

## Suzanne Scanlon Transcript

>>[Text on screen] Suzanne Scanlon.

>>Suzanne Scanlon is the American author of the novel *Promising Young Women*, as well as *Her 37th Year*, *An Index*, which was chosen by Allan Gurganus for the Iowa Review Fiction Prize. Her fiction has appeared in many journals, including *BOMB Magazine*, *The Iowa Review*, *The American Scholar*, and *DIAGRAM*, and she writes about theater for the *Chicago Reader* and *Time Out Chicago*. She teaches creative writing at Columbia College and was recently a visiting writer at Roosevelt University's MFA program.

>>So today I'm going to talk about fragmentation in fiction, in prose writing. And to start with I just want to talk about my recent book *Her 37th Year, An Index*, which I structured as a series of fragments and it was all collected in the form of an index. So in terms of fragmentation, what has interested me in reading for many years is the deliberate break in a narrative line, the way a series of fragments allows a reader to jump from a specific time or place or moment or image, to another, with just the white space in between allowing for some narrative tension, narrative movement. So in *Her 37th Year*, part of how I made that cohere was the limit of time: I structured it as one year in a woman's life - her 37th year - and so the fragments, then, were an assemblage of moments from that year - moments, conversations, things she read, letters, theater pieces - and at times, these moments, in the present tense of the narrator in that 37th year, linked to certain past tense, past moments. So there was a circling there, and it allowed me, in that structure, to collapse the present with the past.

So fragmentation, in my view, is a great way to of linking form and content when a work is circling around time, around memory, around loss, and when you want to provide layers for a character because we all know that in our present moments, there are often things that link to something in the past, right? So our present is often linked to the past, or perhaps to the future. And our present subjectivity is linked to everything that is informing our lives at that moment, whether it's the people we're close to, the ones we're in love with, where our children or parents are at that time, as well as

what we're reading - for an artist or writer, certainly everything you're taking in is filtered through that lens. So I wanted to distill a year through that accumulation of fragments, of moments, glimpses, without a complete structure, without a sense of linear beginning, middle, end. So something that fragmentation allowed me to do, which I have loved as a reader, is to have the reader and writer working together to fill in the gaps, to make those leaps in time. And I think that what's key for me is the gaps - what's left out - in such a structure becomes as important as what's included and what's offered with each precise fragment. And there's a kind of mystery and tension in what's left out. So I want to think about what I said about form and content, and how this can help you, as a writer, to decide when a fragmented structure might be helpful. For me, the books I've loved have dealt with memory. The books that have used fragmentation have dealt with memory, with time collapsing, with the layers of a self, often with a sort of narrative breakdown, in which cases the fragmentation - the structure of the text itself - reflects the content of the book, the actual story of the book.

[Text on screen] Working with Fragmented Narrative Structures: *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras.

One of my favorite books of all time - *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, the French writer - was published in 1984, I believe, in the translated version - in English - and as you can see with Duras' book - I mean, before you even read the text, there's something fascinating about the fragmentation of the text that strikes the reader immediately. And the structure is just these blocks of text with enormous amounts of white space. So there will be a short bit, and then we have a break, and then a longer bit, and a break, and a short bit again - and each of these fragments is moving us to another moment, or time, or place. So one might be now, in the present tense of the narrator as she writes, whereas another is linking back to her fourteen-year-old self or fifteen-year-old self. And the jumps she makes, beyond time, are often in the point of view, so we have the first person at times, we have the third person at times, she'll see herself at fourteen or fifteen and speak of "the girl" - she doesn't name the girl. So we have that tension of the older woman now narrating the story in a way that we know the young girl living the story would not have access to in the same way. And it provides some of the power of the book, and certainly the power of the narrator here. I'm going to read just the

first short fragment that opens the book, and then talk a little bit more about what she's doing here.

So the book begins:

"One day, I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said, 'I've known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged.'"

