



Dervla McTiernan

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CHERYL AKLE: Do you dream of writing a novel? Or do you just like listening to authors talk. I'm Cheryl Akle from the Better reading *Stories Behind the Story* podcast.

This new podcast springs from many requests we've had from listeners to do more episodes on how to write. We've produced a six-part series where we discuss the craft of writing with some of Australia's top authors and industry professionals. Welcome to *Better Reading On Writing*.

Candice Fox

CANDICE FOX: I never used to plot my book. I used to just wing it and I felt sort of free and easy doing that but when I started working with James Patterson he wanted these big extensive outlines and I learned that that's really good because it's comforting, you know? You've seen it, you've done it on the paper and people have looked at it and yes this is gonna be a great novel and you can just go through, you know chapter by chapter and just follow the road map really. And also once you've plotted it for yourself, that's your first idea down. You know, and you can look at it and go, well can I do better than that? You know and while you're following that road map you might go, ooh that looks interesting that little side road lets go off and then we've got somewhere safe to come back to.

Dervla McTiernan

CHERYL: We just heard from best-selling crime author Candice Fox who also co-writes with James Patterson. Two very different approaches to plotting books. Today we're going to discuss plot, how important structure is in your novel and whether you're completely original idea might not be original at all. And with us, and to help us is Dervla McTiernan. Dervla, welcome to Better Reading.

DERVLA: Thank you for having me Cheryl. It's always lovely to be here.

CHERYL: I'm super excited that you're here today to discuss plot because i think you're one of the most considered writers I know and you are very good at communicating that.

DERVLA: Oh, wow. Thanks!

CHERYL: We've recorded a podcast before. Okay, so Tim Winton told me he doesn't know what a book is about until he writes it.

DERVLA: Okay.

CHERYL: John Irving once said, plot is a map and I begin with it. Two very different styles of writing. So what do you do Dervla? Are you a plotter or a pantser?

DERVLA: Well a plotter is someone who outlines in advance to a greater or lesser degree. They know where they're going with the story and they're writing to a preconceived plan. Whereas a pantser is someone who literally flies by the seat of their pants. They don't know where they're going. They start with a blank page and an idea and they write their way into the story. And I always think it's like a spectrum. I really doubt there's anybody at the very far reaches of either spectrum. I mean I know Lee Child says he starts with a blank page and he writes and he says that he will be bored if he wrote any other way. If he knew his endings in advance. But I would imagine he sees it at least a little bit of the way in advance or maybe he has an idea about even his main character. I'm sure he's very deep at what he's gonna do with Reacher. So I think people sit somewhere on that spectrum and maybe even move back and forth. I definitely feel like moved on it. I wrote *The Ruin* with an idea and a blank page and no clue where I was going and I definitely paid the price for that in the writing and I wrote *The Scholar* with a pretty good outline and a fair idea of where I was going and then I thought I would always write like that.

CHERYL: And why did you change your style?

DERVLA: Two things. I found in writing *The Ruin* I was going around the houses. I would write two hundred, you know I think I wrote about two hundred and fifty thousand words in that book to get the hundred thousand word novel I ended up with because I went down a lot of blind alleys that didn't lead me anywhere, so that was the first realization, I wanted to avoid that. And I think the second realization was that I learned that writing an outline does not mean that the story becomes inorganic. It doesn't. An outline is as creative as writing the words on the page you know you're still building and creating worlds and characters. And it also doesn't have to be static. I mean I wrote an outline for *The Scholar* and it was detailed but I also abandoned it and rewrote it two or three times in the writing of the book because in certain points the characters tell you this is not the road they want to go down anymore. They've grown or changed, morphed since the character, since you've first created them. Now they're different people and the story needs to go a different direction. So I think, for me as a writer, if I stay open to that and open to hearing that open to binning the outline when it no longer becomes useful then I'm a fan of outlining. But not if you write it in advance and you try to stick to it like glue. I don't think that works.

CHERYL: I really like the way you describe that your characters actually lead you in a direction. Talk to me more about that.

