

f(r)iction

Inside Writing, S2E11- Genre Fiction: Transcription

Length: 59:56

Opens with typewriter sounds.

Introduction: Alright, hello everyone. Welcome to another episode of Inside Writing. This show is presented by Gotham Writers Workshop, offering writing classes of all types and sizes. You can visit us at gothamwriters.com. Reminder that if you've missed any episode of Inside Writing, you can find the recorded version on YouTube or wherever you listen to podcasts. The same goes for this show. It will be available later today or tomorrow on all of those platforms as well.

Josh: Moving into the show for today, as you all know, there is that Q&A button down there on the zoom dashboard, submit your question for the panelists as soon as you have them! The more questions we have, the sooner I will cut to Q&A. So, make sure you get your questions in early. And today we're going to be talking about short genre fiction part 2! So, we did short genre fiction part 1 on December 10th, but since genre is such a big area of discussion, we dedicated two episodes to it. The first episode skewed a little bit towards science fiction, this one will skew a little bit towards fantasy, but again, we're going to be touching on all genres, same as last time. Enough announcements! We're going to start as we always do, with a quote. A short quote, one of my favorite quotes actually, from Lloyd Alexander who said, "Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality, it's a way of understanding it." We're going to talk more about that later, but now let's meet our panelists. Our first panelist, author of the books *Spark and the Leap of Ursus*, *Leap High Yahoo* and the *War with No Name* series as well as short pieces appearing in *Grotesque Quarterly*, *Literary Review*, and *Juked*, Robert Rapino.

Robert: Hello, thanks for having me.

Josh: Absolutely! Thanks for being here. Our second panelist is CEO and Founder of the *Brink Literacy Project* as well as Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *F(r)iction Literary Magazine*, Dani Hedlund. Hello Dani, thank you for being here.

Dani: Thanks for having me.

Josh: So, we're going to start with some points of clarity as we always do. Robert I want to start with you. In fantasy and science fiction, what do you see as some of the big differences between these two big genres of fantasy and science fiction?

Robert: So, I admit I am paraphrasing Rod Serling here...well, that's not a bad admission to make, but I think the way he phrases it is, "Science Fiction is the improbable made plausible, and fantasy is the impossible made plausible or probable," or something like that. The difference I work with is that science fiction is still

dealing with something that could at least be theoretically possible in the world as we understand it. Whereas fantasy might involve more supernatural elements or magic or just things that completely defy laws of physics or science or anything like that. So I think that's the big difference here you're working with. That's the way I usually tell my students.

Josh: Gotcha. And Dani, when it comes to writing fantasy, there are different tiers of fantasy, low fantasy, high fantasy...what's the difference between the two?

Dani: Right, this is probably a really lame way to describe it, but mostly it just comes down to worldbuilding. High fantasy usually you're working in an entirely different world, so you're doing a great deal of building out everything from like geo-politics to like what kind of magical plant is this? And low fantasy is usually grounded in some way in our reality, so our reader can come in understanding, like, Oh, it's set in New York, but all the buildings are magicians. In word count on the publishing side, high fantasy agents usually will take a lot more word count because you've got a lot more to talk about in a way where low fantasy tends to be a little bit more condensed.

Josh: And Robert, in terms of your own writing, what genres do you cover? Do you favor some more than others?

Robert: I think I'm mostly writing in fantasy with some science-y elements where I can at least articulate them. Although I have cheated a lot. I think I'm writing fantasy elements in the real world, in the so-called real world, and usually the characters are characters from our world who are dealing with something improbable or just strange. I have never constructed a world in the way that Dani has just described, I haven't attempted that yet. But yeah usually, the fiction I'm working on is something...not just something improbable, also something absurd is happening and characters, usually characters with some checkered past or some personal issue trying deal with this. And I should mention, just to piggyback off what Dani said, the Science Fiction Writer's Association website has a gigantic checklist for building a world. And it goes into everything, the geo-politics, what they eat, what it smells like after it rains, you know, that kind of stuff. So if you're looking for more detail, it goes on for pages and pages. It's incredible.

Josh: Thank you Robert. And for listeners, I will include a link to that in the show notes. Any links they mention during the show I will include those after the show. Dani, riffing off of what Robert said, in terms of both your writing and what *F(r)iction* is looking for, what genres do you skew towards?

Dani: Right, much like Robert, I really like the reader to feel a little bit more grounded, so usually as a publisher and as a writer, I like things where you recognize what's happening and then really weird elements start seeping in through the borders. So, whether or not that's fun horror or it's a little magical realism or you know, just flat out sci-fi, I really enjoy that. It seems to be as a publisher, we get a lot of the

same submissions and all publishers have this. So, it's like, here's an angsty feeling I'm having about a divorce I'm going through, or here's another New York college professor banging their student, or strange, like a whole bunch of stuff about like degenerative mental diseases and not being able to conceive. This tends to be across the board, every literary journal and publishing house gets a lot of this stuff. So, I don't want to say those stories aren't valuable, but you have to really be interesting to talk about that, so if you can weave a genre element in to tell me something really interesting about something that's on our minds all the time, that's makes me super happy as an editor. With my own writing, I have a degree in quantum mechanics, so I'm just an uber geek, so I'm always into things that bleed in things we find interesting in the scientific community and make them a little bit magical. I find writing about that stuff really cool. I've been re-watching *His Dark Materials* series and it's reminding me of reading it when I was eleven, and being like, oh remember when the world was magic and interesting! That's what I really care about as a reader and a writer and an editor, so that's what I try to hunt.

Josh: Robert, genre fiction, particularly when it comes to science fiction and fantasy it feels pretty boundless. Like you can create whatever you want. Do you feel that way? Do you set boundaries for yourself or do you just do whatever you want with genre fiction?

