

There are no on-camera narrators telling the story of Marlin Barton. We interviewed Marlin at his home, just outside of Montgomery, on the Alabama River.

Marlin begins....

In some ways, telling a story is the most natural thing in the world to do. It's nothing you really have to be afraid of. But we tell stories all the time. I mean, think about it, if you see a friend of yours on Monday and your friend says, what'd you do over the weekend, you might begin by saying, "oh, you not gonna believe what happened to me? Let me tell you". And there you are telling a story.

I'm Marlin Barton. I'm a fiction writer, and also I teach creative writing.

Originally, I'm from Montgomery, Alabama, but I grew up in Greene County, Alabama, out in the country, and my grandfather had a country store, and I remember working in there and spending time in there and listening to people sit around in the front of the store. I would hear people tell stories and my family told stories. And so I think it was listening to all those stories, which always fascinated me, that I think eventually made me want to be a writer.

And I always liked to read and that was a key thing. I remember my parents and my grandparents read to me -- and all of that kind of worked on me unconsciously, I suppose. And when I was in college, I began to wonder if, if I could write a story, and so I started trying my hand at it and, you know, I wasn't very good, but it was a start and I took a couple of creative writing classes -- this was at the University of Alabama, and I started learning a little something about how to write and how to write fiction, and I just kept at it. And I remember I had a professor in my very last semester at Alabama who said, have you ever thought about getting an MFA? And I said, well, what is that? And he said, well, that's a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing. And as soon as he said that I knew that's what I wanted to do it. It really changed my life. And so, I ended up going to Wichita State University, and I got an MFA in creative writing, and I've just kept at it.

And so now, at this point in my career, I guess you'd say, I've published three collections of short stories and three novels and I'm working on a new collection of stories right now, so I thought maybe I would read a little something from one of my stories that I wrote a good many years ago.

This story, which is called "Gypsy at the Door," is based on a story I used to hear my grandmother tell, and tell it several times over the years. So it's kinda written in her voice, although I make up plenty of things in my story. But her story was the basis of this.

The story comes from what she told me about once seeing a Gypsy at her front door when she was a little girl. So let me just read the opening two paragraphs. and again, this is called "Gypsy at the Door."

In those long-ago days back when I was a girl and we lived on what was called the ridge in the northern part of the county where my father farmed his own land, Gypsies used to travel through the countryside once every spring. Usually there was a caravan of them with dogs trailing behind rattling wagons, which I know must sound like something out of a storybook now, but their appearance had always been a very real and regular event from a time long before I was born.

My mother, though, was deathly afraid of them. It seemed like she saw the gypsies as some strange invading army, like soldiers from the moon who had come to steal what they could before moving on in their mule drawn wagons. And what they most wanted to steal, according to the belief that my mother couldn't quite dismiss, was children.

So, the day the dark looking man came to the door while my mother and I were alone after lunch, or noon dinner as we called it, then became marked in my memory, not just because of what I saw my mother do, which I found unbelievable, but also because of the change that took place between my mother and father."

So that gives you a little taste of that story. That's the opening two paragraphs, and I'm trying to do several things with those first two paragraphs. I'm trying to introduce the characters and I'm giving you a sense of the place and the time, which are always important in a story, and I'm also trying to introduce, there, some kind of conflict because you can tell that there's going to be a gypsy who shows up at the front door and there's gonna be conflict between the mother and this man who shows up, this stranger.

So we've got conflict between two characters there. Also, I begin to try to suggest in that last little bit that I read, that there's also gonna be some conflict between the mother and the father because of what happened with this stranger who came to the door.

And so as the story unfolds, I began to explore these relationships and explore the action and explore the conflict. All of those are important elements for storytelling.

So, what I want to do now is to talk a little bit more about how to go about writing a short story. I once heard a writer, a friend of mine, say that fiction is about three things:

- 1. It's about people**
- 2. in a place**
- 3. with a problem.**

And if you think about that, it makes sense. To use more literary terms, it's about:

- 1. characters**
- 2. in a setting**
- 3. with a conflict,**

But I've always loved that description – it's about people in a place with a problem.

