

Representation and Responsibility in Fiction: Writing about Mental Health Issues with Hope and a Proper Point of View

Presenter: Spencer Hyde

This is a transcript of a presentation given at the 2020 conference of the Latter-day Saint Publishing and Media Association (LDSPMA). You may not reproduce or publish this material without prior written consent from LDSPMA.

Hello, everyone. Thanks for joining me today. My name's Spencer Hyde, as you know, and my head's in an archipelago. I said that word wrong for many years, actually until very recently. Okay. Today I'd like to start talking about point of view and responsibility by sharing this (if I can figure this out. Here we go.) All right. There we are.

In discussing point of view with you, I thought about responsibility a lot and what it means to be responsible for someone or something. And the first thing I thought of was—it's about six or seven years old, but this came to me first. I thought about my children, of course, and that I truly have lives in my hands.

And it might be a simple way to think about it. But, but I really want you to think about what it means to be responsible for someone or something. This has never happened to me, thankfully.

Now, the great news about being a writer: you get a second draft and a third, fourth, and fifth. You can spell check and make sure you don't give gifts to Satan. Well, unless, of course, the character in your book is indeed giving gifts to Satan, then you want that. And I believe I've actually done this one. I want to try this one for sure. Seems mean, but it might, might be the right thing to do.

Okay so author Steve Almond said that every reader comes to a narrative with two questions: Who do I care about? And what does he or she care about? If you've never seen Parks and Rec

it's worth a watch. Andy here should not be drinking from a fountain that way. I mean, especially with COVID.

But it's not just funny, I care about this because of the way Ann is looking at him right behind Andy. The way she's looking at him as he drinks. I know Andy cares about Ann, so every action is layered and changes my perception of the narrative arc. The scene has purpose because I'm close enough to each character to understand what they want and what they care about.

But how do you get to that point where you care-We care about characters, even those as bumbling as Andy. In fact, how does he become, in many ways, the heart of the show? Think of your favorite novels, stories, films, shows etc. Which characters matter most to you and why? Seriously consider that for a minute.

Why do they matter to you and what did the author do to get you to that point? It wouldn't be wise to discuss properly represented characters or talking about portraying mental health, if we didn't also discuss #OwnVoices in tandem.

In the past two years, #OwnVoices has become a popular hashtag on Twitter and in agent bios or requests or what they call manuscript wish list.

You may have heard from Madeleine Dresden discuss this very thing. #OwnVoices means a book written by a member of the marginalized community from which it depicts.

In other words, if you're writing a character from the LGBTQ community, an #OwnVoices hashtag or description would mean that you as the author are also from the LGBTQ community.

So to claim #OwnVoices, it's not necessary that every experience your character goes through is also something you're going through, but it is necessary that you are from the marginalized community you-your protagonist is also from.

#OwnVoices is creating a lot of great inroads for those looking to tell stories from their community, culture, class, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation.

And this has allowed new voices to find publication and a platform. This movement is great in so many ways. But one reason you're in this session and thinking about responsibility has to do, I mean at least peripherally, with cancel culture. Recently, a friend of mine published a book with a Native American folk tale in its pages.

The folk tale is broadly known and told, but my friend is not Native American. Twitter tore her apart. She said it brought her to tears most nights on her book tour.

She said she wishes she spent more time integrating that folktale into the tissue of the book, though she tried to do just that from the outset.

I don't like going too far down this rabbit hole because we tend to get lost in the debate about who can tell what story, and I, I feel that that goes against what fiction is fundamentally about. But if you're interested and have time I recommend you read-In the New Yorker there was an article called In Y.A. Where's The Line Between Criticism and Cancel Culture. I recommend you give that a look.

Now, speaking of what fiction is fundamentally about, Pulitzer Prize winning author Anthony Doerr said "I don't see my own life as necessarily all that interesting.

I'm not mining or cannibalizing my own direct experience to write stories. I'm sure those of you who are writers have all heard this advice, Write what you know.

Fundamentally, that is good advice. You're writing about heartbreak or feeling lost or feeling scared or feeling anxious, these things that you have gone through.

But that doesn't mean necessarily that if you are a violin-violin maker from-for 60 years, you should only write stories about violin makers. You should assume that there are enough commonalities in human experience, that you can write about a Finnish washerwoman in 1512." And the consummate pro, Einstein said "No worthy problem is ever solved on the plane of its original conception." All right, put those two together and think about what it means to portray commonalities in human experience and solve problems on a new plane.