Robert: I like to say you can do whatever you want and then of course, you know, several thousand words into a story I'm like, wait. Wait, wait, wait, this actually doesn't work. So yeah, I think it's a good starting place to say you're limitless. I think as it goes on you will always benefit from doing research. Even in my case, I'm not an expert in science and some of the research I've done to set these boundaries, very often what I'm doing is saying, Okay...just to give one example, I've written about ant colonies for example. I did enough research on them to figure out what was actually real and what I could just...what little kernels I could take. One example with that would be how an ant queen works. An ant queen is not really a queen in any sense of the word. She's not a ruler, she just is a specialized worker, but I couldn't resist making her more of a ruler because that made her a more interesting character. So, I took some elements of the way ant colonies actually work and use them, but ultimately made her more of a classic kind of ruler. So, some of the research I was doing was to help set some boundaries, just to make the world make a little more sense, but yeah, I mean, if you're working on a first draft, you know, have fun. Please have fun writers out there. It's a tough world, try to have a little fun with it.

Josh: Dani, how about you? How do writers create in a seemingly boundless creative sphere in genre fiction?

Dani: Honestly, everyone has their own kind of style. A lot of my authors are heavy researchers, they will just either like travel to esoteric places in shanghai to really feel what it's going to feel like. Most of us don't have a disposable budget to just

randomly fly over shanghai to feel what the dirt feels like on our fingers. So, some people, you know, just live at the library, other people, I'm one of them, I tend to, if I break flow, I just ruin it. I'll just write "blank" really large when I'm writing, like, "And then they encountered BLANK." And then I'll write a note like, "research how the Scottish government worked before the referendum." And then I'll go back and kind of pop that in, but I think you just got to have a feel for it. A lot of people that write historical fiction have told me it was really hard to move from something that was confined by how history moved into an open genre because they were like, oh god I could do anything, I have no markers, so genre kind of gives and takes on both sides. Like Robert said, just have as much fun as possible and figure out what keep you in the flow and what doesn't.

Robert: And I would also add you know, if you find yourself getting so bogged down by how the world works, you might have to take a step back and ask yourself what's really important in the story and to me like, grounding it in the character and what they want and what stands in their way, what's holding them back, that can help clarify what's really important in terms of how much world building you have to do and how much exposition you have to do. It always helps to focus back on the characters again.

Dani: Yeah, to piggyback off of what Robert said, I'm going to butcher this really badly, but someone, somewhere, said something about how to make video games and they were like, what you need to break it down to is like, is the core of the game fun. So, looking at something like Mario, it's like, do people enjoy jumping over things and not dying if they jump right? And essentially people decided yes, they like that. So as an editor, I look at a story and I'm always like do I like the core of the story without any of the faff? Do I want to watch someone overcome a big challenge? Do I want to see someone do something magical? And if I can break it down into the one sentence synopsis and that makes sense, then I have a good core. But if everything out here is distracting the core, like, do I want to play something where I jump over a hole, the story has a broken bit, and you should go back and give it some love.

Josh: Thank you. Thank you both. Robert, and Dani, I'm going to ask you the same question because it seems like you both kind of write with one foot in reality. So, Robert, when you're writing that way, what's the process like whenever you're writing a story that's based in reality, but what happens in this reality is somewhat, unreal, for a lack of a better word. Do you approach it the same way?

Robert: I think I do, yeah. I know a lot of people will obsess over the differences between so-called literary fiction and so-called genre fiction, but I do think the basic principle of having a character who wants something and is going to push the story forward, I mean that principle applies no matter what I think. Even if what they want is some magical thing that you haven't defined yet, if you're putting in that blank space, as Dani described, that rule still applies. I think that sometimes people do get bogged down in worrying about how they can articulate what is

actually real in this world to how they can build it, but often I keep it focused on that character and what could be holding them back, what could be overcome, how they're going to change as a result of all of this. I just did a talk with some middle-schoolers where they asked, "Seems like all these premises have been done, all these zombie apocalypses and alien invasions, they've all been done. How can we make something original?" I'm like, you make it original with a unique character. I've made the mistake of making a character of a composite of me, I've gone through that phase. A lot of writers sometimes don't admit it, but I've done it too many times, I'm getting better at it.

Josh: Thank you. And Dani, same question to you, you write with one foot in reality as well. What are some of the challenges that come in to creating something so unreal out of reality?

Dani: I mean, often I think the two things just want to fight with each other. I often struggle as a writer, I very rarely see this in other writers, this makes me think that I'm stupid in a really unique way, where I can't quite decide where the conflict should come from. I always feel like to be a very intimate character driven writer, a lot of conflict should come from reality. Hypothetical, let's say I have a character who can control people's dreams. And obviously the conflict should be that there's a big dream conspiracy, but in my head I'm like, oh goodness, what if she doesn't get the promotion at that job, or what if that boy doesn't like her? So, there's this weird thing where I'm like, if you write genre, reader's expect big genre conflicts and I'm always like, oh okay, but how do I keep it intimate and human. I don't see that in any of our submissions. Usually my writers are really, really good about being like it makes really good sense that this exploded satellite also has everything to do with this woman's marriage. I feel like, if you can balance those things out, you're doing great. I'm not a good example because I'm a total asshat about it.

Robert: Can I also say, also when you're talking about the internal monologue about one of these characters, you know, trying to create a world when they're not constantly thinking about how fanciful the world is, is a huge challenge. If someone from a hundred years ago was writing about 2020, they would probably have a story where a person is constantly thinking, "my phone is this incredible device that can reach satellites and do blah, blah, blah." That's not the world we live in, we barely think about how our phone works, it's just part of our lives. How can you incorporate that in a natural way that both explains to the reader what's going on without making it look like your narrator just happens to be thinking about the very thing that the reader needs to know. It's really difficult to do that, but you just have to keep massaging it, take out the clunky exposition. A person picks up a phone and they're not automatically thinking "a few years ago phones were invented and they work like this," because that's the temptation!

