

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

Week 3, Part II – Transcript

>>[Text on screen] Vu Tran on How Identity Informs Character and Narrative in Fiction.

>>Vu Tran was born in Saigon and has degrees from the University of Iowa and The Black Mountain Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He's the author of the novel DRAGONFISH and his short fiction has appeared in *O. Henry Prized Stories*, *A Best of Fence*, *The Southern Review*, *Harvard Review*, and other publications. He currently teaches English and creative writing at the University of Chicago.

>>My name is Vu Tran, I'm a fiction writer. I teach fiction writing at the University of Chicago, where I've taught for six years.

[Text on screen] Introduction to DRAGONFISH by Vu Tran.

My novel DRAGONFISH is it essentially concerns a white American police officer who was married, had a tumultuous marriage to a Vietnamese woman. She has since left him, and as the novel begins, she has remarried a Vietnamese man this time, but she has gone missing, intentionally or unintentionally we do not know. And so he has been kind of blackmailed for various reasons, been blackmailed by this new Vietnamese husband to hunt her down, to find her for him. And that's the primary narrative, it's a crime narrative, it's in that noir crime framework. But it's really a story about immigrants and refugees because the second, the kind of secondary narrative of the novel is an epistolary narrative where this Vietnamese woman is writing letters to the daughter that she abandoned 20 years before when they first came to the states. A lot of it is about their escape from Vietnam, by boat, their time in a refugee camp in Malaysia, and the reasons, it really is her way of writing towards the reasons why she had to abandon her daughter.

[Text on screen] Contrasting Story Structures and Changing Point of View.

Yeah, because you have two very, at first, disparate narratives, one being a crime narrative required a certain fast pace, so I, And it was a first person narrator as well. And I want there to be a lot of dramatic momentum. I wanted the sentences to be clean and declarative. So I was very conscious of moving the plot forward as quickly as I could, and at the same time, try to have a rich narrative in terms of character and ideas. So that was a very quick narrative, in a sense, very fast paced. The epistolary portion of the novel, which is actually only 70, 80 pages, it required me to slow down, I used more fragmented narrative. It went back and forth in time more. The sections were shorter from section to section. And it was much more contemplative. Actually the novel that was on my desk the entire time, I had a lot of novels on my desk when I was writing DRAGONFISH. I had Haruki Murakami's WIND-UP BIRD CHRONICLE, I had Raymond Chandler's THE BIG SLEEP, I had THE QUIET AMERICAN by Graham Greene. But I also had GILEAD by Marilynne Robinson and GILEAD, of course, is a novel in letters, letters that this semi-four-year-

old minister is writing to his young, young son. And it has this very contemplative, sifting back through time and figuring out ways to tell his son about the world, because he'll soon be gone. In many ways, I would open up pages of GILEAD, and kind of, just random pages to get that tone, that tone of kind of a melancholy reminiscence. And a kind of melancholy, figuring out of things. And I try to bring that to my novel tuned in that section. So it's still plot driven, those epistolary letter, that epistolary narrative, but I needed to slow it down. But the one fear was like would these two narratives be too distinct? And would they be able to kind of complement each other in a way that felt seamless? The only way I managed to really do that was to, to kind of have both narrators in their melancholy tone, kind of interact with each other, if that makes sense. In a way I want them to be facing each other. What I mean by that is, originally I had, her name is Suzy, I had her writing these letters to her sister. And then I realized, oh no, she should be writing it to someone who's in the primary crime narrative. And that had to be her daughter. And that's when I really found the novel because then both narratives were kind of facing each other. And they were interacting with each other. So it was not just a matter of tone it was a matter of, almost, space and structure where both narratives were talking to each other in a way. And once I kind of, conceived of that structure. The language came out of it. And I think the language then bound two narratives together, the voices.

[Text on screen] Three Questions for Creating Characters.

I feel like I find characters by asking certain questions. And usually it's like, three primary questions like what do they want? What are they afraid of? And what are they confused by? And I remember finding Suzy's voice very quickly, because I immediately had those answers, the answers to those three questions. What did she want? She wanted to understand this thing that she did that she still feels haunted by and guilty over. She was confused by why she did those things and why she still feels like she can't escape that past, and why she, in a way, still can't define herself because of her past. And what she's afraid of is, I always felt she was afraid of the idea that she has nothing to live for, and that she will never have a space in her life where she will be at peace. And so I think those three questions and me answering them to myself animated every single line that I wrote in her narrative. And once I established that, that became the kind of emotional foundation of the novel, because I wrote all the letters and then went back. I was kind of stuck on page 60, and then I figured out the epistolary narrative. And I wrote all of it. And that became the kind of emotional backbone of the novel, which informed all the other characters' motivations. And then that's when I went back and kind of continued the crime narrative, Robert's narrative. And I tried to do the same thing with Robert. What does he want? What is he afraid of? And what is he confused by? And I was able to find his character when I was able to answer those three questions as well.

[Text on screen] Writing Marginalized Identities in DRAGONFISH.