I think fiction is beautiful because we can solve the problems of existence through story. Through our imaginative creations. Vonnegut put it this way: "A book is an arrangement of 26 phonetic symbols 10 numerals and about eight punctuation marks and people can cast their eyes over these and envision the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, or the Battle of Waterloo." Ultimately, that can only work if you earn it. And when considering #OwnVoices, representation, responsibility, and hope, that means you need to think about proximity to your characters. Get proximate and you won't have to worry about that Twitter mob.

Well, honestly, we shouldn't have to worry about that Twitter mob because fiction is an imaginative art. This means we imagine characters every day, in every way, in all situations so we can create new stories and try to understand existence a bit better.

The mob only rises when we fail to earn the moment. And to be fair, even if we do earn it, there are still trolls looking to bring you down. So avoid those conversations and focus on the humaneness in your novel.

But how do you get that humaneness and that authenticity factor? How do you earn it? That might be a question, or those might be questions that you have right now.

Jerome Stern said much of fiction would be impossible-And I insert here that of the mental health variety-without research and something deeply and immediately personal at its heart. Mark Twain made up stories, but he knew the Mississippi River. He knew its people and he knew its dialects. Hawthorne wrote about events that happened long before he was born, but he knew New England and its customs. Melville's fantastic voyages, although drenched in literary and encyclopedic sources, were launched from his own knowledge of the sea. Virginia Woolf created a character who lived for four centuries, but that character was inspired by a person she loved. Orwell invented a world of the future, but it was based on his deep understanding of his own society.

Now, I don't think it would be fair to talk about ideas for this entire session without offering any practical application or any useful tools you can take home and use in your own writing. To that end, I want to kind of funnel this discussion into one aspect of writing fiction. One critical component that is often decided upon in the early stages of a story or in the first draft and forgotten about largely thereafter.

And that's point of view. It's all about balance and distance and being aware of the gap between author, narrator, character, and the perception of that gap by the audience.

All right. Speaking of gaps, let me make sure I am doing this properly here. So I can make this full screen. Let me make sure-Okay, we did highlight the right one, Okay, here we go. All right, All right, let's get back to this. All right, so, There we go.

It was great until we zoomed out, right? Then it got a little weird. Now, even weirder when Will Ferrell shows up, right? That's a misuse or, I guess, in this case it's a proper use because they're going for the joke.

But it's a misuse of emotional distance. Can you imagine a moment in a story like this? The whiplash that would come from im-improper use of that distance? Not just emotional but physical as well, right? With, with Jimmy Fallon and Justin Timberlake standing right next to each other. But of course it depends on the purpose of the scene and they were going for a joke. So it worked.

Okay, so these names might sound familiar and partially because I just referenced one of them, but if not, don't worry, we're going to discuss it. But you have narrative distance, psychic distance, or emotional distance.

Joseph-Josip Novakovich calls this shifting point of view, but I like to think of it in terms of cinematography. Imagine there's a camera in the novel and you as the author are the director. You're Spielberg.

Now, who is holding the camera, when are they holding it, where are they holding it, why are they holding it? How close are you going to get to each character at any given moment, and why? How will that serve the scene and the overall narrative arc? Make sure you know the answers to all of these questions before you shift point of view, before you choose point of view, and as you're revising with point of view in mind.

John Gardner created this specific progression to show the zoom in function of narrative. Let's go through them together. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.

Now, in example one, we have a third-person narrator looking at an unnamed man with a great psychic distance. Rikand says, this is the kind of long range distance you expect to the opening of a novel.

Example two. Henry J Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms. Okay, so we're situated in the character's point of view. But we still hear the oral quality of the narrator. I know it's small, but that "had never much cared for." That's a distinct voice from a unique individual. I certainly wouldn't say it that way.

In example three we have Henry hated snowstorms. Okay, now that voiceover quality of the narrator, that drops off entirely. We no longer see the character. Instead, we're in the character's head, privy to all his perceptions, but no longer viewing him from the outside.

This is where I want you to get with every one of your characters before you feel they're ready to put into a work of fiction, even in draft one.

I'm not saying you need to have that same psychic distance throughout the novel, but you should feel comfortable getting that close to each character. You should know your characters that well. So I want you to feel comfortable at this range. And to me, that means you've worked hard enough to know the character inside and out, or, I guess, in this case outside and in.

Okay, four. Man, how he hated these stupid snowstorms. Now, I have edited this a little bit so it's a little more-it's a bit friendlier. We'll go with stupid though. He hated these stupid snowstorms. Okay, here Gardener makes use of my favorite technique, free indirect discourse. The characters thoughts are absorbed by the narrator.

In five we have Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul. That's a great stream of consciousness interior monologue. It's also technically a version of free indirect discourse or free indirect style.