Dani: You always see the opposite of that as well. Especially like in portal fiction where it's like, person comes from New York City and enters a magical world and then

just accepts all of it. Just like, oh, centaurs, I'm cool with that. It's such a fine balance to find how much would you actually react to this and how much would the reader allow you to explain how surprised you are.

Josh: And you both mentioned this already, so I want to segway into talking about magic and how magic exists in fiction. Dani, I want to start with you. We hear a lot about magic systems and how each story has its own magic system and the work writers sort of have to do to create this magic and what the rules of it is. How do writer's go about creating unique experiences with magic when so much has been done already?

Dani: That's a really great question. I just recently chatted with Emily Duncan who wrote the *Wicked Saints* series. She's a really young writer. Her series started as a D&D campaign, just a brilliant, lovely human. And for her it was when she was writing the campaign, it was so much about like how to create darkness in a genre that doesn't typically have it. So, she invented just some really messed up blood magic that just seeps so much and has such a great give and take. In each book the world building gets bigger. So, there's bigger gods and bigger drama, and bigger pain. I'm always really interested in how we think about what we grew up with within magic. We all read Tolkien, we're all like, okay he invented everything, let's just change it. So, I think if people are creating a new magic system it's really interesting to see how other genres are doing something. Emily merged horror with fantasy. So, if we're looking at how systems are made in the technological way and then merge them with magic. Like, talking about *His Dark Materials*, Pullman was cool, string theory was barely a concept, I think magic is cool. Let's put them together. So, I really like that. I think if we're going to talk about the change in genre is just crossing those lines and merging them and taking the best out of all of those worlds and then hopefully trying to make it as cohesive as possible. Which seems to be the second biggest problem to coming up with a unique idea is making it execute in a way that doesn't make everyone angry.

Josh: Robert, what about you? What's your experience been with creating unique magic? Or has that been something you've dealt with?

Robert: I've dealt with it a little bit. I think one thing to focus on would be the consequences both macro consequences, huge consequences, and also just the mundane consequences. Take like, for example, the X-Men universe. Where people have these powers that can do all sorts of incredible things. In some cases, they don't really do much incredible things. But a world like that wouldn't automatically turn into world war 3 or where like the world is just rounding up all the mutants and putting them in a concentration camp. That could happen but you also have to have the smaller moments. I know in one of the X-Men movies, Ice Man pulls a beer, a warm beer out of a case and blows on it, and it's cold now. I'm like yeah, there need to be moments like that woven in there as well, just to show that this kind of magic has all sorts of consequences all over the world and

in everybody's lives and I think focusing on both of those can really help and just fill out your world.

Josh: Yeah. And speaking of worlds, I want to talk a little bit more on world building here, because it is such a big part of science fiction, fantasy, all the genres out there. Robert when it comes to worldbuilding, especially in the confines of a short story, how do you approach what details are important to the story and what can be left out. Because in a novel you have all the space in the world to build out a world, but in a short story you don't. So, what's your process there?

Robert: There's a principle that Charlie Jane Anders (SP??), Dani already mentioned. She's written a lot about worldbuilding and there's a line that she uses and it's something like "good worldbuilding shows what the characters see, but great worldbuilding shows what the characters don't see but should see." So, if you can come up with a way of conveying, and this is something I try to do, I'm not saying I'm always successful. I'm really good at talking about it in theory and in practice it's a different thing. If you can come up with a way of conveying what the characters are missing, at least early in the book, now maybe later on they have a revelation, and hopefully that revelation comes from them discovering what's up with this world rather than simply sitting there and being told, that's another temptation that's hard to resist, but I think if you could focus on it like that, that's a thing I tend to do, what I strive for. I'll leave it at that.

Josh: And does that – real quick follow up – does that approach differ from short story to novel when it comes to worldbuilding?

Robert: I guess it doesn't really. Because I think the same...it's just in a short story you have to do it more quickly and I think the short story format really forces you to start in the middle of things. So, you can't get away with exposition in the beginning, you really have to start in the middle of things and end up...it requires a little more discipline, that's for sure, and I think in a novel you will be tempted to meander a bit, you will...and I know in my novels I've had entire chapters that are just like this is the story of so-and-so. This is the backstory of this character, so you understand why he acts like this. I telegraph that to my readers sometimes. It needs to be done. Can't get away with that in a short story I don't think. Unless you're only doing three sentences of it. And then you've got to get moving. It's all the same principles but compacted to the tiniest version of it to keep things going.

Josh: And Dani, when it comes to submissions that you're looking at for *F(r)iction*, and both in your own writing as well, what are you looking for in worldbuilding? What makes the world really pop?

Dani: Worldbuilding is one of the most difficult aspects of writing genre on the short story side, just because it's space-wise. This is something that is probably the most common thing that we work on with authors. *F(r)iction* is a really unique

publication since we're owned by this like big bleeding-heart non-profit, that we give free edits to anything we see has potential. So, we will take a B level story and work on it for like six months. So, the really big thing with worldbuilding on the editorial side is usually for an author to dump worldbuilding at us incoherently in emails. Like, where did this monster come from, what is it eating, how long has it been around, has a shaman summon it, and maybe ten percent of that actually goes into the story. So, we kind of get all of our heads together and we think, Okay, what part of this worldbuilding is essential for the reader understanding of the stakes for the characters, caring about the character, and what can we leave that's pretty ambiguous that kind of builds that Lovecraftian suspense? So that's kind of how we approach worldbuilding. It's always a delicate balance, because my writers are stupidly talented and they ramble at me that are so interesting, but I'm like, No, listen. Like, if I want to nominate this for the Hugo, I need it under 6,500 words so we're going to have to cut 80% of this story. So, it's always a fine balance of do I really care about the characters, do I understand enough about the world, do I understand what's going on, and I'm a little enchanted and that's about it.

