

TJ Beitelman Transcript

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We're here today with TJ Beitelman, Director of the Creative Writing Program at the Alabama School of Fine Arts.

TJ is here to talk about how we might get started writing a short story... or fiction of any kind.

You might think he's going to talk about prepositions and verbs and dangling participles.

What is a dangling participle anyway?

But what he's actually going to talk about is us, because we have lives with problems.

And that means we have lives that are filled with potential stories.

And maybe, just maybe, we're the ones who are supposed to tell those stories.

I'm originally from the Washington D.C. area, Northern Virginia, and kind of kept coming South. I went to college in southwestern Virginia and then went to grad school. Went to Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. God's country. Beautiful place. And that's where I really first got the bug to write. And I think it was the place that inspired me, just the sort of beauty of it. But it was a stark beauty. It was pretty dramatic and there was a lot of kind of tone and mood and emotion there.

I want to read this before we go further.

Why?

So we can all understand Sensory.

Okay.

Sensory details use the five senses. Sight, touch, taste, sound and smell to add depth of detail.

They can be incorporated into many types of writing to help our work stand out.

One of the things that I think is super important about writing is that it's sensory in nature and it's image driven in nature, and so the things that we see and we hear and we taste and smell and touch, that's the kind of stuff that we want to put on the page. And so, when I'm in a place, whether it's Blacksburg, Virginia, or Birmingham, or Florence, Alabama, which is also a place that I love, all sorts of different places that you can feel the place, you can feel the mood and the temperament of the place, that's what tends to inspire me to write.

And so, writing about it was a way for me to connect with it. It was a way for me to engage in this really profoundly beautiful and interesting place in a way that I couldn't otherwise.

A student in our class wrote this story about a girl and her grandfather. He had died, and he had all the family picture books and diaries.

But the mean step-grandmother would not let her into the garage to find them.

And she had to get the photographs and the diaries to solve a family mystery.

Remember, a good story is about somebody who wants something very, very much and something bad will happen if they don't get it.

So, this girl sneaks into the garage looking for that box to solve the family mystery when suddenly a green lizard runs out from under the box. That immediately put me as a reader in the garage. I could smell the garage. I could feel the temperature in the garage. I could feel the loneliness in the garage.

And writers, first and foremost, notice details, but they notice details that mean something. And it might not mean something that you can spell out like that green lizard. You couldn't necessarily say why that energized the scene. But it did. It was an important thing. And maybe it was the movement of it, you know, maybe it was the color of it, maybe it was that it was something that wasn't supposed to be there, you know, but writers notice those sorts of things. I talk about noticing and documenting being the first step towards writing, right? So, the first part has nothing to do with putting words on the page, whether it's with a pen or a laptop.

It's actually noticing, it's actually paying attention. It's actually being clued into your surroundings and clued into things that don't fit there or that you sort of are curious about. How'd that get there? And then you document it, whether that's in a notebook or whether that's in a story or a poem. Then you put it down to paper and you start teasing that out.

What is that thing that wasn't supposed to be there? What is that scene or that person that really captivated my imagination, and sort of build it from there. You have to trust your eyes. Trust your heart. Trust your preoccupations. Something captures your imagination, it's important and you trust it.

You don't have to comment on it. You don't have to know what it means yet. Just trust that you notice that thing, and if you put it down, it's going to work.

A lot of students think we're supposed to make up stories in our head and then write them down like we thought them up, like we intended.

I often say intention is overrated in writing.

What you intend to put down and what you actually put down are very often different things. I remember I wrote a story when I was a young writer and it had a bunch of metal in it, a lot of copper and iron. There were train tracks in the story. And I was at a creative writing workshop and everybody said, "oh, I really love what you're doing with all this metal imagery."

And I was like, oh, okay. I didn't know I had done that, but not only did I then notice it, I realized, oh my gosh, this thematically is tied into what I'm writing about. So, I learned then to kind of trust what's going on under the surface. And if I just notice it and put it down, honestly, in the way that I'm sort of compelled to do, it's usually going to mean something.

And so, the person who made it and the person who is reading it or watching it, that's a partnership and you got to trust the partner on the other end, right? That there's going to be that person and that they're going to bring meaning to it that is interesting and compelling, and that probably is something that you didn't plan for.

A lot of times we as students think that we're writing a story, we have to know the theme of the story before we even begin.

Because we're taught in English class that we have to know the theme of the stories we read, like it's a subject matter.

So, studying English is a subject matter. Is creative writing a subject matter?

One of my mentors, we've already talked about him, and one of my mentors is Michael Martone who is a really meaningful teacher in my life. Good fiction writer. He used to say that creative writing is not a subject matter. It's a way of engaging a subject that matters to you. So, you don't have to go in finding the theme or anything like that. You just have to go in with a preoccupation, an interest, put it down on the page and let it go from there.