If the only thing you can remember after listening to me talk for a little while here is that, you can write a story -- if you'll just remember those, those three things.

But let me talk about fiction in a little bit more organized way here. I want to begin by talking about the five basic elements of fiction, and I've already mentioned a couple of them, and so I'll name 'em and then I'll talk in detail about some of them.

So the first element of fiction is;

- 1. Plot is simply what happens in a story**
- 2. A plot is made up of a series of events that are affected by cause and effect.**

Because something happens, some character does something, and because the character did this, this happened, and because this happened, another character did another thing....

So everything is created by cause and effect.

That's what plot is.

That's what takes you through a story, or that's part of what takes you through a story.

And I'll talk a little bit more about plot in a minute.

Second basic element is characters.

You've gotta have characters on the page who are interacting with each other, and there needs to be some kind of conflict between them, some kind of problem.

I teach creative writing to juvenile offenders at Mount Meig's juvenile facility, and I often say to them, you want to give your characters some kind of conflict when you write a story because you know why — do you want to read a story where everybody is happy at the beginning of the story, they're happy in the middle of the story, and -- by God -- they're happy at the end of the story?

That's not a story.

Something has to happen. Some kind of problem has to occur so that the characters go through something and are most likely changed by what they go through.

So, plot, character, those are two of the most basic elements.

Setting is a third element. The story has to take place **somewhere and in some time**, like in the opening of my story, you can tell it's a time when there were no cars or not many cars around because the Gypsies that I described are traveling in mule drawn wagons. So that establishes the time right there, and you can tell this -- that the story is set out in the country. So, I'm already trying to make clear time and place.

The **fourth basic element**, which is also important is **point of view**. Point of view is who's telling the story. In other words, whose eyes we are seeing the story through.

Some stories are told in the first person with the "I" voice where the main character is telling his or her story, and in some ways that's probably the natural way to tell a story. And if you're trying to write a story for the first time, you might try writing it in first person and use that "I" voice where you begin; "I went to the store one day and I ran into my ex-girlfriend." That's the "I" voice. That's the main character telling his or her story.

And the, the fifth element I'll mention here is **theme**, which I don't really like that word because it's kind of a highfalutin sounding literary word.

You hear English teachers talk about theme and they tell you to write a big, long paper about the theme of some story. When I think of theme, I would define theme this way:

Theme is simply what a story says to us about human nature, what humans are capable of both good and bad.

That's what theme really boils down to.

So those are your five basic elements;

Character

Setting

Point of view

Theme or the meaning of the story, what it says to us.

So let me talk a little bit more about **plot**. All stories have to, at least in the beginning, have to establish some basic information for the reader. The reader needs to know the names of the characters, what their relationship is. Are the main two characters a mother and a daughter? Are they two friends? How old are the characters? Where do they live? That's background information and so all that needs to be included in the beginning of the story so the reader can make sense of the story.

Like in my story or the beginning of my story that I read, it's clear there that there's a mother and a daughter who were together in the house and a stranger's gonna show up, and there's also a father who you probably figure is gonna show up later also. So that's, that's exposition, that's background information. **Exposition is the more literary term.**

There's a graph that you often see about plot and how it works and it starts off, the graph starts off with a flat line and that's your exposition or your background information. And then the line turns upward, and we have what we call **rising action** and what makes the action rise in the story is when characters begin to do things and move around and talk. You have an opportunity there to create conflict. It's conflict that makes the action rise.

There are three basic kinds of conflict, and I bet you've heard these talked about in English class:

There's one character versus another.

There is a character versus him or herself, some kind of inner conflict.

And finally, there is a character versus nature.

A good example of that would be the novel *Hatchet*, where a boy is the only survivor of a plane crash, and he's out in the middle of the wilderness and the only thing he has to help him survive is a hatchet -- and so **that character is in conflict with nature**.

