

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

Week 3, Part I – Transcript

>>[Text on screen] Power of the Pen: Identities and Social Issues in Fiction and Nonfiction.

>>[Text on screen] We are very proud to bring you the perspectives of authors from around the world, and trust that you will find their perspectives valuable. Because some of our contributing authors are nonnative speakers of English, we suggest that you turn on video captions. You can turn on captions by clicking the “cc” button at the bottom right of the video.

>>[Text on screen] Week 3: Plot, Structure, Identity, and Character in Fiction and Memoir.

>>Welcome back to the Power of the Pen, Block B. The broad theme is identities on the move, the ways in which we are different people in different social situations, in different places, we call those most important moments in our lives rites of passage, which is to say whether we move from one country to another, or one community to another, or one place in our thinking about what we do to another, our identities in some ways are always on the move and so, we're going to be exploring how a sense of affiliation has multiple overlapping communities in the development of our lives. And that will be clarified through our craft emphasis this week on structures in fiction, the memoir essay, and the personal essay.

>>Okay, so when we're looking at fiction, we really want you to think about point of view and structure, what is the story? What are elements of time management, the order of events? The point of telling, your pace, we really want you to think about if you're telling a story about movement, from one place to another, out of one community, into another, a movement of identity, changes in identity. We really want you to think about where to begin and where to end. What are some of the most important elements that you include as the catalyst for the story, and then the climax versus the ending? So, really thinking about that arc of how the character's going to evolve during your story. There are really small elements of identity that you can use to create this larger place for your character, such as, you know, kids talk a certain way, teenagers talk a different way, parents talk a different way. When teens are with their parents, they're going to talk differently, or feel differently, or act differently than with peers, so you really want to begin to think about how they understand, how people understand things differently, and all that ties into these identities that continue to flow from, you know, one place to another, or as a person grows and evolves in their life. I wanted to mention that I always go back a very early concept of double consciousness. W.E.B. Du Bois talked about double consciousness in relation to African-Americans and slaves and how, you know, there was this necessity to understand the world from two different spaces because you're living in one space as far as your experience but you need to exist in another place concerning what's going on around you. Well, in this day and age, I would argue that we have triple and quadruple consciousness because not only are you looking at, for example, race and issues of mainstream America but you might be looking at gender, you might be looking at issues of transgender, and there are so many elements that tie to an identity that you could use to really build your character.

>>And really, that's what it means to be a writer is to be aware, in some way or another, of all those different identities that we possess, right?

>>Mm-hmm.

>>When we're writing a memoir essay, we begin with by exploring a memory. Generally speaking, something that bewilders us, or haunts us, something we may not understand, something that, in some fashion, changed the way we were at that moment into what we now imagine ourselves to be and we may go all the way back to the beginning of our lives or it may be something nearer to home but if we consider that memory of movement from one place to another in our imagination, in our physical setting, in our understanding of the world, that's a good place to start to write a memoir, to try to make sense out of the things that have made up our lives. We have to choose a point of telling, we have to include as many perspectives as we can, recognizing that we are inherently different than the person who went through that event all those years ago. And that over the course of our lives, our understanding of that event is likely to keep changing and that in the writing of a memoir, we capture one view of it, which we hope will endure.

>>[Text on Screen] Lucy Jane Bledsoe on the Role of Social Issues in Creating and Guiding Plot in Fiction.

>>Lucy Bledsoe is the author of several children's books and adult fiction, including THE BIG BANG SYMPHONY and most recently, A THIN BRIGHT LINE. She is a two-time recipient of the National Science Foundation's Artist and Writers in Antarctica Fellowship and was the recipient of the Yaddo Fellowship in 2013.

>>Hi, my name is Lucy Jane Bledsoe and I am the author of five novels, the most recent of which is A THIN BRIGHT LINE, which is an American love story with Cold War complications. My last novel was THE BIG BANG SYMPHONY. And welcome all to this video, I'm going to talk for a few minutes about the role of social issues when creating and guiding plot. Using my own work and the work of other folks as examples.

[Text on screen] The Importance of Characters when Writing About Social Issues.

So, when an author has social issues that he or she wants to include in a plot, how is that done effectively? It's actually a very difficult thing to do and it's a good topic to talk about because it can be done poorly. Writers who explicitly try to push a political agenda or a social justice agenda in a novel, usually it fails. So, how's it done? I would like to say in this short talk that it's all about character. The social issues that affect plot are actually issues that are affecting your characters, they're issues that are either thwarting your characters or driving the action of your characters, so if you think about it in terms of your character, what's motivating, driving their action, you'll be much more successful including those social issues as part of your plot.

[Text on screen] Creating Compelling Characters.

So, I wanna talk a little bit about how to create these believable, compelling characters with that in mind. Characterization is at the heart of any novel. We write fiction, I think, mostly to understand who we are as human beings. To the extent we ought to understand who we are as, say, queer or

how climate change is affecting us as people. It's important stay very personal. It's actually a personal issue in a novel, not a social issue. Everything in a novel, actually, the setting, the plot serves the development of character. Most important of all, I think, most important of most of all, especially when you're writing about social issues in plot is what does your character want? The big picture, like if, you know, if it's like, she wants her PhD, but probably it's not really her PhD, it's something like she wants to prove to her dad that she is really smart. So, understanding those desires at their deepest level, or if she wants to stop some particular climate denier in her neighborhood, or in her city from doing something, what is underneath driving that desire? What is it about that social justice work, on a very personal level, that she wants? To be a good person, that's a little simplistic but there's going to be something else in there. So, you want the big picture plus what's driving your characters in every moment. It's also really good to know what does that character most fear? So, let's say you're writing about a queer character who is living in a small town in a rural place in America and for instance, some despot has just been elected president, you know, what does this character most fear? You know, being beat up, losing his job, that's going to drive not only that character, but it's going to drive all the action and actually the plot of the novel. So, knowing the character's greatest desires and greatest fears is what will drive your plot ultimately and I like to start there from the character and move out to plot, rather than start with plot and overlay that on characters because what's going to keep readers reading your novel is identifying, caring about your compelling characters.