You got to turn off the internal editor and just allow those things that you notice be the raw material for what you're writing about. We tell stories all the time and we're made of stories. I feel like the role of story in our lives is so crucial. And it's so much deeper than I think sometimes. You know, I think one of the roles that stories play in our lives is that they entertain us and that's important. But stories also define us. They define what we value. They connect us to other people, they connect us to the past, and those are really crucial, essential ancient mythic roles for stories that are super serious, and it's not just a pastime. It's not just something to distract you, it's something to engage you. It's something to be super active.

I mean, I feel like we're story animals. You know, all the things that are important to us, whether it's the Constitution, whether it's your faith tradition, whether it's your family lore, those are stories. And without that, we're not human in a way, you know? And if we're not actively engaged in telling our stories, telling the stories that are important to us individually and important to our communities, then we're kind of disengaged from living, I think a fully realized life.

A lot of times as new writers, we think we have to go "out there" somewhere looking for stories, like there's a story out there somewhere and if we find it, then we can write about that.

But we don't realize there might be a million stories right in our own lives.

Absolutely. And I think one of the things that I encounter with student writers, especially younger student writers, is they think that their lives are not that interesting. They're not worthy of stories and that they're too simple. I think that's one of the reasons a lot of young people are drawn to fantasy and science fiction because they are so imaginative and interesting and otherworldly, right. But I think a lot of the stories that matter the most are not otherworldly at all.

They are everyday stories and everyday struggles. You have to be in tune to what's happening in your life and have the faith that what's happening in your life matters

because it does. So, if you are passionate about it, if you are interested in it, it matters.

I had a teacher who used to say the first rule was to make it interesting, right? And the way to make it interesting is to be interested, right? If you're interested, you are much more likely to convey that interest and that preoccupation, that intensity, that, let's just say an obsession, right? We want that passion.

So, you're saying that our lives right now, even though we might be only like 14, 15 or 16, our lives, the very lives we're living right now with all this crazy stuff that goes on with dating

and fights and bullying

and gossip and social media

and lies and drugs and cliques

and being popular and not being popular.

You might say our lives are filled with starter dough for stories.

Yeah, absolutely, and young people, especially high school age, maybe early college age, they are inherently at a transition point in their life. They're in an inflection point in their life. That's what stories are made of.

So, if you're a young person, you are uniquely situated to write about your current experience in a way that is going to be inherently thematic, and that people older and younger are going to relate to. And what I see a lot in working with high school aged students and maybe slightly older, is they feel like they need to write stories about older people.

And maybe sometimes younger people, but not necessarily their own age. And you are perfectly suited to write your experience in a way that's going to matter to a lot of people I think.

When we talked with Ashley Jones about getting started, she gave us a starter lesson.

Do you have a starter lesson for us?

Yeah. This is a super simple lesson but it goes back to what I was talking about when I talk about image in sensory detail. I often say that starting with an image,

an action, and an open-ended question is a guaranteed good start. It might not get you all the way to the finish line, but it's a good start.

And I got a good example of this from, Sandra Cisneros' *A House on Mango Street*, which is a really great book that expresses her experience. It's a novel, but it's an autobiographical novel, based on her experience growing up in Chicago. And the first time her family had a house of their own.

It's very short. I believe it's 194 words, but it packs a punch. It's called Four Skinny Trees. Okay, I'm going to read the story and then dive in real close to the beginning. And as I read, think about images. Think about images that you can feel. Four Skinny Trees.

They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city. From our room, we can hear them, but Nenny just sleeps and doesn't appreciate these things. Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground.

They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep. Let one forget his reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is, I look at trees when there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four, who grew despite concrete, four, who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be.

A lot of things I love about that piece. It's very short. It packs a punch. It's sort of a combination of non-fiction because it's based on her experience. It's fiction in the sense that it's a character, it's not her. And it's got setting and all of that. But it's also poetry. It literally has rhyme in it, even though it's prose.

So, she's breaking a lot of rules here. She's blending a lot of styles here, and it works. So again, let me go back to the beginning, because I think this is the exercise I want to invite people to do right now after they stop watching. So, the first paragraph has an image, an action, open-ended question, and let's take a look at it.

They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them.

Well, not too much image or action there, but an open-ended question. Who are they? And what's this relationship between these two people? So, we start with that.

Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine.

There's our image, right? And so, I wouldn't necessarily think that they are trees, and so that's some layering of the open-ended question. Well, how is that going to work? Right.

Four who do not belong here but are here.

Well, where's here?

Four raggedy excuses planted by the city.

Interesting, right.

From our room, we can hear them, but Nenny just sleeps and doesn't appreciate these things.

