that was in essence a very deep, a very difficult story to write. Writing from a highly sexualized female perspective. Even though it was based in part from my own experience. And I guess I could contrast that with a lot of examples of how I've sought to develop character using a voice, and I'll say this time again, a different type of female voice, and a very different type of story. Whereas “April” was what I considered to be sort of a semi-tragic, very straightforward narrative. I also, like I said before, like Borges, heavily influenced by Jorge Luis Borges, and he has had a way of dealing with a very deft and light touch with character development

in very strange ways. Whether it's the pseudobiography, whether it is what he calls condensation, or retelling of certain narratives, which are fictive. His work is extremely metafictional and self-referential, a lot of the stories contain a character called Borges, and he's dealt with it, I mean, there's a particularly good story called "Borges y yo," which is "Borges and I," which sort of tries to distinguish the two narratives. Now there's a story called "Three Versions of Judas," which appears to be an academic paper. Now for myself I have some very serious, very strong views on how what you call postcolonial literature is viewed, and they're strong critical views, but with one story sought to sort of find an intersection between my own critical views, my critical commentary on postcolonial criticism, and I think my own tendency to admire Borges as a fiction writer who deals with serious subjects in a very playful way. And so there is a character, there's a writer, a Guyanese-born writer, called Wilson Harris, who as a student of literature you might come across at some point in time.

[Text on screen] Character Development Through Setting and Plot in "The Review" by Ruel Johnson.

And I've had a long-running, I won't say feud, with several academics who've sort of built up a reputation on Harris's works, so what I did was I invented a very, in a story called "The Review," invented a writer, a female writer, semi-incidentally, who is writing ostensibly a review of sort of a Harris stand-in, prototype, called, I'll risk this, I'm going to call Dennis Cunt, which is a very interesting name in Guyanese, in the Guyanese lexicon. And so whereas in "April," you had a sort of stream of consciousness, a very naturalistic view of the subject, of the development of narrative, in the story called "The Review," you have what is ostensibly an academic paper written by the person who is the lead character, and it's essentially an examination of the self-conceits that come with literary criticism, and postcolonial criticism, and also the sort of ironically gendered approach, gendered narratives that come with the development of postcolonial criticism. So there's two contrasting ways in which I've dealt with developing character, and both, for me, are in fact strong female characters. One, as I a writer, I'm less sympathetic to, clearly, but still, both characters are strong female characters, and through whose lens are most primarily, in fact, primarily, the narrative is developed. And this sort of account outside of their lens, this filters through their particular lens, and that's how I've dealt with that character development in very contrasting ways.

[Text on screen] Using Point of View and Setting to Understand How to Tell the Narrative: "April" by Ruel Johnson.

Very often, I mean, I would say this, very often by the time I get to the end of the story, I've forgotten the kernel of what started it. However, what often starts a story is not necessarily a linear process where you, okay, want to write about this and map x, y, z. Very often I go to, I have the end or a middle, I have to reverse engineer or put forward and backward how the story develops. And then of course there's another very layered process of structure. I mean, maybe I said, my influences are wide, and they range from Borges to Tim O'Brien to very tragic David Foster Wallace, and so I guess what I come up with, I guess the process with me is always something that sparks an initial interest in the subject. Then I consider what I call the thesis of the story, and what is it I essentially want the story to say, what is the greater question. Is it worth being said? And then I look at what I consider the framing narrative, what is the core narrative, the pitch as it were, and then there's the other layered process of how do I tell it? So there is, in "April," I very much wanted to comment on the violence that was going on around me at the time, and so, I was in an intimate relationship with somebody during the midst of that violence, and something they said sort of sparked the angle at

which I could enter this thesis. So I just basically framed the time, it happened over the course of this story. The action of the story happens over the course of the one day. I like to experiment with this other classical structure, and stuff like that. And it draws heavily on a couple of things. One, the April in this story is in reference to, as I triangulated it, one April was in fact the time that this violence was happening, around Easter, and I wanted to deal with the whole issue of, Easter's a very big holiday in Guyana, the whole issues of redemption, et cetera, resurrection, and of course, of course there is Eliot's "The Waste Land," which begins "April is the cruelest month," yeah, so those sort of layers sort of interstitch the narrative. Then there is, for example, there's a story called "The Great Junkie Car Wash," which is what I wanted to do. I mean I served as a reporter for the local newspaper, and I did a series of articles on addiction, et cetera, and that sort of sparked an interest in what I considered to be some of these layered, transactional processes that defined Guyana. And how it is that people are very often upset, one side, there's always some overbearing influence on one side of transaction, it's often very exploitative. And so I thought that certain techniques that Foster Wallace used in BRIEF INTERVIEWS WITH HIDEOUS MEN was a very good way of dealing with those absences and filling in the voice. So the story is ostensibly a sociological interview in which you don't hear the questions performed, asked by the interviewers, but the junkie, one of the junkies that he's interviewing is speaking about how we car wash, this junkie car wash developed, and within that it's a lot of commentary on a lot of history in Guyana, it's recent history, the changing landscape when it comes to transactions and business, and the larger issue of who gets what and who's buying and selling whom. So yeah, that was a way which I, that's the final layer of the process.

[Text on screen] Self-Referential Stories: "Paternity Test" by Ruel Johnson.