He's trying to survive and there's a kind of a subcategory that I would include here, and I would call it character versus his or her environment. Like I tell my students at Mount Meigs -- they're juvenile offenders; they're locked up; they live in dorms. There's a big fence around the place. And I tell my students -- when I'm teaching fiction to them -- I say, you're in conflict with this environment. You don't want to be here. It makes you uncomfortable. So that's another kind of conflict that you can introduce.

These kinds of conflict create rising action. They make that line go upward.

And then finally, at the top of that arc, we have a moment which we refer to as the climactic moment of the story, where the conflicts finally just come to a head where things can't remain as they are. And I'll give you a simple example here that I often use with my students:

Let's say you've got two friends, two guys, good friends. They both fall for the same girl and they're both in competition for her, so that's gonna create conflict between them, and they may begin to argue. They may begin to go behind each other's back as they pursue this girl.

So the action's gonna rise. There's gonna be conflict between those two characters.

If you're telling the story from one of the character's point of view, you may find that he's conflicted within himself. He feels bad. He feels a little guilty because he knows he's going behind his friend's back, so he's angry at his friends. There's conflict between the two of them, but then he also has some guilt about what he's doing, and as these conflicts escalate, we get closer and closer to that climactic point.

At the top of that arc, let's say finally these two friends get in a fight. There's a fist fight. That's where the action becomes its most intense. And then after that climactic moment, things began to calm down.

The two friends realize that they've **gotta make choices**.

Are they gonna remain friends?

Are they gonna end their friendship?

When the story begins to slow down, we call that **falling action**.

And then, finally, we have what we call **resolution**.

Now sometimes stories are resolved in positive and affirmative ways. It might be that one of those characters realizes that he doesn't wanna lose his friend over a girl.

Or it may be that their friendship ends, and it's done for. Things have gotten to such a terrible point that they just cannot be friends any longer. **That's also a resolution**. That's just how it ends.

So that gives you some sense of how a plot should unfold, some basic information about the story, **where it's set, who the characters are**, so that we can understand the action. We've got the **rising action conflict**, we've got a **climactic moment**, and then the story begins to **resolve itself in some way that's falling action**. And then the story ends with the writer giving the reader a sense of how things will be, for good or for bad.

So let me talk a little bit more about character.

Now, as important as plot is, because something has to happen in a story, character may be even more important because it's the choices that characters make that determine what a character wants and thinks about and acts upon – those things that push the story

forward. There are a handful of ways that writers develop characters. I'll give you some examples. How a character looks can tell a reader a lot. How a character wears his hair, what kind of clothes the character wears, the character's body language.

If a character wears a three-piece suit and has an expensive haircut and drives a fancy car, that tells you one thing about that character. If another character has tattoos all up and down his arms and has a shaved head or a mohawk, that tells you something about that character. So, the way characters appear tell you something about them.

Of course, we don't know everything just through looks. I often tell my students that we really learn about characters, the way that we learn about people in real life. Think about it, when you meet somebody for the very first time, you're looking at how they walk, how they move, the clothes they're wearing and that tells you something about them. And then you begin to talk to them, and you learn something about them through the things that they say. Well, it works that way in fiction too, and when characters begin to speak you begin to learn a little bit more.

So when you meet somebody, you take a look at 'em and you learn a little something. You begin talking with them and you learn a little bit more about them, and then you're around them more and you watch what they do. Their actions tell you something about who he or she is. Just like a person's actions tell you something about who he or she is.

And of course, sometimes, what characters say and what characters do are two different things, just like in real life. And when you have a character, say one thing and do another, that begins to create complexity. Sometimes what one character says about another character tells us something about who they are.