So most narratives move like a camera eye between those long distance establishing shots, at-like we had at the beginning, and the short, and the shots that established tone, right? Man how he hated stupid snowstorms. That's the tone for us there.

Now, I want you to think about your own narrative, right? When do you have these limited shots? When do you have close range character points of view, and when you back up to those long range shots and why? So take this idea and try it with your main character in your current project if you haven't already. You probably have just didn't know it.

And if you did know it, you might not have pay close enough attention to realize what it might be doing to that character in that specific scene. And, and you can start to think about if you really want that to happen in that moment.

So again, you should make it at least to step three with every character, then feel free to change the distance as you see fit. Again, according to narrative purpose (inaudible.) All right, so like I said with tone. Man how he hated those stupid snowstorms. It's not just about zooming in and out physically, what if we don't have Will Ferrell standing at the door and we still want to create some space between Jimmy Fallon and Justin Timberlake? What do we do? We can use body language, sure, but we also need to remember the heart of any narrative. And that's the dialogue.

We need to think about how we are representing each character with the voice we give them in the narration. It's important to touch briefly on tone here. Like I said earlier, especially considering representation of touchy subjects like mental health. Just like parenting fails, we can have dialogue or character fails if we don't consider the appropriate tone at any given moment when dealing with touchy subject matter.

To that end, we move to this now. Let's see here. Not that one. Whoops. Here we go. Okay. You know, it's Woody Allen. Did I mention that? Yeah! We got it, we got it! And I'm sitting there with Woody and I say, I turned to him and I go, Uh boy these pretzels or making me thirsty. Is that how you gonna say it? No, no, I'm working on it. Do it like this! These pretzels are making me thirsty. No. These pretzels are making me thirsty. No, no see, that's no good. See, you don't know how to act. These pretzels are making me thirsty! Oh that was no good? All right.

Okay, let's get back to the presentation here. But, uh, we'll need to keep that in mind as we move forward. All right. It's not what you said, it's how you said it. So even when we're at a similar distance and even when we're using similar language, we can still differentiate and show character.

I know a lot of people with OCD who talk about their tics in a much different way than I talked about mine. My nephew is autistic and his autism is much different than that of my neighbor. And we all eat pretzels, but I don't-I certainly don't get as dramatic as George does when he's talking about being thirsty, even if we use the same words. Why? Well, George is experiencing his own individual stresses in the moment. He's parking hundreds of cars on tight Manhattan streets and he's looking for a stable, more stable job and he's on, on the outs with with the friends. So that all carries over into how he speaks. Your characters are going to likewise shift in tone, according to their own yearnings or struggles or anxieties or hopes.

It's a sliding scale, just like narrative or emotional distance is a sliding scale, but remember the tone established early on is likewise important and also established through proper use of narrative distance.

Here's what he enforced or said about such zooming in and out. A novelist can shift his viewpoint. If it comes off, and it comes off with Dickens and Tolstoy. Indeed, this power to expand and contract perceptions, this right to intermittent knowledge, I find that one of the great advantages of the novel form.

And it has a parallel in our perception of life. We are stupider sometimes than others. We can enter into people's minds occasionally but not always because our minds get tired. And this intermittence lends in the long run variety and color to the experiences we receive.

At the end of the day we're stupider sometimes than others. We get tired, we decide we can simplify and go for the easy laughs and the flat character like we have with Monk. If you love that show, I, I think it's-that is wonderful and I think it's a funny show, and I don't question why it gained so much popularity, but in my opinion, coming from the perspective I come from having severe OCD, Monk is a very stereotypical character.

Very palatable, right? It's one we can encounter and feel comfortable with and not feel like we have to do the hard work of the kind of character-of engaging with the kind of character we see in Jack Nicholson is-in *As Good As It Gets*. Nicholson is more of an archetype. Monk, more of a stereotype.

Sometimes we decided it's easiest to offer a character that's more stereotype than archetype, and I can understand that that feeling that impulse, but over the course of revision and looking at point of view and how it's ri-and how we represent and are responsible for our characters, I promise it will turn into the Jack Nicholson character and you'll be grateful for it.

Sometimes we figure our novel has a strong plot, so why worry about the point of view and tone. But then when we get down to that revision, you'll see it matters more than anything else. And why? Because that's how you get proximate to character. That's how you avoid missing the heart of the thing. You need to know when to zoom in, in or out, physically and emotionally. And it shows that you're representing properly and that you're responsible and caring for the lives in your hands. The lives on that page.