And so that's the end, we move from there to another image to another image to another moment. The man who comments there, who's unnamed, we never meet him again, we never hear from him again, we don't learn anything more about this man. But this moment - the precision of that moment and the conversation and what the man says to her - lays the groundwork for what will follow in this entire novel. The pieces of the past and who she was as a young woman, and the rather overvalued beauty of a young woman, and then who she is now, this speaker here, the woman who's telling the story with the ravaged face. So the man, in his comment to her, "One day, I was already old..." in the public, so we get that information that she's at this point in her life already something of a public figure. But the man is commenting there and offering this resistance to a sort of common cultural narrative of the young woman as being more valuable, in a way - her experience is more valuable - whereas he's already rejecting that and saying, "I prefer your face now." And what that links to is the voice here, telling the story, is the one who's able to kind of resist the silencing of the young woman whose face - and this is Duras as a young woman on the cover of the book - and the story is about her and this moment at fourteen or fifteen and realizing how alone she was in the world, the lack of guidance her mother could offer, but it's also a story and most probably known and sold as a story of sexual awakening. And it certainly is that, but there's layers to this novel that becomes a coming of age story for a woman who, less important almost than the lover of the title, was this moment of time which arose in her the knowledge that she would be a writer, that she could be a writer, and that, as such, she was always in some way separate from her experience. And yet that was part of how she would survive, and that was the power. So from that moment of childhood that she's reflecting on, to the moment of the woman telling this story, the book becomes

about piecing together different fragments of the life she's lived in that time, from this moment to now. And because the subject of the book is coming of age, but also memory and time and loss, the fragmentation works in the way that our memory often works, as well as the way that the construction of a self works. I think for many people, our identity is in so many places, and I think for a young woman whose identity was from the start inscribed from the outside or, certainly in this circumstance, is the way she saw herself and the way she was told who she was by this older man. And now, as she's older with the ravaged face, what she's told... she's taking these pieces of who she is and she's looking at the pieces of the women she's known - from her mother to other women she will bring up in, again, fragments, midway through the book there's a woman, Marie Claude Carpenter, another woman Betty Hernandez, both these women she sees as foreign, they were foreigners in Paris when she was older, and this links to who she was, and her mother, as foreigners, they were French colonized Vietnam at the time, and so her early awareness of herself as an outsider here becomes key, becomes part of what she's circling here. But I think also for Duras, always the case, this sense of narrative breakdown, the fragmentation is key to this sense. her awareness that there is no such thing as a linear narrative, that that is less realistic, perhaps, than a narrative that's jumping around in time and associative, for example, as a way of telling a story.

[Text on screen] Working with Sentence Structure, Points of View, and Flashback in Fragmented Narrative Structures: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison.

I think another example this brings to mind in a perhaps more realistic, structurally, in some ways, book is Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. And I just want to speak to the way this book is layered with the repetition of fragments from a childhood primer, the Dick and Jane books. So she begins this book with a fragment from this other text, which is: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, father, Dick, and Jane live in the green and white house." So that continues on, and on the second page here, of her book, the text starts to speed up, and by the end, there's no space between the words anymore, and the words are jammed together so that the text, which starts slow and deliberate - a very familiar text but also a kind of idea from a very post-depression era, comfortable, white-American view of what a family is - into the

kind of loss and hysteria of what that text came to represent for those voices and people who weren't included in that narrative. In *The Bluest Eye*, which was Morrison's first book, the protagonist, or the focal character who's not necessarily the narrator here, her story is told by a woman named Claudia, later in her life, two sisters who knew her as a young girl. And it's alternately told in Claudia's first person remembering Pecola, but also told in omniscient third person point of view because Morrison wants to give, I believe, she wants to give a sense of the community and the role the community played in the life of this girl - in the way they failed her and betrayed her. Like Duras' book - however different they are - they're both stories of young women's sort of sexual awakening, but also violation and the abandonment of the young girl, the young woman, to a larger culture that's already decided the place for young women, whether she's outside the culture or within depending on her status.

In *The Bluest Eye* it's very much a black girl whose status, she's been told, is lesser. And then when even her own family, those who are meant to protect her, are unable to do that - and in fact contribute to her destruction - we see the narrative break down. Morrison, in her fragmentation, she jumps from a flashback - again, jumps in time, so she'll have one character's flashback in time - to another character in the present, and then she'll jump back to this other text and she'll alternate that. And I think that is another way that fragmentation can work in a more perhaps linear storytelling format. I think, like Duras, what's impressed me so much about Morrison's work is the way that the very subject of the book - the loss of a self, the loss of a coherent narrative for a young woman's early experience, and the way that trauma leads to the creation and the fragmentation of her very identity - that we see the formation of an identity can be fragmented, and that a life beyond that necessarily might circle back to this origin story, or to this trauma, or to this loss.

[Text on screen] Working with Time, Points of View, and Unreliable Narrators in Fragmented Narrative Structures: "Ma, A Memoir" by Lynn Freed.