[Text on screen] The Interaction of Character and Social Setting.

With regard to the social issues, I personally am not very interested in characters who are not aware of all the social issues of their times, such as racism, climate change, issues facing LGBT people, any character who's alive and intelligent and thinking is going to be very aware of how those issues affect them. So, that is actually part of the setting, it's part of the social setting and I want my characters, I'm most interested in characters who are super aware of that setting. That doesn't mean, I mean, they can be racist, they can be homophobic, they can be climate deniers, but they are reacting to the social setting of their time. That's the characters reacting to the social setting, it's not overlying these social issues on the character, so once you know how the character feels about those issues, they can be ambivalent, they can be anything, but knowing their relationship to the social issues is going to make your characters very interesting and also bring those issues very much into sharper focus and be much more compelling.

[Text on screen] Marrying Characters and Social Issues.

I always like there to be a love story in a novel. So, even if mainly what I'm, I think about this a lot because if I do have an agenda, I just said a writer's not supposed to have an agenda but if I want, for instance, a reader to understand, in *THE BIG BANG SYMPHONY*, the beauty of Antarctica and why we need to save that continent. Or in my new novel, it's about a queer woman in the '50s and '60s and I want the audience to understand what it was like in the '50s and '60s and maybe how that relates to what it's like today to be a queer in culture. In fact, I want the reader to understand these ideas, so I'm not without having some ideas of what I want to get across, but one easy way is to just throw in a love story, but I love writing love stories, so it's, it's where the passions of the character are going to get in her own way or help her along in terms of delivering some of those ideas. So, a love story is one idea, I write a lot about sisters, I have two sisters, I love my sisters, I love that whole relationship, so I write often about that kind. So, writing about, or people's relationships, characters' relationships with their parents, the death of parents, I mean, there's taking

the characters through the very emotional, key relationships that happen in life and marrying that with what else they're working on in the social justice issue I think often works really well to keep readers in the story.

[Text on screen] Pitfalls to Avoid when Writing About Social Issues.

I want to just finish by talking about a few pitfalls that are standard that you might want to avoid when creating character, especially when writing plots that involve social justice issues. Writing stereotypical characters, everybody knows they're not supposed to do that. How not to do it is very difficult. One of the difficulties is that some parts of stereotypes are true. So, somehow there's, you have to get beyond those stereotypes. One way to do that is to really know who you're writing about, so if, in fact, you're writing about characters different from yourself. If I want to write about a gay male character, I will talk to a lot of gay men, I will find out as much as I can about what it means to be a gay male in my setting, I'll also take what I've written and show it to a lot of people in the category of the person I've written and see it, get it vetted, see whether I've done it well or not well and make some changes. So, that's one way to avoid writing stereotypes. I think it is important to write people different from yourself. It just takes, again, a ton of research. Another problem people write, especially in writing political fiction, is writing characters who are too evil or too good. You know, you have the character who is working for, to save the monarch butterfly, but she's Miss Perfect or the character, the evil character who's all bad and this is something I struggled with a lot as a younger writer. The evil characters were so evil and finding a place where I felt compassion for them, you don't really feel like doing that, there's this terrible person doing this thing. But it turns out to be actually now one of my favorite parts of writing. Finding compassion for my evil characters so that I can write them with much more complexity. Someone who's really good at this is Louise Erdrich, her last couple novels, *The Round House*, and the newest one, she just has these amazing characters who are so fully human and the good work they're trying to do, and also when they fall short of doing good work. An annoyance, for me, is when people write too quirky characters trying to write unique characters, so I like to think in terms of authentic rather than quirky. Sometimes quirkiness just comes across as trying too hard, so that's another pitfall to look after. Finally, and I've mentioned this a few times, but forcing your characters to go with your plot rather than the other way, having the characters and characterization drive the plot is a big pitfall. So, start with character, find out what it is they want to do, they will drive the action and eventually, it's almost the last part of writing a novel is looking at your action in the plot and at that point, you may want to change things a bit to have the build to the climax be a little clearer and sharper, but start with your characters and then go to plot. I think in a lot of writing programs and a lot of writing teachers, we are discouraged from writing about social justice issues because of some of these pitfalls of sounding like we're getting on a soap box or pushing an agenda. I think that stories that don't include the social setting we're in are not particularly interesting, it just means the characters are not aware, so it's difficult, it's difficult to write against a culture if you're writing, for instance, about queer characters who don't believe in marriage. I encourage you to have the justice, I mean, the justice, the courage to do that and to go deep so that you can write these characters so that people can see them, especially feel them, I want all my stories to make readers both think and feel. So, that's my goal, I want ideas and emotions to be the result of reading my stories and I would just say it takes a lot of courage to write against the grain, to write stories that aren't necessarily getting published by the mainstream press, but there's nothing more satisfying than doing that and finding the things you want to say and writing about the characters you want to write and I encourage everyone to go deep and have courage.