Let me give you an example. My cousin Kyle Pain grew up in New Mexico. President Gordon B. Hinckley was visiting his home ward in Albuquerque. Kyle was seven, sitting in the front row. Another kid with a tie on in a meeting all packed to the brim, just like the picture. Think of this narratively. Now, from a distance it would seem the most important person in the room is President Hinckley on those two screens on either side and all the way up front, right? And I think we can all agree, President Hinckley had a weightier job than my cousin did, an unemployed kid picking his nose, teasing his sister, Valerie and bringing my uncle's temper to a boil, as usual.

Now if Kyle is a character in my narrative, and he is right now, I have just as much responsibility to him as I do to the Prophet. If he is my point of view character then I have even more pressure to properly represent.

Many would see the heart of the scene coming from the pulpit. I mean, it's the prophet, right? But as President Hinckley stepped off the stand and walked down the aisle after the meeting was over, he stopped my cousin and shook his hand. This actually happened too, which, which is great. Kyle was on his way out because he had his own desires.

As Bhu tran says, start with a character who wants something and you'll eventually find the heart of your story. Anyway, so here's Kyle, walking away when the Prophet puts his hand on his shoulder, turns Kyle around and says, What's your name, little guy? Kyle responds, My name is Kyle ya big pile, and he walks away without another word, leaving his mother and father speechless. President Hinckley turned to my aunt and said, if you think you're important, just talk to a kid.

Now I want you to think about how that narrative honors Kyle, not just the prophet, but Kyle as well. And I want you to think about the differences here between narrative distance and emotional distance.

You need both in fiction, of course, but don't forget that every character in your book is your responsibility. Just like Kyle, if you bring that kid into the narrative, he needs to want something. And he wanted to get out of there and he didn't care who the Prophet was.

And they-everyone wants something, even if it's just a kid, every single person in this packed auditorium has their own wants, their own hopes, their own desires, and they hope that they're going to be realized. And you have to honor those characters, if you include them in your narrative. Ron Carlson put it this way, saying, every character has an agenda. Their own life that filters into a scene and gives it authenticity. And that's what you're after in representing mental health or any other community. That's why you're here today.

Look Janie, I've been invited to tea at the White House. And I suppose you want to wear my red sweater. So this doesn't diminish the news from Janey, right? But Carlson tells us it honors Janey by making her credible.

I think that's a great way to think about this entire discussion. You are responsible for accurate characterization, and by doing the work to earn that accuracy you honor the individuals from the communities you're seeking to represent.

Here's a great example from Mark Hatton's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. I stepped outside. Father was standing in the corridor. He held up his right hand and spread his fingers out in a fan. I held up my left hand and spread my fingers out in a fan and we made our fingers and thumbs touch each other. We do this because sometimes father wants to give me a hug, but I do not like hugging people. So we do this instead, and it means that he loves me.

This paragraph breaks my heart and puts it all back together again in the same moment. Makes me smile. I know what the character wants, and I understand intimately the buffer of mental health. I believe any authors' worries over properly representing mental health in fiction ultimately stem from worries about properly portraying a character by using the right point of view.

Capturing the right tone and doing the proper amount of research to earn the right to tell that story with the appropriate emotional distance. I know that's a lot. But think about earning it, you have to earn the right to tell that story.

So why did we spend so much time on point of view and character and tone when we wanted to talk about mental health? Because that's what you need to master in order to portray mental health correctly in fiction.

Faulkner said it all begins with character and in order to properly portray that character, you need to appreciate the sliding scale of narrative distance. Then and only then will we understand, or will you understand who the most important character is in the room. Andy sure doesn't seem like he's important initially, but the closer we get to him, the more we care about him. And isn't that true of everybody? As Tom Grind said, as for the intimidating decree "write what you know," you would, if you accepted this totalitarian advice, surrender not only your imagination but also your freedom to deploy it however, and whenever you wish to do so. Did Homer go to Troy? No.

Did Pynchon fight in World War Two? No. Was Faulkner black? Was Toni Morrison a slave? Was Shakespeare ever a king? Was he ever a queen? Was he ever a sprite? Was he ever a Moor? Was he ever a ghost? If you write only what you know you voluntarily forfeit the possibility of tell, telling stories that go beyond what you know and if you forfeit this possibility you undermine all of literature as well as your own hopes for creating some of it yourself.

So don't lose hope. Create some of it yourself but remember, you have to earn it.

This means every character in the book is your responsibility. You can talk about a large man stepping out of a doorway all day long. That's easy distance. But when you start telling me how Henry J Warburton felt about snow, well, I'm in. And I want to know more. I start caring. And ultimately that will decide if you succeed or fail in representing anything, not just mental health. You have to care. And it's that charitable impulse that will drive it home.

Novels are famous for their humaneness, not their novelness. Get to know the human and then put it in the novel. Don't just talk about it, be about it. Talk with you soon. Thank you.