So let's go back to real life. Let's say you've met somebody, you've seen them, you've talked to them, you've been around them enough, you've seen their actions and you think, hey, he's a pretty nice guy. And then some friend of yours who you've known a long time and who you trust tells you, "In my old school, I knew that guy. You can't trust what he

says.” Well, that's gonna change the way you look at this person. Probably you're gonna trust your longtime friend. So, what characters say about other characters in a story, that can tell you about who they are now.

There's one other way that character is revealed that can't happen in real life but in a story -- we get to know what a character is thinking. In real life, we can't know that. We can speculate, and maybe we're right and maybe we're wrong. But in a story, you can tell your reader exactly what a character is thinking, and that's when you really begin to get inside that character and reveal him or her to the reader.

The best fiction, I think, is character driven. It's those choices that characters make. It's how they react to others that drives the action that determines what happens in a story.

Here's one other thing that I want you to remember. If you can't remember anything else, just remember *people in a place with a problem*. That's the key.

A second thing that's really important is **a main character always wants something** and that's gonna drive the story because the character is going to try to get what he or she wants. We all have desires, and that's what fiction is about.

Now, a character can want something concrete, something like a car or money or a ring. It can be something physical, but characters can also want things like respect, trust, forgiveness, and that creates a deeper story. Now, when a character wants something, there's gotta be something getting in his or her way. There's gotta be some obstacle. What I'm describing here is what we experience in our own lives.

We want things and we've got obstacles in our way, and so we try to figure out how to get what we want. When a character wants something and something, or someone is getting in his way, what does that create? That creates conflict. And usually, by the end of a story, a character undergoes some kind of change because of the conflicts that have occurred, because of the climatic moment where things change, the character is gonna be

changed. Often in traditional stories, the main character learns or grows in some way, in some affirmative manner. And those are the more hopeful kind of stories. Those are the stories that I try to write where a writer goes through difficulties and comes out better on the other side. That doesn't have to happen. A character can end up not learning anything because some people are like that. Even in a story like that, where a character doesn't change, there can still be illumination for the reader.

The reader understands what the character does not.

I wanna talk about an exercise that I sometimes use with my students out at Mount Meigs Juvenile facility. I have a photograph I show them. It's a photograph that was taken in 1963 at a lunch counter. This is back in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement. And in this photo, there's a young Black woman sitting right next to a young White woman, and you can see from the expression on the face of the young White woman that she is upset.

She looks a little angry. She's bound to be angry because she's sitting next to a Black person because you know that in that time, lunch counters and many other places were separate. White people and Black people were not supposed to sit together next to each other at a lunch counter.

And so we have this young Black woman there who was asserting her human rights. She knows it should be okay for her to sit there and in the photograph you can tell -- or you suspect -- what she's feeling. And so I show this to my students and I ask them to just write a scene about these two characters.

Think about it. You've got two characters. You've got 'em in a place at a lunch counter, and you've got some conflict between them people in a place with a problem. So we've got these two characters. There's conflict between them and to write a story or maybe just a scene about these two characters, you gotta get 'em talking. Let's say you wanna write this from the young Black woman's point of view. You might use the "I" voice where she just tells the story of what happened to her at this lunch counter, and she can tell you

what happened. So you're using first-person point of view, and she's gonna describe the conflict that occurred between the two of them.

Now, at first, that conflict might have been unspoken. Maybe she just noticed the kind of sour, mean, angry look on the face of the young White woman. But at some point then you have to make the action rise, right? You've got to have the two characters begin to speak and begin to interact, and that's where the action can begin to escalate, right, where the conflict grows. You've clearly got conflict between two characters, and you can carry this far as you want to. You could have the two characters reaching the point of a physical altercation, but often I tell my students, be careful about that. It's not like you can't use violence in a story, but that doesn't have to be the first thing you go to.

Stories don't have to be violent in order to reach a climatic moment, just so there's tension and sometimes tension is unspoken. We just feel it. It's there. If you were writing this story, that would be how you would begin to develop your rising action, your conflict between the two characters.