Robert: I should throw in there, I just came across a beautiful essay and I will have to send the link to you but, it was about worldbuilding and exposition and it uses as a case study the opening chapter of Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* I think. And if you look at the structure of it, it's actually really beautiful because it starts with an opening line that gets your attention, then there's maybe four sentences that give a little bit of background, then we're back to the person who's describing the opening line, they're doing some action, then there's a shorter paragraph with a little bit of exposition, and then there's more action. Then there's maybe like one sentence of exposition and we...she just gives you just enough to get moving while blending it in with the rest of the story what you need to know to get to the next sentence. Like, having that discipline is really, it's a big part of getting better.

Josh: And Dani, is worldbuilding a selling point? Is this something that comes front and center to a story or is it always the character or the plot that sells it first? Can worldbuilding be something that's like a focal point of a story?

Dani: I think the focal point for me, as a publisher, always comes down to character. We talk endlessly in editorial meetings about turning points. I want to see change in characters, I want to care about them, even if the change is oh wow you made all the worst choice, you did nothing right and now it's going terribly. I want stories that kind of change the way we think about the world and world building often has to take a backseat to that because as readers, to be changed by something we need to empathize. So, we need to kind of put ourselves in the position of the human in the story and then kind of agree or disagree with what they're doing. So just plain worldbuilding kind of lacks for me, as an editor, that emotional pull that makes us affected by literature. There are some publishers that don't feel that way, both on the literary fiction and genre side, like vignette fiction is really popular. I hate it, I just hate everything about it. I don't publish it, it makes my editors just so

angry with me, but for me I really need to see stakes and change. So, world building isn't a human and can't go through huge emotional changes so it kind of simmers in the background for me.

Josh: Robert is it similar for you? Is the writing perspective...are you always focused on character first or do you ever start a story with the world?

Robert: I have started a story with the world and I usually end up somewhat regretting it, because I really think you should start with the character. Some of these writers, who really are brilliant and come up with idea driven stories that are just a description of a world, like Dani I don't think I'm that crazy about those stories. When they're done well I admire it, but I don't see myself trying that anytime soon. I just don't know if I could pull it off myself, because I think at some point I would have to throw in like a car chase or like a flashback to some gritty experience that explains why the character is the way they are...I just don't think I'd be able to resist that. But when some people can do it well, and it does happen, I'm like wow. Their brain is just working in a completely different way from me.

Josh: So, moving on from world building. I want to talk about the theme of a story, or the meaning, or the emotional truth, there are so many different words for it. But Dani, I want to ask you, how important, especially in genre fiction, is it for you to see a deeper meaning in a story other than it just being an interesting story?

Dani: I would say, as a publisher, it's really important to me. If I ran a different sort of publication it might be less so, but *F(r)iction* is called *F(r)iction* because it's supposed to challenge conventions, it's supposed to make you think differently about things. Few things make me happier than when readers send me hate mail. I'm like, I've done a great job as a publisher because this person is pissed off and that requires a writer really delves into something that maybe we don't want to look at or we don't want to think about and then really unearths uncomfortable feelings about it. So, theme is really important for that. But when I teach writing, I never recommend anyone start with theme. It's something that should come really organically. Like, start with character, start with an interesting situation and see how that character can change through it and the rest of the stuff will usually fall into place. Certainly, as a writer myself, if ever I try to say something like big and interesting about philosophy, it's the worst stuff I've ever written. So, I know that's kind of a hard thing for readers to be like, "Achieve this! But don't try it," but honestly it will just happen if you're passionate about and you're think really hard about.

Robert: I agree with that 100%.

Josh: Follow up for you. I was going to see if...one question we often get is if you are a writer you write the story and you don't see a deeper meaning? Robert, what's

your process there? Do you sort of just set the story aside? Do you dig deeper? What do you do, or have you ever come across that?

Robert: It's happened. And look, I've sent out stories simply because I thought they were entertaining. You know, I like to think that there's, you know, different readers might get different things out of them. But I've definitely just sent out stories that I've just thought were fun, that had a character that you just want to hang out with, or some situation that really either provokes a reaction or whatever. So yeah, it's something I can live with and very often, people have come up to me later and said like, I really love the theme of such and such in your story and I'm like, "Yeah, because I did that on purpose." I agree though with Dani. Like, don't.... I'm not saying you can't start with theme and some people said, "I have started with theme and I pulled it off. I don't know how it happened. Maybe it was an accident", I respect that, but I think theme can eventually come out of these other things we're talking about. Like, building a coherent world and going with the character that we actually care about. I actually...this has nothing to do with genre, but I was teaching a class when the movie *Call Me by Your Name* came out, and that movie ends with a character basically giving a speech that's about the theme of the movie. I came in and I asked who had seen it and few people raised their hands and I said, "Yeah, that thing that he does? Don't do that yet. I don't know if you're ready...I'm not sure if I'm ready to do that. It's very difficult to pull off having a character tell the reader what the story was all about. You have to really work hard to earn that, you know, so.

Josh: And Dani, is it a red flag if the story doesn't have a theme? If you read a story and you can't pull out a deeper meaning from it is that a red flag for you or is it something you work with the writer on or how do you see it?