DERVLA: Well for me I heard writers talk about characters coming to life and I didn't understand it. You know it did not make a lot of sense to me and now I think I do. I start writing a book by writing about a character. I have a particular kind of notebook I like and I take it out and I write for pages and pages and pages about that character, their entire history and background you know, down to their siblings and their first boyfriend, whatever. Until they start to come to life and I feel like I almost know them as a person. If I can do that for my characters and place them on the page, they almost tell the story for me, because I just don't have to put them in a situation. And it takes off. If I haven't done that prep work, then I'm sitting with, you know, wooden characters, or one-dimensional on the page and I'm telling them what to do. I'm saying, well, I need Sally to get from this location to that location by chapter two, so that this event can happen there. And I don't know the hows or the whys because I don't know her. And if I don't know her, then it's not organic. If I do know her, then I know what would she do in that situation when Tom says that to her? I know Sally's going to go off because she is just like that. She always overreacts, look at what she did, you know, back in whenever, and then the story can grow organically and surprise me sometimes. Because I think wow, yeah.

CHERYL: So Sally might surprise you.

DERVLA: Sally might surprise you. Sally goes off. And then of course Tom's gonna react like that. I never thought of that. That would be great. You know, and then the ideas start to come and flow.

CHERYL: So do you profile? Do you do a profile in every single character?

DERVLA: Every significant character? Yeah. It will be pages and pages. Yeah,

CHERYL: Wow. And do you sometimes write a profile and at the end of it think, oh well, I don't like that. I don't like that person.

DERVLA: Yeah, I will sometimes, or I just say there's nothing exciting coming from this person, you know, there's nothing. Usually it literally starts out with something as simple as Sally's 40. She's got two children. She's got blond hair, she's five foot two, whatever. And it starts to become more and more detailed by the end of the page, then exciting things start to come out of it. If nothing fun and exciting is coming out of that character by the end of the page, then I'm probably on the wrong track. And I need to abandon her and move on with somebody else. So yeah, you're looking for those moments that make you even almost sort of feeling like a reader. Get excited. And what would I want to read about what would be fun?

CHERYL: You told me that you have the story completely in your head. Is that right?

DERVLA: Mostly, yeah.

CHERYL: Mostly, so you are dreaming or daydreaming of it for a very long time?

DERVLA: Yes.

CHERYL: Or plotting it in your head.

DERVLA: Yes.

CHERYL: I don't, what do you call that? Is there a technical term?

DERVLA: I think daydreaming is a good one. I think daydreaming works for me, that is exactly what it's like.

CHERYL: You know, Michael Robotham, who we all know and love. He once told me that he's he was writing some one of his books and one of the female characters, and his wife said to him over coffee or dinner or lunch one day, "Are you with her at the moment?" Dont you like that?

DERVLA: That makes complete sense. I absolutely get that.

CHERYL: Are you with her or with me?

DERVLA: Yeah, where are you right now? What planet? What world are you living in? It feels that way sometimes when you're building something, creating something in your head, you pour a lot of yourself into it, you know, and then it becomes, you get to a certain point where it's the only place you want to be.

CHERYL: Yeah, tell me about the technique of that. So it is really I gather very important that you don't sit down and write all of the time, isn't it?

DERVLA: Yeah, you need time away. I mean, look, I try and write every day because I find if I don't, the story starts to slow down. But at the same time, I'm very conscious that in the first couple of years, all I did was write and work, write and work, write and work. And then I realized that you just get burned out. And you don't fill up the well again, you know, you need to see what other people are doing. You need to write, read great books, watch great TV and movies, spend time with family and friends. Laugh, you know? Just feel alive again, because you're building something from nothing, you're creating a story from thin air. If you don't have anything to put into that, then what can you expect to create, you know? So you have to live a life as well.

CHERYL: Does practice help?

DERVLA: Oh yeah yeah. Absolutely.

CHERYL: Talk to me about practice.

DERVLA: Well, I think a lot of people who want to write and most people who want to write are readers, so they know good books, and they sit down and they start writing and they look at the words in the page and they think oh, god, it's not me. I can't do it because look at this rubbish I've just written, you know. But the reality is writing is like everything else. It's a skill. I can't say that everybody can write good fiction. But a lot of potentially good writers abandon that very quickly, because they look at what they've done and they judge it. I think you have to recognize that it takes practice. And there are certain skills that can be taught. So for me, if you want to write I would say read the best of the craft books you can get your hands on, take from them what is helpful to you, because I don't believe there is one right way. So if you read all these craft books you take from that what's useful and leave the rest behind you. And then write as often as you can for a prolonged period of time, at least a year, if not two, and see what happens with your writing. Because I guarantee you, you'll be a completely different writer at the end of two years, you were in the beginning.

CHERYL: Do you think it's plot that keeps the reader turning the page?

DERVLA: I think it's character that keeps the reader turning the page, but I think plot has to be there at the same time. For the kind of fiction I'm writing, certainly. You could have a fascinating character study, but if she doesn't do anything for 200 pages, you know, you're not going to keep your reader.

