

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

Week 5, 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.

>>Welcome back to Power of the Pen. We're in Block C, Week five. We're going to be exploring research, detail, and description. Those class elements that are essential to connecting and expressing the identities of the various characters about whom we write. Characters we try to bring to life. The settings that they move around in. The issues that, in one way or another, they are confronting. These are, for me, the most interesting parts of writing. Once you go out and do your digging and have the chance then to do some interviewing and then to go to the library and look stuff up. That's where it gets really interesting. We'll be talking this week about the ways in which we use that material.

>>We were looking at fiction. We're going to be looking at world building and you could use with research with fiction and non-fiction because research is always going to help you to add details, add description, really build that world that you want your character to exist in, and so you want to make sure that this fictional world is one that your readers believe, and that's helpful in the sense that when you're doing research about a certain city, you might want to bring in some information about very specific, maybe there's a building that's really well known in that city or maybe there's a street that is significant, and so you really can use this research to help your reader become more involved in what it is that you're trying to show them in your story. I think it's important as well to add layers as you begin to work with your manuscript, you want to layers of information. Not just looking at the street, but maybe looking at the house that's on that street, or maybe looking at how that house has changed from when it was built to now if you're in this period. I think it's really interesting to begin to kind of flesh out these ideas of the community and building this community and doing the research that it takes so that your reader can really buy in to your vision.

>>In the same hopes, in non-fiction working, either in literary journalism, in the memoir essay, or in the personal essay, we're trying to create believable worlds, and we can look for models all over the place. In novels, I'm thinking particularly, in this case, of a wonderful biography by Fredrick Turner of the American Explorer John Muir, which begins with a set piece in Glasgow, Scotland and Glasgow, Scotland comes so vividly to life in that opening chapter establishing the world from which John Muir will leave to come to America and then travel all over the country, often by foot, but it begins in a particular place with all the concrete details that make that world come to life. We do that in our research, in our archival research, the Internet, of course, makes things so much easier. You can find as much information as a click will take you, and then the question is how you

use that information to write work of literary journalism or a memoir or a personal essay remembering that you want to convey information to your reader, but maybe not necessarily with the reader knowing that they're getting information. I'm always saying to myself that I want to figure out how to activate facts. How to slip information without the reader knowing they're actually getting information. Creating that vivid dream of place and hoping that the research I've done to make that place come to life will include the kinds of information that are useful and part of that larger theme I'm trying to explore.

>>One of the elements of writing that I find really interesting is when you take a real story and you give it other elements of detail that help to really build it into something that's maybe a little bit different than it originally was, and I'm thinking about a book by David Anthony Durham called PRIDE OF CARTHAGE, where he actually told the story of Hannibal. Goes into the mountains and is looking to get involved in a war, and he creates a brother, Hannibal's brother, who actually tells the story, and it's such a wonderful way to take the real details and give them a kind of personal attention in the story that I just loved it. I thought it was a wonderful way to do that.

>>As you were saying that, I was thinking, in another fashion, the wonderful historian Edmund Morris wrote a biography of Ronald Reagan in which he invented a character to help tell the story. He caught a lot of flack for that because he was, and had always been a highly reputable and dependable historian, but now, in an authorized biography, he invents a character. His reasoning or his rationale was quite interesting, which was that Reagan himself was a product of Hollywood, so why not invent a character? Now, whether that device worked or not, there's some part of me that thinks, oh that's great. Take a chance. Experiment. Maybe it doesn't work. You have at least opened up a new way of thinking about the enterprise of writing a biography.

>>I love it.

>>Onward!

>>[Text on screen] zp Priya Dala on Evoking Community Through Research in Fiction.

>>Zp Priya Dala is a South African physical therapist, psychologist, and writer. Her first novel, WHAT ABOUT MEERA, won the 2015 South African Minara Debut prize, was short listed for the Etisalat Literary prize, and made the top 15 African Novels of 2015 list. Her new novel, THE ARCHITECTURE OF LOSS, is forthcoming this year. In 2016, she was a resident of the International Writing Program.