This is actually... there's David Foster Wallace stories in this great collection *New Sudden Fiction: Short*

Short Stories from America and Beyond, but it's also of course in his collected fictions. But also in this book, another story working in fragments that I quite adore, a piece of short fiction by the writer Lynn Freed, and the title of this story is "Ma, A Memoir," which is already playing there with the idea that this is fiction but the title is "Ma, A Memoir," and when we think about memoir, we think about, of course, the narrator being able to tell or reflect on his or her own story. Well Freed's story is about a mother - mostly from the daughter's point of view - but a mother who is in the midst of dementia or Alzheimer's, some loss of self, or what we think of as self. And again, the fragmentation here is a wonderful linking of form and content in that dementia, the way dementia alters time and perception of time.

So when we have a character who has something of an unstable self - an unreliable narrator - the fragments reflect that confusion, and the reader, just as the reader in Wallace's story starts to feel the terror and the anxiety and the crisis point in the movement of the prose, the fragmented sections here, she writes this story in seven pieces, seven fragments, and between each one there's a gap, there's a white space, and there's a leap in time. We don't know what happens in between exactly, but it doesn't matter because in each section we're with this family, which is really a mother, a father, and a daughter. And it's quite funny and Freed uses this jumping around to represent a marriage, and identity, and the way that a marriage - a long marriage - the husband and wife might play different roles for each other. And here the daughter is the only one who's really sort of kept her... who has the perspective to remind these people who they are. And yet on some levels she's also aware that memory is its own kind of fiction. So ultimately what difference does it matter if, you know, her mother remembers things differently than she does, and to what extent should she insist on the so-called truth, right? And something else to note that Freed does here is that she doesn't say Alzheimer's or dementia - she says "Ma, A Memoir" and she gives us these characters in dialogue, and the Ma and the daughter and the dad, and they're very funny the way they speak, and they have their very particular sort of terms of endearment. At one point the daughter says: "I took her out for a drive in the Fiat the next day, up to the coast to our favorite beach hotel for lunch. 'This way, Marmalade,' I said, shepherding her down the steps one at a time, 'This way, strawberry jam,' said the Indian waiter, 'This way, honey bunch.' She laughed, she giggled.

'Go on, order crayfish,' she suggested." So they have this funny way of speaking. "Driving back, I described the wild horses on the sea, the people selling beadwork on the beachfront. We were both happy for a moment. 'Hey, ho!' she cried, 'How old are you?' 'Forty-nine.' 'How old am I?' 'Eightyseven.' 'Really? How can I be that much older than you?' 'Because you're my mother, Ma.' 'Haha, that's a good one!'"

So it's a funny story, funny and we know the tragedy of the humor is that she's ill in the sense that she's lost her sense of time and memory in the way that we do. But there's also truth in that loss, and there's joy, and as she says, "We are happy for a moment," so we come to feel that that's a sort of triumph of its own, these moments she has with her mom, even if her mom doesn't believe that she's actually her mom anymore, there's beauty there. Late in the piece, she's talking about going to pick up her mother: "The next day when I came to fetch her she was waiting at the front door. 'Has he died?' she asked. 'No.' 'Well thank God for that. Wearing a hat?' 'No.' 'Then nor shall I.' She was the one that was meant to die first. Once she had overheard him saying to a widow, just engaged to be married, 'Couldn't you have waited for me?' 'That husband of mine,' she said now, 'he was really very good to me.' 'Your husband is my father, Ma.' 'Rubbish!' she snapped, 'he's my father.'" And there's that sweet sense of, you know, her confusion, and yet we all know that it's the way that the ones who are mad, the ones who've lost sense, the fools, speaking the truth, we know that there's truth in a long marriage and the different roles people play for each other, in this case, you know, she sees her husband as her father, she won't believe her daughter that it's her father. So after that bit, we have some white space, and the next section - the leap that Freed makes - the next section begins this way: "The day after she claimed him as her father, he died. When I came to tell her she was waiting, as usual, to be taken to the hospital. 'Ready?' she said, 'I've been waiting for hours.' 'Ma,' I said, 'dad died, he just died.' I sat down. She covered her eyes with a hand and breathed deeply.