But there's another element you want to think about here. You want to think maybe a little bit about a character versus herself. For example, let's say this young Black woman, let's say it's the first time that she has sat down at a segregated lunch counter. And let's say that she's been wanting to do this and perhaps friends of hers have said to her, "you know, you haven't done this yet. Why haven't you, are you...are you a coward to go and do this now? Don't you want to help the movement? Don't you want to make things change?"

And so when she sits down at that counter, she could have a real inward conflict here. She's got to struggle with her fears, and she's got to find the courage to sit there and when the young White woman sits down beside her, she's got to decide, am I gonna stay here or am I gonna get up and move? And when she decides to stay, that choice pushes the story forward. The plot begins to unfold. She's made a choice and it was probably a difficult choice.

Another possibility here for an inward conflict. Let's say her parents have said to her, "don't you be going out and creating any trouble. It's too dangerous. Yes, things need to change, but you're young, you're still in school. You don't need to get into trouble. You don't need to be put in jail. You don't need to risk being beaten up. Whatever you do, don't you go try to try to drink out of that water fountain or eat at that lunch counter."

And so that inner conflict then would be: am I gonna defy my parents and do what I feel is right, even though I'm scared, or am I not?

So that's a way to introduce more complexity to the story. It's those inner conflicts that really take us into the areas that fiction should explore.

I'll use a couple of other terms here.

There always should be an exterior story and an interior story.

The exterior story is the action, it's what happens. It's the two characters sitting there at the counter feeling tension -- one saying something to the other, getting the conflict moving. One character maybe stands up and ends up storming off. Okay, that's the exterior story.

But then you want to ask yourself, what is the interior story? And it's that inner conflict that I was just talking about -- the young Black woman finding the courage to make a stand. And then we really begin to get to know her, inside herself. And if she's narrating her own story (first person) it's easy for you as the writer to convey that to the reader. She can tell you, "I was really feeling scared." Okay. We know what she's thinking. So exterior and interior stories are something you can think about a little bit.

Let me talk a little bit more about setting. You know, the reader needs to be able to see where and when the story is taking place. They need descriptions so they can kind of see it in their mind's eye. When I read fiction, if the writer is doing a good job, providing descriptive details and appealing to all five of the senses -- taste, touch, sight, smell, sound -- that's gonna put me there in that scene. I'm not in the middle of it, but I'm kind of off to the side. I'm there. I forget that I'm reading.

And so description -- **using the five senses** -- is important.

It gives the reader a way to imagine the action and it puts them in the action. But a little off to the side.

But there's one other thing about setting that can be beneficial in the story. Let's take, again, this scene with the two women at the lunch counter;

There's tension there between them, right? And it's gonna escalate. You might describe the heat coming off the grill, cuz you know if it's a lunch counter, there's a grill right behind it. There's somebody cooking hamburgers on there. Maybe the heat from that grill is getting hotter and hotter. Maybe there's smoke that's beginning to fill the air. Maybe in the road right out in front of the lunch counter car horns honking. Let's say the traffic is real heavy. Well, all those kind of details, those unpleasant details, the heat from the grill, the smoke, the sound of the car is honking -- that's gonna underscore the tension that you're creating between the characters. So setting can be important because it can help intensify the conflict that you're trying to establish in the story.

Let me talk a little bit more about point of view. I've talked about first person, the "I" voice, the main character telling his or her story, which is really the most natural way to tell a story. Just imagine that you are the character and just let the character start talking.

You know, when I write fiction, when I sit down at my desk and I'm trying to write, sometimes it's just a matter of me listening. I've got the characters in my mind. I've got 'em in a place. I kind of know what the problem is, and so I just listen to what they say, and if I've got a first-person narrator telling his or her own story, I'll listen to 'em, and I write down what they say, and that's kind of a natural way to get started.