>>Good day, my name is Zana Priya Dala. I publish as Zed P Dala, or ZP Dala. I am a fiction writer and an essayist. I've also now begun to work on scripts for plays and I've published three novels. The third one's coming out in 2017 published by Pegasus New York. By profession, I am a psychologist and a physical therapist, so I suppose I'm constantly surrounded by social issues on a professional basis. I had the experience of working in an environment where I was in contact with many anti-apartheid activists who are now in their 70s and 80s, and they are living in old age homes and very low-income apartments. As a physical therapist and a psychologist, I was called in to consult with them. My social issues in terms of my writing stemmed from my professional work with these people. I began to, for my own debriefing and debunking experience, write down many of these social issues that were coming out and I found that my medical notes and my psychological notes were beginning to take on a narrative form. In my own cathartic process, I began to write

about these social issues. I eventually began to realize that this writing is now becoming a work, a piece of work which grew very, very quickly into my novels, so I suppose, in terms of incorporating social issues into my fiction writing, I find that the lines are very blurred.

[Text on screen] Beginning with the Social Issue: WHAT ABOUT MEERA by ZP Dala.

I think I first begin thinking about the social issue and the largeness of the social issue in terms of where does it fit into the frame of reference of society and itself. For example, torture or abuse of an anti-apartheid activist, or stigmatization of a divorcee in my community. Starts first as a construct where I begin thinking where does this particular construct fit into the larger social environment that I come from. When I look at the larger social theme, I then begin to draw into craft where it becomes a question of crafting a story. In that, I fall into the fictional style of development of a story where I begin to think about character, characterization, and drawing up a composite character of the various people that I've consulted with. I wouldn't say that I even write a story of one particular woman or one particular man as a memoir, so to speak. Or a biography. I always begin to create a composite of the many stories that I hear in my work, or even at dinner parties or at social gatherings, and the first place I always start is with character. I make constant notes on different mannerisms. It might be something small, little behaviors of characters that I meet, and these characters eventually composite into one protagonist that eventually forms the protagonist of my novel. I begin with thinking about large social issues and where it fits into the world, and I begin to then craft it into a novel structure. Might find myself, I will use the example of divorce, which is highly stigmatized in the community that I come from. It's very frowned upon, and my first novel, WHAT ABOUT MEERA, touched on a woman in the community who dares to divorce. I never find myself standing back and theorizing about whether divorce is good or whether divorce is bad, but what I do is I take the central character, the protagonist, and I talk a lot about her own experience of the social issue. It may be that I can bring across a message about divorce and its stigmatization, by using my character's experiences rather than spending long passages writing about, theoretically, why divorce is such a stigmatized thing, but I can use the character, her experiences, the people that she meets, and perhaps her inner thoughts that will somehow show these large social issues in a fictional way, but also bring the fact into the fiction.

[Text on screen] Casting a Lens.

I absolutely don't feel that I need to force a reader to take sides, or to actually begin to even engage with the social issue in a novel. What I really like to do is cast a lens that the social issue exists. That's largely, if I would think my motivation, that is my motivation. In the writing of any social issue that I work on, I'm never preaching or forcing a reader to take a side, to make a decision, or to even develop any activism of any kind. I think I present all sides of a particular social issue using a character. The reader is free to interpret that the way he or she feels. My particular feeling about the social issue, for example, I don't agree with the stigmatization of divorce, but I never push it down into the reader that they've got to now change their minds or become activists, or even believe that divorce is a stigma or the casting out of anti-apartheid activists is a stigma. What I like to do is cast a lens and show them that such a thing exists. Maybe by showing them that this exists, opening up a box that is very, very much locked, I then can allow them to have a process that will start in their minds that makes them think about something they probably never thought about before. I come from a community in South Africa which is an indentured labor community. In the 1800s, my ancestors were brought over by the British Colonial. It was the East India Company that brought over, I think about 200,000 laborists to work on the sugar cane fields in South Africa. This was a