CHERYL: Yeah. And you think about that.

DERVLA: Yeah, I do. I think about it at every level, I think about it story level, paragraph level, even chapter level, you know, and I feel like character first and always but plot is part of it or rather story, I suppose I see it as story, I know it's the same thing, but it's slightly different in my head.

CHERYL: So what kind of tools do you use? I mean, I hear people talking of, of computer programs that help with writing and plots. What do you use?

DERVLA: I use a combination of my simple notebook and Scrivener, which is the probably the software most writers use.

CHERYL: Do you recommend that?

DERVLA: Yeah, I really recommend Scrivener. I mean, it's very simple. First of all, it's not outrageously overpriced, as a lot of these systems are. You don't have to pay a monthly subscription. It's a one off fee, and you've got this solid piece of software that works. And it's what it delivers from it. There are loads of bells and whistles. But for me, what it delivers is the ability to see your book split into scenes. So the central part of your screen would be the text that you're writing, as you'd see in Word for example. And the left hand side of the screen, you have all these little tabs, just showing the names of your scenes, you don't name them, scene one scene two and three, you name the middle, Cormac meets Peter and learns about Carrie or something. And next scene, Peter finds out the truth, you know, whatever. The pivotal thing that's happening in the scene is there and you can see them all and you can pick and drag those scenes to any point in the book, which I can tell you is so important when you're at the editing stage, and you're trying to find the flow of your story and where the important things are happening. You can color code them. This is the really nerdy part of me coming out. But anyway, you can color code them. So for example, if you're using two different points of view, you can give one point of view blue, one point of view yellow, and then you can see how is this balancing through the story? Am I leaning too hard into one point of view in the first half and not at all and second, or you can color code or you can label them, you know... I'm at draft one in this scene, but I'm at draft three in the scenes, you can see how you're progressing. So as a tool, it's very useful if you're target oriented. You can set yourself daily word targets, you know, word targets and see your little measuring thing moving up and forth and changing color. That's kind of encouraging if you're that way inclined. So that's very useful. I still move the manuscript into Word, once I get to the structure edit point when I'm working with my editors. I send it to them and they send it back to me with track changes. If the structure of edit requires a huge amount of work then I will probably break that back out into Scrivener again, and do it in Scrivener. But mostly I stick with Word at that point.

CHERYL: I want to touch a little bit on the editing process because I can't tell you how many people think that that's a negative. So many people that send me manuscripts don't want their work touched.

DERVLA: Wow. God, I think that's crazy. I've really do think that's crazy. I mean, I have to say I love the editing process, I look forward to it. If you think about what it's like when you're writing a book, it's just you in a little room by yourself for a long time. For some people years and years. At a certain point, you've read every single word five times and you cannot see it anymore. You just, it doesn't matter how good you are, you can't see the work. You need first of all, a break from it. You need to send it away to somebody else, read or write something completely different. Clear your head of that story. And then your editor

brings to this, you know, years of experience, understanding the structure of good work from a macro level and right down to the line level. And they send it back to you with their considered thoughts and opinions not with directives. They're not saying you must do this, you must do that. They're asking you the tough questions. You know, why is the character in chapter 12 doing this? Because it really seems out of character given that in chapter two he did this or why I find the ending unsatisfying as a reader, I find it unsatisfying. That tests you, as a writer. You have to either look at it and double down and say, well, actually, I don't agree. This is why in chapter 12, he does that. But I often find when I'm answering questions in that way, I will realize that I might have the answer to the question in my head, but I fail to get it on the page. And that's my job.

CHERYL: Can you tell me this, the lovely story you told me the other day about when Harper Collins Australia received your manuscript.

DERVLA: I got my edit letter. Oh God, so funny. I mean, I had a lovely meeting with Harper Collins in Sydney before we signed up, you know, and they were so gorgeous and so welcoming. I of course, was terrified as a new writer to say a word for fear I'll put them off. So it was a kind of one sided but lovely meeting. And then a few weeks later, I got my first editorial letter and it was like a very long letter. And I read the first two paragraphs, I was blushing because they were like, we love your book. It's wonderful. And it's amazing. And this is why we're so excited. And it's just fantastic. It is just amazing. And then 17 pages of everything that's wrong with this. Why did you do this, and this character is not convincing, and you know, really, like really hardcore. And then the last paragraph is, and we love it. So I've always I call it the compliment sandwich. And I think that editors feel that they're, you know, they have to be gentle with you, but tough at the same time. And it's you know, it's always like that. Now, the first paragraphs are a lot shorter, I get much less of the we love it, and much more of that this is what's wrong. But I think that's more that we know each other better than that the work's worse. I think that they just know, I want to get into the work, you know.