Dani: Oftentimes, if we really like the story but it just doesn't have a punch, it doesn't have an emotional punch, we will work with the author on that. And oftentimes, the author thinks it's there and it's just not, so it will just be a conversation about like what do you think this story means? And then they'll tell me, and I'll be like, Oh, well you didn't do that. But let's find out how to incorporate it. There are a few times...I'm a really big of absurdism, and I really like humor, and I have maybe published in my six years as EIC, four funny things? And I love them, and they don't usually have big meanings. I'm specifically thinking...we published this flash fiction about the letter Q calling up his literary agent, I mean, his booking agent, being like, you know, "It's bullshit that I don't get more things. Why do I always have to collaborate with U? Like, why didn't I get cucumber? Like, you're a terrible literary agent!" and I guess we could be like, this is an interesting commentary on the entertainment business. But it was mostly just "Oh wow, this is making me giggle into like, my coffee. I need to publish it." So, something I feel like, just brings me and my editors an extraordinary, weird amount of joy, it's not going to say, change all of my opinions and I'm going to vote down another political party, I will take chances on really well-done stuff that way, it's just really rare to even get that submitted or pitched up to my seniors.

Josh: Robert, simple question, but where do you get ideas from? When you need inspiration to write another story, where do you go to find them?

Robert: All over. I record my dreams for one thing. My *War with No Name* series is based entirely, well not entirely, it got its start as a dream. Although, in that case I had the idea, the basic idea of a war between humans and animals from the dream. But it wasn't until I actually came up with a good villain that I was like, "Oh wait. This could actually work." Because at that moment I only had a premise, I didn't have the good characters to combat each other. I also just think, hopefully we can do this more soon, but just you know, going out and meeting people, and learning about them and trying to see what they're all about, that will always help you come up with ideas. Or at least come up with people to populate old ideas. You know, living in New York is a great way to do that, but there are plenty of other ways and you know, just listen to people. And listen to what they're backgrounds all about. I mean, you will... there are entire universes inside of some people's anecdotes.

Josh: Dani, what about you? Where are some places writers can inspiration, especially when it comes to writing stories about the unreal?

Dani: I think it's two-fold. I mean, everyone will tell you read a bunch. Read a bunch, read constantly, read until people think that you lack social skills and you're not watching enough television. I find it really helpful to learn about other sort of fields, so...usually if an author comes to me, usually a young one like hey, what should I study at Uni, I'm like, "Well, don't study English. What do you want to write about?" Go get a degree in archeology, go get a psych degree, so you have a really unique perspective. Because you can learn how to write from just writing and reading a bunch. I randomly went to the museum the other day and just found an esoteric sort of weird artifact in the crumbling Mayan section of the thing, and I'm like, "Oh god, I'd be so interested in this." So just trying to spark your brain as much as possible. That's for world building. On the writerly side, like just go out and live. That's why young writers tend not to get published, not because they're not talented, but because they haven't lived enough to figure out what are the things we should write about. So, if you're a young writer, go make some great mistakes. Go have a really terrible love affair that hopefully ends with your life not being over. And then you can really know enough about the human experience to write about it and young people can do that if they just take big chances and live some good, weird events.

Josh: That actually reminds me of one of my favorite quotes, I think it's either Theroux or Benjamin Franklin that said, "How arrogant to sit down to write when you haven't stood up to live." It's one of my favorite quotes. I want to get into talking about publishing now. Robert, I want to start with you. It's one of my favorite questions, when do you know when a story is ready to be submitted?

Robert: I forget who I'm stealing this from, but it's like when you know there's something wrong, but you can't say what it is anymore. I think that's a good principle to follow. Because you're always going to feel like urrrgh, there's something not right about this. I think another, just very simple thing to do, and I'm shocked when I meet people who don't do this, is read it out loud. I feel like it should sound like you can tell it at a dinner or something. That's probably too ambitious for a short story, but you know what I mean. Like, really strive for it though. Make sure it sounds right in your head, and if the story does something weird, you should know why you did it that way. If your only answer to the question is to shrug, then maybe you do need to think about it a little more. I've certainly been guilty of just being like, the character does it because, I don't know, he kind of needed to. You know, people have called me out for...saying like, "You know the only reason you're saying the character had a change of heart was because if they didn't, the plot wouldn't have worked." And I'm like, "You're right." And that's when you have to go back. So yeah, those are some basic ones to help.

Josh: And Dani, from the editorial perspective, are there any red flags you see often in stories that writers can avoid before submitting?

Dani: Yeah, definitely. Before I get on to that, I want to piggyback off of something that Robert said. One our authors Hart Hansen (*double check NAME*), he wrote *Bones*, the television show and then he also wrote this badass book called *The Driver*. And he has this main character, and these two women are just like flocking all over him and his editor was like, hey why do these women want this man? Hart was like, "Well, he's the main character," and then he was like, "And then I realized the book was on fire again." So, I think it's really good to be, like Robert said, like why are things happening? Is there a reason other than I need them to happen? That's a really great checks and balance to see whether or not a story is ready to submit or whether a novel's ready to send to your editor or your agent. That kind of stuff. But in terms of red flags, there's a lot of things. Bad grammar. If someone submits something to me and it's riddled with typos, I know they didn't read it out loud, they didn't have a second reader. They didn't care enough about us as a publisher to respect that they should attempt, you know, to get it clean. A few typos is fine, we all make mistakes, but something that looks really sloppy? A lot of people will submit a blanket cover letter that clearly tells me they have no idea who we are. We are a really weird journal and if you aren't into the weird shit we're into, you should not send us stuff. Often they'll be pieces like clearly for the New Yorker. Angry pieces where nothing happens and they're addressed to "Dear Mr. Hedlund," and I'm like, okay, there are a lot of flags. So just like basic...do research into where you're submitting. I see this with my agents all the time too. People will query for representation and not list any of the other books the agent carries, not talk about at all why you wanted that literary agent other than, "You are also Neil Gaiman's agent, so clearly you will love me." So just basic housekeeping. In terms of other red flags, really heavy exposition in the beginning, like very enormous paragraphs. There are just some visual stuff where I can almost tell what a story is going to be like before I start reading it. So

certainly, clean that kind of stuff up. Obviously, actually listen to word count. I feel like authors just think like I'm so good that they will respect this, but I have a budget and a page count and I need you to give me the right word count. So, there's little stuff like that.