very traumatic experience. It was never written about, it was never spoken about. From this community, there's a large amount of cultural experiences that we brought over from India, but there's a large amount of cultural experiences that we've appropriated now as Africans. When I released my first novel, *WHAT ABOUT MEERA*, one of the first questions most people asked me: Is this autobiographical? Are you talking about spousal abuse and divorce and extramarital affairs and the absolute desperation of the South African Indian woman to transcend this tiny little farm box that they are living in? I had to explain myself that this is not autobiographical at all, but because I've engaged so much with these women and the community, I began to question myself. I began to question my ideologies about marriage, about the roles of a woman in a marriage in my community, and then the second novel, which moved on about two years later, when I began to work with a woman that had lost the relationship with their children because they chose to be anti-apartheid activists, I also then somehow brought it into a personal narrative because I began to question, am I losing my relationship with my own children because I've decided now to spend hours and hours digging through archives about women who've collected the bones of their comrades from battlefields? In that immersion in the writing of my novels, I've also transformed my own thinking about various issues that I initially thought that I was strongly rooted in. When I wrote the novels, and when I went on the journey with the characters, at the end of the writing of the books, I became a different person from what I started as. Somehow, it became a personal transformation, and I enjoy that. I don't run away from it. I want to, in all my novels, and in the forthcoming one as well, where I'll be addressing something completely, a social issue, but it's something very different from the previous narratives I've spoken about, I also want to go on this journey of transformation. My writing for me is a journey, and as much as for me as writer as it will be for the reader.

[Text on screen] The Relationship Between Research and Narrative.

When I start researching now, when I realize that the novel has now begun creating itself, and I begin the research process, which is quite formalized. It's very structured because facts, figures, they need to be very rooted. My opinion, I try as much as possible to keep out of the discussion, and try to keep it out of an argument so to speak, so I don't cast a judgment at the start of a novel. Even though I've read so much facts and figures of research, I don't cast a judgment about where this particular novel is going to go, but as I'm writing the novel, and it's quite a long process, it's not something that happens within a few weeks, the layers and layers begin to start to unfold before me, and when I start dissecting the research and going deeper and deeper into looking at the narratives, the transcripts of the interviews and the documents, the letters between people, between lovers who had to be separated because of apartheid, it forms a process of reading and then rereading, and then rereading where you discover new layers. Deeper and deeper and deeper layers in text and subtext, and because, I suppose, in my training I've had to learn how to tease out deeper issues, then it follows in my fictional writing as well. As the process unfolds, I'm able to tease out the deeper issues of the character as well. One of the processes I particularly enjoy, and I think I always trend towards when it comes to research is dialogue, where I have direct meetings or interviews with the people that I want to write about. The reason for this is because I strongly feel that whilst I respect documentation, I sometimes wonder how deep this documentation is. An example would be when I was going through the ship logs of the people that were brought over from India to South Africa as indentured laborers, there was not much rich detail in there, and there'd probably be a form that was filled out and they just say bodily markings and the answer would be pock mark on left shoulder, scar on forehead, and even though those things are very important, it would somehow find its way into the fictional writing, but I very much enjoy when it comes to research, my process I enjoy is speaking to people who have known these characters, people who have known these social issues,

people who have lived them. It's difficult because in order to write about them, and in order to begin to get them to start talking to you, you have to immerse yourself in the community. It almost becomes anthropological where you've got to gain their trust, and it's a slow process, which for me is quite frustrating, but I feel that once I begin dialogue, speaking, spending time with people, driving around with them, they will take me to their old houses, they will show me where they grew up. I spend a lot of time with people. I spend a lot of time listening to nonsensical stories of the food that they used to eat when they were children, and in that process, I find that I am becoming closer and closer to the person that I'm about to talk about in a fictional novel, and once they trust me well enough, then the deeper issues do come out. I really enjoy face to face discussions, but we've lost a lot of people, so I don't always have the luxury to have face to face discussions, but there's generations after them, their children. Some are willing to talk, some are not. I take whatever tiny little bits of research that I get, whether it be documentation or interviews. If you are writing a story about any particular social issue, most especially social issues, and I do believe that almost every bit of writing is a social issue. I even believe a story like Harry Potter is a social issue. Respect is one of the greatest advice that I would give is that if you are writing about anything that you will respect the fact that your words are going to always be there, even when you're not. Be careful and be very, very respectful of what you put down on a piece of paper. It should not be judgmental, nor should be advocating. You can be an activist for social issues and be a fiction writer without being disrespectful to what you're writing about.