So, she's creating a scene there. And if you're going to use adjectives, use interesting ones. Raggedy is an interesting adjective, right? Skinny trees. That's interesting. I might ordinarily think of skinny as something I might describe a human or a dog or some moving creature, right?

But we're making those trees animate and that fits because she's comparing herself to these trees, right? And these are, you know, they have persona, they have character to these trees. So, my invitation to you out there in writing land in Alabama, is to start something with an image, an action, and an open-ended question.

And if you're stuck for ideas for how to write, one thing I really like to do, it's very simple. I like to write a list of 30 things I love right now. Just make a list of 30 things that are really interesting to you in the moment.

**So, image, action, and open-ended questions
and 30 things I love right now.**

Yeah, I mean, image action, open-ended question. And if you're stuck for images, actions, and open-ended questions, mine the territory of the things that are preoccupations for you. And the way that I do that is I come up with a list of 30 things I love right now. Sometimes what I'll also do is five things that have been challenging about today and five things that have been great about today, right? That's raw material for you to go in and find an image, action, open-ended question that you associate with those things.

So, here comes our first assignment.

Okay so here's what I would say. Write a list of 30 things you love right now. Take as long as you need to write that. That could be 15 minutes, it could be an hour and 15 minutes.

Then circle the three things on that list that most captivate your imagination.

I can do that.

They don't have to be good. They just have to be what I think are 30 things I love right now.

Or things I have a problem with right now.

Here's more good news. The Alabama School of Fine Arts is teaming up with The Story Acorn to get the word out to you no matter where you might live, because the Alabama School of Fine Arts has a mandate.

The dictionary again?

Yeah.

"Mandate, an official order or commission to do something."

And that official order is that the Alabama School of Fine Arts is required by the state to reach all the students in Alabama.

Yeah, I mean, the Alabama School of Fine Arts has a mandate to serve the entire state. And the most primary way that that happens is that we have 350 students in grades seven through 12 who come here every day. Some of them live here and they go through our curriculum, but 350 students is a drop in the bucket to the number that we want to reach. There's way more students out there than that that could be impacted by what we do.

So, this is an awesome opportunity. The Story Acorn is giving us a chance to be relevant to a large audience of Alabama students and teachers who can use the work that we're doing here to augment stuff that they're already doing in the classroom. I know time-wise that can be hard, right?

And standards wise, that can be hard. But we know from a raft of research and just anecdotal evidence that this type of thinking and this type of creating feeds the process of critical thinking in ways that others just really kind of can't. I think that it's important for teachers to meet students where they are, and not every student is gonna be drawn to this project.

And force feeding them is probably counterproductive for everybody involved, but there are gonna be some students who are really gonna be energized and captivated by this. And, you know, that's what we're here for, to find those students and feed their talents and their preoccupations for sure.

This is not for everybody. Nobody's expecting teachers to have your entire class of 30 or more students in a monthly zoom meeting with TJ or Ashley.

What we're looking for is those who think they might want to be writers, poets, artists,

And give them this opportunity.

If they want to play football or basketball, they have a lot of support and a lot of people telling them that they have value.

But if you want to be a poet or fiction writer, or gather history from your community, there might not be a lot of support.

And this is the place where those students can find kindred spirits who love to do what they love to do, and it's a place where they just might discover that they have value.

You know, writing is often a lonely enterprise. And finding a community that can support you, that can encourage you, that can make you feel like you belong and can make you feel like what you do matters that can be so important for a young person who otherwise wouldn't.

As we learned in the section on how to interview, gathering oral history from your community, we learned it's valuable to sometimes ask one last question.

And that question that we ask is:

"I want you to look into your heart. Take as long as you want. Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

Here's what I want to say. Reading is absolutely crucial to your life as a writer. Before I ever knew I wanted to be a writer, I was a voracious reader. And one of the things I did that was a little bit unusual is that I reread the same books a lot and I didn't know it at the time, but what I was doing is I was learning to read like a writer.

And that is that I was learning to read with depth, because when you read something again, a lot of things that didn't occur to you the first time, occur to you, and you see them and doing that is the most important thing you can do to learn how to write.

I'm TJ Beitelman and I am the chair of the Creative Writing Department here at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, and I am so excited about what Story Acorn is doing and how it can help us and our organization reach out and reach a lot of people in the state who we wouldn't ordinarily be able to reach. So be a part of it. And if it speaks to you, listen to that still small voice and join us in this awesome endeavor.

So now it's your turn.

Do the assignment and send to us at TheStoryAcorn.Submissions@Gmail.com and keep remembering those words of Graham Greene.

"There's always a moment for young people that a door opens and lets the future in."

And maybe, just maybe, The Story Acorn might be that door for you.