Robert: I should say, about word count, in my class we do fifteen pages and I had someone hand in a thirty-page story and they said, "Yeah, but it's fifteen sheets of paper." I'm just leaving that there. The math checked out.

Josh: Dani, I want to follow up to something you said about...we don't talk about cover letters very much in this show, so I want to ask you, what do you look for in a cover letter? What should writers be including in that cover letter to get your attention?

Dani: That's a great question. I should say, general submissions for *F(r)iction* are read blind, so we don't read the cover letter until a senior editor has decided to enter the piece or it's pitched up to me and the reason for that is we really respect slush. Thirty percent of each of our issues comes from unrepresented writers and we put debut authors in and everything so it's really important to us that we're not like, "Ooo, you'll sell a lot of copies because you're really shiny!" That should never be a part of our reading experience. It should just be do I like this story. But for things like contests, we let the cover letters be read by the judges. So, Charlie Jane Anders was our last judge, so we really want to make sure, in a cover letter, you're not being an asshole. That's a big thing authors love doing, is being like, "You will be a fool if you do not pick this story up!" I don't know why someone thought that would be appropriate. Usually, I like to see a little bit of your bio, where else you've been published. I really love if you tell me you're a first-time writer, if you're writing from a unique perspective, you are in a minority group or you have a really interesting life experience or say you're writing about space travel, and you work at space force, I'm going to find that interesting. And then it's just really nice if someone writes a little paragraph about why you're submitting to us, like hey, I read the Monsters Issue and I loved the piece by Benjamin Percy and I think this would be a good fit because I love your blah-blah-blah. We're all human, we're all really susceptible to flattery, so it really makes me happy when someone's like, cool, there's a reason that you came to us with this piece. And yeah, keep it really short, usually no more than three paragraphs, about three hundred words. That's all pretty good.

Robert: Is it safe to say they don't have to summarize what their story's about, because I feel like a lot of people make that mistake.

Dani: Yeah. It just feels like my second-grade teacher is like, "And then we're going to read this really great story about how family is important." You never need to summarize stories for us. Your stories should speak for itself, a cover letter is just to tell me who you are as a person and that's always exciting for us as editors,

because we want to connect with you. But you never need to tell me anything about the story.

Josh: And Robert, at what point in writing a piece are you thinking about where to send it. Is that something that's always on your mind or do you write the story first and then think about it after?

Robert: I usually write the story first and think about it after. I think, you know, there are so many journals out there, it is difficult to keep track of which ones might be into it. I don't think I've ever written a story thinking, "This is the perfect story for such-and-such literary journal." I don't think I would even recommend that. I just think that might lead to some disappointment. Because look, in some cases you don't know who's reading your story. It could be a twenty-one-year-old intern that has already read fifty stories that are virtually the same as yours. I tell people I don't say that as a knock on journals, but I do say that to my students so that they don't feel terrible when their story gets turned down even though they thought it was perfect for it. You know, it's part of the process so. I never done that yet, but it might happen someday.

Josh: Dani, do you think that there are writers out there who read *F(r)iction* and think I'm going to send a story directly to here and then they write the story from there and can that work that way? Or do you recommend what Robert said and just write the story and then worry about it?

Dani: In general, I recommend what Robert said. I think, like we've talked about, writing is really hard, as everyone here knows. And everything that's going around outside, oh god, is this too long for this journal, is this not marketable, is this going to appeal to male writers in north America. This are all thoughts that you have when you're like more ingrained in the industry, and they're really distracting and terrible. So, all you really need to do is be like, is there enough coffee in my cup, am I writing something that matters and everything else should be blocked out. When I say that, we've published four people that have either come to me at conferences. or were once students I lectured at or had just written in their cover letter, "I wrote this story for you. I've been studying this book like a crazy person, I have sticky notes on my wall with all these diagrams about your editorial choices and I have catered this," and I'm like, "Ooo, that looks scary," and I read it and I'm like "Oh, actually this is just great!" So there have been people like that. And certainly, a lot of my authors have been like, I will get this in o the Paris Review and will write fifty-five billion stories until the Paris Review takes me and sometimes that really works, but generally try not to think about anything but writing, because everything else is really distracting.

Josh: So, Robert, then how do you know when a literary magazine's right for your piece? Once you've written the piece, it's ready to go, what do you do next? Do you start just reading them or how do you know when a literary magazine is right for you?

Robert: Yeah, again that's difficult to say unless you're really reading a lot of them and I admit that I'm not reading them as often as I should. All of their submission guidelines will tell you, you should be at least a little bit familiar with what we're doing here. I think it's pretty simple, if you've read a story in a journal that you liked and is in a similar genre to what you're doing, that I think is good enough. I think sending...if you include just a simple line in the cover letter that says look, I like what you guys do. There was a story I read six months ago from you guys that was just awesome and I think it would be cool...if you said something like that it's not automatically going to get you to the top of the pile but it's nice human to human interaction in what is otherwise, you know, a pretty cold interaction. I often tell my students, like look, the editor you're sending it to, they don't owe you anything, they don't owe you a critique of your story or recommendation of where to send it to. You don't necessarily owe them anything other than just writing a good story and that's it. That's your relationship up until they actually contact you. Which is both liberating and, might sound a little bleak, but I think it's mostly liberating and just keeps things professional. So yeah, I would just say, if you've read stuff you like, feel free to mention it in the cover letter but I don't think you need to go much further than that. This diagram stuff with the sticky notes sounds fascinating. Hey if you're at that level, you have that much time and you're that enthusiastic, go for it, but you know.

Josh: Dani, we've talked about this a little bit, but I want to just hear it, a succinct what is *F(r)iction* looking for, if you had to break it down. We all see on literary magazines it will say be sure you know the magazine, that you read it, but then we'll see a what kind of stuff they like. So, for *F(r)iction*, what kind of stuff is that?