Finally she said, 'It's unbearable, I cannot bear it, don't expect me to bear it.' 'I don't expect you to bear it, Ma. I can't bear it either.' She looked up as if she'd just met me at a bus stop. 'It's full of emptiness, this place,' she said." So from there, you know, this is part of the moment in this narrator's life, she's forty-nine, her parents are quite elderly, and her father dies, and her mother is

alive, but isn't quite, you know, connected to time or to the sense of who she was to her daughter. So the daughter's become the parent to the mother. And yet in that moment - in, really, the climax of the story here, "The day after she claimed him as her father, he died" - the mother seems to return to awareness, or at least the gravity of the awareness of his loss, and yet in that final comment, "It's full of emptiness, this place," she said, but still not connecting and yet saying the most profound kind of commentary on what's happening. And that's the end of that fragment. And there's two other fragments that return and, again, with much dialogue here and much scene, Freed sort of narrows in on a bit of conversation from each of these moments. It covers about seven to ten days, so each of these fragments that she offers is a glimpse, a moment, as if we're overhearing a moment from this time.

[Text on screen] Constructing a Fragmented Story.

So one question writers often have is, if they want to write a book in this style, in a very fragmented style: How would you plan a structure like this? And how would you contain it all? And I think that's a great challenge of structuring a work this way, is how far out can you go, how much can you leave out before the reader feels frustrated, or that there's just not enough through line - narrative through line. And I think that - it really depends on the work - I think that depending on the book you're writing, you have to decide how much fragmentation is going to inform the book itself. So I think Duras' fragmentation here, part of why that works is because the narrative voice is so strong, and so grounded, and drives the work, and is so focused on putting together the pieces of a past that as she says early on - the narrator says early on - "I've never told this story correctly." So the fragments become a way of piecing together almost a puzzle. And it's hard when you read a book like that - and certainly when I read it first when I was eighteen - you know, I wanted to write like that, and it's very hard to do. I think the tension of an older narrator with this retrospective voice gives it coherence.

Because this is a woman who's lived all these years and so that voice is able... we know how memory works, we know what it is to hear a story from an older person who's jumping here

and there and there, and that voice holds it together. In my case, when I was writing *Her 37th Year*, I had the story, it began as a short story, and the story was really the story of an affair, a romance - there was a romantic line - and I felt, almost from reading... Barthelme has these wonderful short fictions that tend to, you know, he goes in all sorts of wild directions, and yet many of his stories are grounded by this romantic line, this sort of love story. And I think I was thinking about that, that if I had this grounding of a story of this woman meeting this man in a sort of seduction, and they actually, you know, the meeting is quite brief, but if that was the narrative line that grounded it, then where else could I go. And I knew that was the base story, and I knew that the time... I limited it to this year. And the things that were happening in that year, I could return to, there were some very precise occasions in that year. But I returned to that base story, that narrative line, and that allowed the narrator to jump into the past, to jump into her reading, because we came back to this story of the narrator and the man in boots, who is the one she has the affair with, and that allowed for the structure.

And then, it was after that that I added the index form for the short fiction, really as an exercise, because I at first had little headings for each of the sections, and then I added the index and that seemed to contain it as well. And the index... that form became so fun that it just continued from there. But I think I didn't start out thinking that it would be so fragmented; it was more the discovery of the index and how that worked that allowed for the fragmentation. And I've seen writers do this in other ways. In *Why Did I Ever*, a book by Mary Robison, she has numbered sections, and they're little fragments, and she said that she wrote that book on notecards, and it jumps around, but there's one story: we have this story of a woman, Money, and we have, from the beginning, where she is set in time and her boyfriend, and there's three ex-husbands, right, but we don't get a lot of development of how we got there. But this time, where she is, she has two children, and a certain crisis with her son, and we just get pieces of this. So the sort of crisis of sorting together all these pieces of her life - her job, her work, her next door neighbor, her daughter's life, her son and the kind of tragedy he was in - this becomes key to the fragmentation here and the humor of that book. So I think you really, really have to decide if it's going to be best for the work that you're building. And I think for many nonfiction works that uses fragmentation

such as Maggie Nelson or Claudia Rankine's recent *Citizen* or *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* - these are in the world of lyric essay or the world of poetry, we're used to that fragmentation, and we're used to those shifts and what's left out, and I think readers will do that in fiction and nonfiction. But ultimately, the more you can have some grounding in a certain place or in a certain narrative line or in a certain time, the easier it will be for the reader to kind of put the pieces together to work with the narrator to make this all cohere into a cohesive story.