There are a lot of stories, for example one of these stories that I would have submitted here, they are very self-referential, pleasantly so, in a way that Philip Roth or Borges has been self-referential, in that, or Javier Cercas in SOLDIERS IN SALAMIS, which is there's a character that is ostensibly me, and so for example this story that I submitted for consideration to the IWP is a story called "The Paternity Test," and it deals with the issue of fatherhood, again a marriage breaking apart, and implications for fatherhood, et cetera, and within the story I included where the character relates a poem that the character writes. And that poem, you can find that poem in my collection of poetry. So, and in fact that the story is published in the collection called FICTIONS, and you see each chapter is, or each section of the book, because the book is divided into four sections, each section of the book is prefaced by a quote from Borges or Tim O'Brien, Nabokov, about the whole concept of fiction, and the role of fiction, and Roth of course, the whole concept of what is fiction versus reality? And whether there is a necessary dichotomy between the two, and if there is, I guess, what is more authentically fictional, and what is supposed truth. I do some occasional workshops in which one of the questions I pose to them is if it is that we rely on memory, and we accept that memory itself is incomplete, therefore any representation of memory is in fact implicitly artifice. Whereas if it is that you are creating a fiction, and it has intent, and it has purpose, and an implicit wholeness therefore, and there are no gaps or omissions, then isn't that an essential truth? I mean, isn't it truth? So the whole dichotomy, truth and fiction, I like to explore. And I think that is the core of what goes into the structure, so you might have an artificial structure, but the realization that it is seeking at least, at least trying to mine some greater truth.

[Text on screen] Polemics, Politics, and Fiction.

Polemics in literature are very much always very personal. Say it is that you are seeking to represent people. I think the best way to do that is to observe people. Take off the political lens through which you see the world. Literature, fiction in particular, within the vein of getting to that essential truth, and we are speaking about that, politics, et cetera. I think fiction is the greatest tool we have for empathy, and one of the things that I am very concerned with politically is that we live in an increasingly divided world. We have this clash of cultures, et cetera. And you see it happening all over the world. You see it happening in America right now. In a few months, I think, whatever the outcome of the election, America will be essentially a divided family. There will be, it's the boorish uncle who starts up a very painful and divisive conversation at Thanksgiving dinner, and the family has to live with it the rest of the year, and the years after that. Healing is going to be very difficult. I think fiction provides a bridge of empathy, and the only way as a writer that you can engender, even if you have a political view, I don't think a writer has the luxury of a temporary or transient political view, and I say this as a writer who has been deeply involved in politics. I think you can be politically active. I think sometimes you need to be politically active. I don't think that enough writers in America are politically active. I think too many writers, I mean, they exist in this sort of abstraction when it comes to writing. Yes it's good in literature, but you've seen in it in people like Zola or Camus, for example, José Julián Martí, Martin Carter in Guyana, who are, who sorely need to be active politically, but whose literature sort of transcends, precisely because of the character of empathy. So you fight against ideologies, yes, but when it comes to representing people, you have to look much closer than you look at ideology, you can dismiss an ideology, but you have to be careful in dismissing the people, even though the people might embody those ideologies. It's a process I think of refining, of sort of straining.

[Text on screen] Considering Social Issues in Fiction Compared to Journalism.

And in your literature, you have to be careful in that you spend time particularly when it comes to representing people whose views are different from yours, more than anything else. You could risk self-caricature, fine, but the danger comes in that it is you are so self-absorbed and so shrill that the only way that you represent what should essentially be the other half of a dialogue as caricature. An example I could probably give is, again, I'm involved in politics, et cetera, and we've had this whole narrative, during the 1980's, we had the political assassination of somebody called Dr. Walter Rodney. It is highly probable, it is extremely highly probable, almost to high degree of certainty, that the then-government was involved in his assassination. They were the only ones who benefited, would benefit. Only last year, even though there was a change of government, and even though the government that replaced that government was in power for, what, almost 23 years, it was only last year that they finally decided to do an inquiry into Rodney's death. By this time the man who had been accused of killing him had left the country, and then he died. He died in 2003. And Walter Rodney's assassination has been a particularly touchy thing in Guyana and its political history. And I could write, I mean I read some of the speeches, et cetera, and it's still very relevant for what is happening in Guyana, ironically, after a change of government, but also there is this sort of heroic narrative that's always accompanied Rodney. You saw him, and there's an iconic picture of him, posterized, with his afro, quotes of him, and stuff like that. But I wanted to deal with Rodney, so I started in a lot of research, et cetera. But I also started researching his assassin. And it ended up that I didn't know I knew, but I knew his, the assassin, his daughter. And by the time I finished researching, both the hard research as well as the, what I would call, the empathic research, in the balancing the information I received in my head, while doing this, I came up with a story that was essentially a dialogue with Rodney's ghost and the man who was accused of killing him. And a very sort of, again, Borgesian dialogue. But instead of necessarily a vindication of Rodney, who has

always been painted as heroic, what I aimed for was a sort of thesis that put forward a potential vindication, as it were, of the assassin, at least to start the dialogue, at least through his own eyes. And so for me there's a rule that you've got to engage history and engage people and politics with a long view, and again, you see a lot of it in Borges, and there's a wonderful book called SOLDIERS OF SALAMIS by Javier Cercas, the Spanish writer, that sort of looks at that, how would this be, if history is written by the victors, or at least their marketing teams, et cetera, it is the role of the creative writer to aim for an access a sort of a more balanced truth than we can necessarily find in the fictive narratives that very often constitute history or canon.