Dani: I wish I had a really succinct answer, and I will try to make it that way. But *F(r)iction* really wants to put the story first, so we publish all genres. That includes literary fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, hard sci-fi, horror, we put a comic in every single issue - which if you're wondering is fiscally very stupid - but comics is a really weird industry that doesn't have the same sort of "you publish in small journals, then you get a literary agent, then you get a book." There's no pipeline like that for comics, so we really, we're fine hemorrhaging 20-thousand dollars a year to just make sure three comic people get their career settled. But anyway, the point is, what I really look for are stories that take big chances. I really care about the prose style. I think that there's a sort of tendency in genre fiction to say okay, the world building is more important than really mastering my craft and I don't need loquacious...I don't need Dickens. I need the stories voice to be really compelling and I need it to have good change. That's really, really what I look for. Every now and then I get lucky enough that I read a submission and even with my cold dark heart, like it makes me tear up a bit? Ooo, I love that. So yeah, the point is, I know this is really unhelpful, but things that are really good, that take big chances, that aren't afraid to delve into things that might make us a wee bit uncomfortable, that's totally my jam.

Josh: So, I want to talk a little bit about rejection, not long, but I do want to touch on rejection. Robert, all writers face rejection. How do you stay positive and how do you continue moving forward when you're getting ready to.... especially form rejections. How do you...what's your mindset there?

Robert: I've definitely become more Zen about it as time has gone on. I mean, there was a time in grad school where I was pasting all my rejection letters onto a wall. I've done that corny cliched thing and you know, there was something defiant about it, some sort of, there was a fatalistic determination to it, gallows humor to it. But honestly, as I learned more about how journals work and today, listening to Dani has been educational, you know, just understanding the people who work in a lot of these journals are working very hard for not much power or glory or money to keep this art form, this amazing limitless art form alive. So, you can be annoyed with them for not recognizing your genius or you just use it as an impetus to keep getting better to the point where they won't be sending you form letters anymore. There's a million things that go into a decision to include or reject a story and those things don't always have to do with what the story's about. Maybe they already have a similar story. The journal's already full, they did something similar to it a while ago, like there's a bunch of things that go into it that have nothing to do with how good or bad your story is. So just, don't get too bogged down in it, don't be...use it as an impetus to keep getting better. Alright? That's the best thing it can do for you.

Josh: Dani, what about you? Anything you wish you could tell all the writers that *F(r)iction* has ever rejected or just general thoughts on how people can handle rejection.

Dani: I mean really like what Robert said in terms of, there's always a billion reasons something could get rejected. *F(r)iction* receives over 10,000 submissions a year and we, not including solicitations from celebrities, and we publish from the slush, like 30 or 40, so that's a huge sort of differential. But one of the things that *F(r)iction* does, because I've been in a writer's shoes, is every single rejection is not form. We'll tell you what works, we'll tell you what doesn't, and we'll tell you if there was something weird that happened. Like, hey, we just published a story like this, or weirdly we only had men in this journal, and I noticed you had a penis and we couldn't put another man in this journal. Because publishing like goes out of its way to obfuscate what's happening and it's a disservice to everyone. It doesn't help a writer get better, it doesn't help me as a publisher, it doesn't help anyone, so we work really hard just to say hey, this is what's actually happening. I'm really keen on that. In terms of what I tell my writers, is just keep going. You finished a piece and you submitted it out, start writing another piece immediately. So, you always have something in the cooker. Because the moment you're just waiting for something, those rejections hurt so much more. Especially for authors that are querying for agents. If anyone has gotten to that stage, querying for agents is one of the most painful experiences that most authors have. Some of us get

really luck and we get picked up on our first one and Neil Gaiman's agent our agent. But usually it's like, oh wow, this is waiting for six months for someone to tell me, Oh hey, my boss didn't read this, but I'm the secretary and I read it and we don't like it. So just always keep moving as much as possible. It will keep you sane.

Josh: Thank you, thank you. So we're going to jump over to audience Q&A now. I got a little bit carried away with the time, but we're going to fit as many questions from the audience here as we can. Let's start with this one. Dani, you talked a bit about cover letters, what if somebody doesn't have an education in creative writing, they don't have anywhere they've been published, what do you include in your bio if you don't have a background in publishing?

Dani: Well, first of all, that's fine. I think since our philosophy is go out and live a bunch to write well, honestly it doesn't matter to me as an editor what your background is if you're starting out. Just tell me that. Just be like, "Hey, I'm a brand new writer, here's the kind of stuff I'm interested in, I would love for you to look at my piece." That's great. Try not to make stuff up. That's always a really good line. I see a lot of new writer's being like, "Well I spent a long time eating croissants in France and staring into the park and I think I now understand da da da." That seems odd to me. I mean, you could try it. Sometimes we laugh about it, but usually just tell me you're new and then we'll be like, okay. If anything, we're more, often we'll work with brand new writers than seasoned writers, because we know they need someone to take a chance on them. So just tell me that.

Josh: Robert, let's get this question to you. The term speculative fiction, where does that fit into the genre sphere?

Robert: I have used the term speculative fiction just to refer to any kind of fiction that instills some sort of sense of wonder or awe or that's exploring some, you know, some premise that may not exactly apply to the real world but is easy to imagine it in the real world. So I've used it very loosely, and in my class, you know, I tell people look, you don't all have to be doing Lord of the Rings here. As long as there's some element to it that is fanciful in some way or maybe you know, just comes from your imagination. Then that's fine with me and we'll put that under this gigantic umbrella of speculative fiction. Which I think has been used mainly to combine science fiction and fantasy. Saying science fiction and fantasy all the time just gets too much. And the abbreviation SSF doesn't sound right either so I think that's another important reason the term speculative fiction is useful.