Now there are two other kinds of points of view that I want to mention here. One is called **third person limited**. Now by third person, I mean he or she, right? First person is the "I" voice, "I" is the pronoun. Third person is he or she or you use the character's name. I'm gonna give you kind of a simple example here. Let's say you've got a character named Dan and he goes into a grocery store -- so you might begin a third person limited point of view in this way. I'll make clear what I mean by limited.

You might begin the story --

Dan walked into the grocery store. He got his buggy in. The first section he came to was the produce section. When he got there, he saw his ex-girlfriend, Jane. When Dan saw his ex-girlfriend, he decided the best thing for him to do was duck down, behind the stack of watermelons so that Jane wouldn't...

So I'm using the character's name and I'm using the pronoun "he," and if I stay with that all the way through the story, I'm limiting it just to Dan's point of view. We never know what Jane thinks when she sees him -- cause if we're writing a story, she's got to see him. At some point they've got to begin to interact, right? So at first, I'm in Dan's point of view. I'm keeping it limited to him. That's third person limited. I can know what Dan is thinking and we can see his actions and we can hear him talk.

Now a third point of view is if I also wanted to include Jane's point of view, and if I use both Dan and Jane's point of view, I'm using third person **omniscient**. Omniscient means "all knowing." So as a reader you get to know what Dan's thinking and you get to know what Jane's thinking. You are "all-knowing" about these characters.

So what you might do there is -- after you're in Dan's point of view for a while -- you want to then switch to Jane's point of view, and probably what you would do there would be to put a little bit of white space between two paragraphs. That's called a page break, and it tells the reader that there's gonna be a shift. Sometimes it's a shift forward in time. Sometimes it's just a shift to another character's point of view. Again, that's called a page break. In any reading you've done, you've seen page breaks. So what I might do here is begin after my page break --

When Jane saw Dan hiding behind the stack of watermelons, she thought to herself, look at that stupid idiot. I can't believe he's trying to hide from me.

That's point of view in a nutshell --

First person

Third person, limited

Third person omniscient

And finally, let me talk a little bit more about theme.

Again, theme is what a story says to us about human nature, about what human beings go through and struggle with. If we go back to our lunch counter story where the two women are sitting there, at odds with one another. I mean, yes, the story is partly about just what happens. What is the story about on a deeper level, what else does it say to us about human nature? Well, maybe it says to us something about how we overcome fear, about how we make difficult choices, about how we stand up for what we know is right --that's what that story would really be about. It wouldn't be just about one woman standing up, angry, cursing, and storming off. It's about more than that. It's about a human being's need to find their place in the world, to establish who they are, to feel good about themselves. That's what that story would really be about. That's the stuff of fiction. That's why fiction writers write. That's why fiction writers tell stories.

I've given you lots of terms here. I'm hoping they're making sense to you. But again, the way to get started is to imagine, say, two characters -- and you can base them on someone you know. You can base them on some story you've heard. I've done both. I've based some stories on things that have happened to me, and I've made some stories up completely outta whole cloth. But the way to get started is to take at least two characters, put 'em in a place, decide what their problem is, what their conflict is, and get 'em talking and get 'em moving around and make things difficult for them.

Have your characters make choices about their actions and act upon them. Again, you want to think about; what does my main character want. If we think about the two women at the lunch counter, the young Black woman, she wants respect. That's what she's looking for. So when we think more about characters wanting something like, again, the young Black woman at the counter, she wants respect, she wants to be treated decently. She wants the freedom to sit at a lunch counter and eat a lunch, like anyone. Now that's what she wants. What's getting in her way? Well, partly maybe her fears about trying to get what she wants, that inner conflict, she's afraid. So that's partly what's keeping her from getting what she wants, but she can overcome those fears and sit down.

Anyway, so now the other thing that's getting in her way is this young White woman sitting beside her. She can see the expression on the woman's face. She can sense that she's not welcome there, the young Black woman can sense that she's not welcome, and so then the White character might say something ugly to her to try to get her to get up and move, or the young White woman might take it even further, might tell her she needs to get out of the establishment.