J.R. Lonie

CHERYL : I love John le Carre, as a writer, and he was in Sydney a few years back now, maybe 10 years ago, and I was just in the audience with a couple of hundred other people. And of course, at the end of it somebody asked him about what makes a good story. And for me, I mean, not that I'm a writer, but this has always sat with me. He said there are two stories. There's the cat sat on the mat. Or there's the cat sat on the dog's mat.

DERVLA: Absolutely. The cat sat on the dog's mat is the dramatic story and that's the thing that really gives you –

CHERYL: Tension.

DERVLA: Tension, drama, and you want to find out what happens.

Dervla McTiernan

CHERYL: So that was J.R. Lonie and I discussing John le Carre's quote. I mean, I love this, you know this. Yeah. It is really one of my favorites is, you know, when you're writing a story, it's either the cat sat on the mat, or the cat sat on the dogs mat.

DERVLA: Yes.

CHERYL: I mean that should be the beginning of every writing class.

DERVLA: Yeah, it should. Natasha Lester used to use a different one when she was teaching and she would say, and the King died and then the Queen died, or the King died and then the Queen died of grief –

CHERYL: Ah lovely.

DERVLA: You know, it's perfect. It's the same thing. You're going to the differences of what questions and the how and why questions and that's the key, the heart of story for me.

CHERYL: Is that how you start?

DERVLA: Yeah, well, I start with, I have my own little my own little thing that I write, and I stick up on the wall every time and it's and this might sound very pretentious, but I can I can tell you I got it from a TED talk rather than the original Aristotle. Apparently it is from Aristotle. And he says the heart of every story comes down to three things: pity, fear and catharsis. And he's thinking about the reader. He I think he was writing about place at the time he was talking about plays, but I think it goes to the story as well. You know, I'm thinking about the reader all of the time. I want them firstly, to feel empathy for the character. Then you raise the stakes, so they feel fear for the character. And then you resolve that and you give the reader catharsis. That's what I'm aiming for.

CHERYL: Yeah. Talk to me about the seven story archetypes. What are they?

DERVLA: Well, Christopher Booker, I think wrote a book and where he had spent a prolonged period of time, I think, many, many years reading different stories and operas and plays, and even movies. And he felt that in analyzing all of those, he could identify seven basic story archetypes, a formula, if you will, that every story fits within or every successful story fits within in his view. And he probably wasn't the first you know, to carry out that sort of analysis. In fact, he definitely wasn't. Many people have done something similar. Joseph Campbell talked about the hero's journey, and lots of other people have talked about this over time. And I do think it's a fascinating area, because there is a reason why certain stories are more satisfying to people than others. But I'm not sure that it's useful for a writer to think in those terms. I mean, I certainly don't sit down with the formula and look at you know, this is the story of rags to riches. For example, I'm going to write a rags to riches story, and I have to hit these notes at these pages.

CHERYL: So what the first one is, although I've got a list here, overcoming the monster, and an example of that is Dracula.

DERVLA: Yep.

CHERYL: Rags to riches: *Cinderella*, *Great Expectations*; the quest, examples are *The Odyssey* and *The Lightning Thief*; voyage and return: *The Hobbit*, *Alice in Wonderland*; comedy: *Bridget Jones' Diary*; tragedy: *Madame Bovary*; rebirth: *The Secret Garden*.

DERVLA: Yeah, I do think there's truth to the fact that the vast majority of stories, you could find a way to make them fit these. And sometimes you wouldn't even have to push that hard, you know, they really do fit these archetypes. And I wouldn't argue that there is some truth to it. I don't I mean, think I haven't read all of Chris's book. But I think he puts forward some theories as to why. And there are many talks about

some of the different historical theories about why we why these stories may fall within these archetypes that it may even come down to, you know, human psyche, why we find certain things more satisfying. But I think as a writer, when you sit down again, with your blank page, and you're starting off, to think in those terms is counterproductive. Because they are in many ways the what questions, you know? What happens next? Sally goes to the garden, and then she went to the shop. And then, you know, the, but it doesn't tell you why. You know, it's like the cat sat in the mat. Well why, you know, we sat in the dog's mat. Oh, okay, suddenly, we've got something interesting here.

CHERYL: Yeah.

DERVLA: So for writer to think about it in terms of this is a formula of the story that I'm writing is a very, very, very small part of the picture. And I think if you put it up front, and it's the big picture, then I think it's unhelpful.