Josh: So, I want to start with Dani on this one, but I want to hear from both of you on this question, just because I want to hear your answers. Person asks, "I am a new writer, do I have any chance of getting published?" Dani, what would you tell them?

Dani: Absolutely! Every new writer started at a new phase. Just put on all of your mental armor, get ready to probably get your ass handed to you in rejections and be stubborn enough to keep going. For me as a publisher, and as an employer, I look for stubbornness before I look for talent. Talent can be developed. Stubbornness is something that you just have in your heart. So yeah. Just keep going and keep working at it! Everyone starts somewhere.

Josh: Robert, what about you?

Robert: I would say just a few beginner tips, you know, don't be afraid to show your work to some friends, but also like, show it to people who might not necessarily be your friend who's going to tell you the truth. I mean, to me, just having other people who I respected tell me what I was doing wrong went a long way because the temptation among the lobby was to show it to their significant other, or a relative and they're like, "Wow, you wrote a lot of words!" So being willing to have your ass handed to you, as Dani phrased it, which I think is the right way to phrase it, having that humility, having that stubbornness, understanding that sitting around and lamenting about how you're not getting published is not going to get you any better and is just, you know, it's a waste of time. The better way to spend your time is working on new projects. Ray Bradbury, his advice is, you know, don't necessarily start with a novel because you might just get discouraged. If you commit yourself to writing a new short story maybe every week or every month for the next year, most of the stories will suck, a few of them might be good, but you will definitely be better. It's impossible to put that much work into it and not at least be noticeably better after a given period of time.

Dani: To piggyback off what Robert said about having other people read your stuff, listen to other people. There's a really big tendency because what we write is so intimate, if someone's like, "Hey I didn't like this," to be like, "You don't understand me." That's the stupidest thing I ever did as a writer and I think it's the most helpful thing I learned about being an editor, is seeing someone with so much potential who comes back at me with a lot of ego and a story will die because of it. Like, give it to people that you actually care about their opinions, and if they say something doesn't work, actually onboard that feedback instead of thinking that it's their fault.

Robert: Yeah. And embrace revision. Learn to love it. Don't just grudgingly do it and don't fall into this trap of thinking that like, oh well Jack Kerouac put a giant roll of paper up against a typewriter and type for three weeks and that's how he got this amazing book! That is cool, but most of the work is going to be done during revision and if you don't learn to love it and if you don't learn to look at it with the same level of inspiration you do with just free writing, you're going to have a low ceiling. You have to learn to love revision and accept it.

Josh: Dani, next question for you. Do you recommend submitting during the early part of a reading period or does it matter when people submit?

Dani: Oh, for contests it doesn't really matter for most places where you submit. You will...usually a contest has a judge, and usually a celebrity judge if it's a larger journal. So, a whole bunch of interns and junior editors and da da da da, will read it up to then, but at the end of the day you need the whole pie to figure out which slices are going to go over. General submissions? I tend to say submit kind of as early as you can, because editors are humans. And they're usually humans like working other jobs, so that big crunch at the end of a deadline means they're like, "Okay, I used to read ten stories a week, now I have fifty stories and my boss is breathing down my throat...my neck....to make sure that I can turn them in. So sometimes they'll be a little bit more rushed and little bit harsher, so I always try to get people to submit in the middle or the beginning. But honestly, if its really good, people are going to find it really good. But there's a nice margin of error to not waiting to the last moment. Which I know is not our kind. Ninety percent of submissions come in the last day of anything I've ever run in my entire career. Because we all procrastinate.

Josh: Robert, next question for you. How can I build empathy for characters who begin with few redeeming qualities?

Robert: I think, this could even go for a villain, like showing how desperately they want something and being very clear about what will happen if they don't get it. And being willing to show that, you know, if they don't get it the consequences are quite dire. I think this a mistake people make very often with villains. I think ideally you should be able to take your story and tip it over, upside down, so that if we're now looking at it through the villain's eyes, it's still a full complete story where the villain is going to, you know, have a goal, they're going to go for it, they're going to have obstacles in their way. Like, they can be the protagonist of the story if you tilted it over. But I think what a lot of people do, especially if they were raised on bad eighties action movies, is the bad guy is evil just because he is, and everything comes so easily to him. And maybe it's only in the last like three minutes of the story where he's finally like, "oh no!" I think showing how desperate your villain could be early on can go a long way. Or just seeing like their way of looking at the world. I mean, you know, Cormac McCarthy establishes this in *No Country for Old Men*. Technically not genre fiction, but like, there's something weird and supernatural about the sugar character that, you know, he has his own weird philosophy of life and once you grasp it you're like, "Oh man." So, showing how desperate they are to get what they want. Same as you would with your protagonist, that helps a lot.

Josh: Dani, I want to sneak one more question in here. If your story gets rejected and is then significantly revised, would it get consideration again?

Dani: Absolutely. Often my editors will ask, "Hey if you want to take another revision of this, pass it on." But even if they don't, if you make significant revisions, absolutely, send it back. And then usually just say that in your cover letter, like,

"Hey this was rejected four months ago, but I had a real long think about it, and I chose to change the stuff and I'd really love you to take another look." I love that.

Josh: Alright, so that's all the time we have for today. Thank you, Robert and Dani, for being here, especially with the holidays coming up. Everybody have a wonderful holiday. We're going to be back next Wednesday, same time. We're talking about satire and parody. Again, a reminder, any of the links or stories mentioned in this show, I will include links to those when I send out the email to everybody that registered for this. Lastly, if you have any questions about this show, I am Josh at gothamwriters.com, feel free to reach out. Again, Robert, Dani, thank you both so much.

Robert: Thank you. Nice meeting you.

Josh: And we will see you all next week! Have a great holiday.