So that other character is trying to keep our main character from getting what she wants, and that's key. A character's gotta want something and someone, or something, has got to be getting in his or her way -- and that's going to create conflict.

I know some of you have listened to the podcast series about Bloody Tuesday, where people are telling their stories, and I know that one of these women is named Cinderella Williams and that she says at the beginning of her story that she had a White grandfather and that she was never White enough for White people or Black enough for Black people. And right there, if you think about what she says, there's inner conflict. If we think about what she wanted, she wanted to fit in somewhere. We all want to fit in somewhere. And she obviously struggled with this. She had a conflict in her life that affected her in very deep ways. So if you think about what she struggled with about trying to fit in and was not able to fit into White society and was not fully able to fit into Black society, then you can explore that in your story. You can create a character that maybe has nothing to do specifically with the woman named Cinderella Williams. You could take a character who is mixed-race and explore her life and you could have a scene where she is with Black friends who treat her in a way that's not fully acceptable.

Now, what does your character want?

She wants to fit in. That's what she needs.

What's getting in her way?

Partly what's getting in her way is being mixed race, but that's a given. That's just the way things are for her. What's really getting in her way are other people not accepting her.

Thinking in terms of writing your own story you could ask, what would she do about this? Will she get angry? Will she drive Black friends further away? Which would create conflict in your story?

Or, will she try so hard to be accepted by others -- that she will compromise who she is, that she will pretend to be someone she's not. And what would that do to her, within her? How is this character gonna cope with this problem? What is she going to do? And that's a question I often ask myself when I'm working on a story when I'm not sure where I should go next. I think about the situation I've created for my character, and I think -- what would this character do? How would she react to this problem or to these other characters? Sometimes I'll even stop and take a scratch sheet of paper and I'll list things

that a character in this situation might do. And, generally, what I'll do is to choose something from that list that maybe might be the more unexpected choice, and that can create a story that goes in places you don't expect. And that's a good thing. You don't always want to know exactly where your story's going. You know who the characters are. You know what the central conflict is. You know what your character wants.

Writing, it's been said many times, is an act of discovery. If you're not sure exactly where your story is going, when you begin writing it, don't worry about that. Let it unfold. Make those choices as your character has to make those choices. I think you can take this dilemma of this character trying to fit in and you could write a great story about that.

And remember, you're writing fiction. Even if the kernel of your story comes from this real story about Cinderella Williams, you're not writing her story. You're creating a character all your own, and you can do with this character anything you want. I've created characters who are based on people I've known, but I've changed everything, I've made up things. Don't ever feel like you have to stay true to the story that you heard. Feel free to invent. That's the fun of writing fiction. You get to do whatever you want. Don't worry too much about inventing a plot before you begin writing.

What you wanna start with is a character who has a problem, who has a conflict.

What's gonna create your plot is having your character make choices and act upon those choices. What your character does will give rise to plot.

Remember, you don't have to write a perfect story here. This is something new to you. All you have to do is get started. I'm not expecting anyone to write the greatest story ever.

It takes time to really learn how to write fiction. It takes lots and lots of reading, studying good models. I often tell my students -- there are really two ways to become a good writer. One is to read a lot, and two is to write a lot. But everybody has to start somewhere. I still have my earliest attempts at short stories, and I wouldn't want anyone

to read them, but I still have 'em and I would be afraid to go back and look at 'em because I would just see how bad they were. But that's okay. I was putting characters on the page. I was creating a story. I had people in a place with a problem, and I enjoyed doing it. It was fun. I was sole owner and proprietor of my fictional world and I'm kind of paraphrasing William Faulkner there.

So don't let the prospect of writing a short story scare you. This could be something you write only for yourself. But you might want to show it to people, and I think you should. I think you should share what you've created. Writers write stories that are important to them, but just sitting at a table alone and writing a story, that's only half of it.

Writing is a way of communicating with the world and that should be your goal -- to write something that means something -- because if it means something to you, it can mean something to someone else.