CHERYL: It's no coincidence that *The Ruin* debut fiction, it was your first book, and it went to the bestseller list. And I often think, how does that happen? You know, for an unknown author, like yourself. And I'm trying to verbalize how, what I what my reaction to the book was, I think for me, one, it was very easy to read.

DERVLA: Yeah.

CHERYL: It was a page turner, what does that mean? And how do you actually achieve that style? And three, the story was complex and engaging in a way that I could understand. How do you-?

DERVLA: How did I get it to do that way?

CHERYL: Yeah.

DERVLA: Well, I think about it to tell you the truth that is absolutely on my mind. That's part of what I'm aiming for. So every single time I sit down to write a scene, I start with a piece of paper in my notebook, and I say, what is the scene about, who was in it, and what did they want going into it? And what has happened in it? I don't want a single scene in any book that is there for no other reason than to fill up the pages. You know, something has to happen that matters in every in every single chapter. I don't mean, you know, macro things like, well, somebody has shot somebody, you know, we've got something dramatic. But it could be that a change of mind, or a new point of view -

CHERYL: Or we discover something about a character.

DERVLA: Yeah, you know, Cormac comes into this chapter feeling this way, and he comes out of this chapter with doubts. It can be as simple as that. But you as a reader I feel that change happening. So I asked myself the same questions every time, you know, and sometimes it's just very theme setting type stuff. Yes. Where what room are you in? And what do we see? What are the people the things we see around us that that create that room? Who else is there? And what does each character want going into the scene? Or what do they know going to the scene? And what do they want coming out of it? So what has changed for each of them, not just the character whose point of view I'm writing, because that's where you have something organic and real, rather than, well, here are my three cardboard cutout characters. Now I'm going to send in my real character, who will tell them what's going to happen, and then we will move forward in this simple exchange of information, that doesn't feel real. I want you to feel wrapped up in it so it has to be real. So I'm asking myself those questions every single time. So that's, that's the first thing and then when it comes back down, before I send it to my editors, I'm looking at it for pace. And I'm looking at it for that sort of stuff. And I'm thinking, you know, does each chapter move

quickly? Does it matter? Is there a balance across the whole book, you know, and a lot of that is instinctive. It comes from reading and reading and reading and reading and reading. And that's why writers always say, if you want to write fiction, you have to read. Because if you think about it, Cheryl like, if you write 100,000 word book, just think how many words you could have chosen, think how many choices you have to make. Its millions and millions of choices. If you try to make every choice consciously. You couldn't, it's just physically impossible to do that. So most of these are coming from it's, you know, an instinctive, subconscious decision that you're making. And those decisions are informed by 20, 30, 40 years of reading other people's work.

CHERYL: Yeah.

DERVLA: So that's why you must read in order to write and it all feeds in to create the book.

CHERYL: Dervla I really think you're magnificent in terms of writing. How you came to it, it was your second career and you nailed it at book one. What are the three things that you've done that you think have carved your success ,like if you're going to give a writer three tips what are they going to be?

DERVLA: Oh God, they're going to sound so boring and I apologize-

CHERYL: But I think maybe they are. Maybe it's a job that you have to apply yourself to.

DERVLA: Well, the first one is read.

CHERYL: Read, yeah.

DERVLA: Because I know I've said that already. And I know everybody says it and probably everybody hearing it rises and goes oh, that ole chestnut but it is the fundamental building block of writing is to read. So read things you love, read things that excite you and make you happy. Don't read to be worthy. Read because you love it because that's the thing you have to feed.

CHERYL: Yeah.

DERVLA: The second thing: write as much as you can. I know people say write every day. I don't think that's practical for everybody, unfortunately, but at the same time, don't lie to yourself. You know, sometimes you have to carve out the time, make yourself do that because you love it. Give it that time and respect and write as much as you can, particularly in the beginning to build up the skill you need to read as much as you can. And my last one is drink tea, not wine. You know, that's a dangerous habit to fall into. But you need some little treats. So I'd say go for the tea rather than the wine if you can.

CHERYL: Or coffee maybe.

DERVLA: Yeah, or coffee. Coffee is good too.

CHERYL: Dervla McTierman, thank you so much. Always a pleasure.

DERVLA: Thank you Cheryl. Thank you for having me.

CHERYL: If you enjoyed this episode of *Better Reading On Writing*, please leave an iTunes review. Also, visit our site betterreading.com for podcast notes and join the Better Reading community on Facebook for more books, author chats and great community discussions.

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