There are a lot of things that you don't know when you begin a novel. Some people know everything before they begin but for me I really had to find what the novel was about. I did know from the very beginning that I want it to be a novel about feeling outside of things, or in between things. A novel about liminal existence, in a sense. And I felt that, of course with the immigrants you would have that. The immigrant characters, the refugee characters. That there would be that sense of outsidership, that sense of being in between worlds, and in between lives even. But my white American police officer the quote unquote hero of the novel is also an outsider. And he's outside the immigrant community that he's trying to investigate. He's outside of, he's an outsider to Las Vegas, the city he's never been to. And he's also outside, he's an outsider to his marriage, he was one in his

marriage. Because Suzy was a woman that he loved desperately and wanted, in a sense, complete access to as we, as humans often mistakenly want from, from people that we love. But she denied him that access. So he always felt like an intruder in that relationship. And that idea of being an intruder I think, is important to how I approached the novel. And I thought, in many ways, and it was almost kind of accidental that that idea works well in the framework of both an immigrant novel, and a noir novel. Noir being, by definition, about the mysteries in the shadows. The incomplete stories that you can't quite, the questions that you can't find all the answers to, because they're always veiled in shadows. And I found that when you're dealing with an immigrant, it's very true, especially refugees, who, especially if they're an adult. They've come from a completely different world but they've left behind a lot of stories. And there's stories that they're not always willing to share with others. But they're stories that they will carry around in the new world for the rest of their life. And so, in a sense they are incomplete in that way. Not in only in terms of how they define themselves in this new world, but how others define them.

[Text on screen] Creating Distinct Characters in DRAGONFISH.

What I was most interested in the novel was how differently people dealt with marginalization and being, an alien or a stranger in a society. We always like to think that being an outsider is a bad thing. For me personally I don't, I'm kind of glad I grew up in Oklahoma where there were very few Asians, and I always felt different from everybody. Because I feel like when you're on the outside of things you, you look at the inside even if you want to be on the inside, that desire requires a more critical eye. You're looking at the inside with a more critical, from a more critical perspective. And that's a perspective you don't necessarily have when you have the privilege of being an insider. So I liked it, but other people are traumatized by that sense of being different from everyone. And I think with the characters in my novel, I think for example, someone like the daughter is someone who's perfectly fine being marginalized because, or being unnoticed in a way, because it allows her to define herself in any way she wants. With her mother, it was more problematic, I think, with my character Suzy because I feel like she, her daughter grew up in America, and you're kind of, I think in America, that spirit of individuality is celebrated. When you come from Asian cultures like Vietnamese culture, people are defined by their roles in society, and they're also defined by how well they fill that role. And I think, the way I always thought of Suzy as a character was someone who was never comfortable with the roles that were given to her. First as a wife, and then as a mother. But the whole time, her role as what she should be as a woman, I think she was always uncomfortable with, and she felt different because of that, because you should love your child as a mother. And she didn't want to be a mother. And her problem was that she would try to escape these roles and she would keep making mistakes in trying to escape those roles. And that was her main struggle. That's example of two characters who have kind of dealt with being different in different ways. And I think the male characters, of course, I feel like I was very interested in the novel about how men deal with this differently than the way women deal with it. I think, for example, the Vietnamese-American male characters in the novel, came to the States, came to America and decided, well we're going to not go the moral route. We're going to go the criminal route. Because this is the best way for us to have a sense of agency in this new world. But that was also a way for them to protect each other and protect their family. And protect their ideas themselves as men, because otherwise they would have felt neutered. Again, I'm not always sure these things come through to the reader, but these were the things that were on my mind when I was writing.

[Text on screen] Using Characters' Desire for Agency to Drive the Narrative of DRAGONFISH.

I feel like what animates most people in life is this grappling with agency, or this kind of irritable reaching towards agency, if that makes sense. I feel like we all want to have control in some measure, especially when it comes to relationships. And I feel like all the characters are motivated by that desire. For example, I think Robert's main dilemma in the novel, for me, was that in his marriage with Suzy he had no sense of agency, which is to say that he loved her but he never felt in control of the relationship and how she felt about him. I think one of the ways that he reacted to this, especially after their marriage is, actually in two ways, he found agency in his, in a sense, by trying to rescue her. To be the detective, the hero. That's one of the ways that I've played with the whole detective narrative, He wanted to solve the mystery and he wanted to save his ex-wife, and that was his irritable reaching towards agency and control of the situation. The other way he did it, I think is, and I think we always do this as humans, inevitably, is that if we can't control a person or control how they feel about us, then we create a narrative in place of it. So we create a narrative of who they are that makes sense to us and explains why they don't behave the way we want them to. And I think that's what Robert does, he creates his narrative of someone who is mentally unstable, is emotionally unstable, and is traumatized by this past, this traumatic, this past that involves war and being a refugee all these things that he never quite understood but knew was in the background of her life. And so he created that narrative of someone who was unstable to explain why their marriage didn't work out, and why she didn't love him as much as he loved her. That's the only way for him to kind of make sense of things and be sane. And I think that's what we all do, otherwise everything would be chaotic and ambiguous and unexplained and we can't deal with that. I don't think anyone can.