Seattle Writes – The Art of Dialogue with Nancy Rawles

[00:00:05] Welcome to the Seattle Writes podcast produced by The Seattle Public Library with support from The Seattle Public Library Foundation and Amazon Literary Partnership. Seattle Writes supports local writers through programs, workshops, and write-ins, and by providing space to work throughout the city. To see upcoming classes and additional information about Seattle Writes, visit our website at SPL dot ORG slash Seattle Writes.

[00:00:37] Nancy Rawles has worked as a journalist, playwright, and novelist. Her novel, My Jim, was the featured Seattle Reads title in 2009. Nancy teaches writing at Highline College and at Hugo House. In previous years, Nancy has taught a workshop for Seattle Writes called “When Someone Speaks: a Workshop in the Art of Dialogue.” We're pleased to welcome Nancy today to talk about writing dialogue in books, plays, screenplays, and poetry.

[00:01:05] I think dialogue can enliven any kind of writing. Um, I really, I'm one of those people who, when I get to the dialogue part of a book, I get very excited. And, if that dialogue is disappointing, then I might not even be caring to finish that book, because I love to get introduced to characters and conflict through dialogue.

[00:01:30] When I was a kid, so a hundred years ago, and I worked at a bakery in Los Angeles, there was, um, there were a lot of women I worked with who were older, who were much older. And there was one named Sophie. Sophie was probably 90 if she were a day, and she was about, I don't know, 35. She was very, very short, except she wore platform shoes, and her hair was high and kind of lacquered. So, she would look a little bit taller and more imposing, and she moved very, very slowly. So, this was a Jewish deli and bakery, so people would come in for the holidays, they would come in for the Sabbath, and they’re often coming where it's, you know, it's just about to be sundown. They're frantic. They need their bread. They need whatever they need. And Sophie is moving very, very slowly. But what I remember about her is her conversations, which were usually very short, and they went something like this.

[00:02:45] “Excuse me, lady, um, excuse me, ma'am. Can I freeze this carrot cake?” And Sophie would say, “They going to freeze human beings in a few years. Vhy not the carrot cake?” Or, people would be rushing, and they'd say, “I'm sorry, I have, I've only got, you know, 20 minutes, and I have to be at the Seder. I have to be somewhere.” And she'd say, “Vhy you rush? You rush to die.”

[00:03:17] So she was also a philosopher, in a way. And you only needed to know a few sentences, from Sophie's mouth, to kind of know everything about her as a person. And that's the point of good dialogue. Normally, in regular conversations, you don't get that kind of dialogue. But, when you're writing, your dialogue has to have meaning. It has to either illustrate the character, the situation, the background, context, the conflict. It's there for a reason. It's moving along the story. And this is true, even if it's a nonfiction story, if it's a narrative form. And all, actually all journalists know this or good journalists, I guess, from wonderful, respectable publications. Unlike a lot of the journalism that's out there now, but I digress. Um, but good journalists know that a quote is something that you cannot say better yourself. You cannot paraphrase. You cannot summarize. Someone has said it in just the right words that move that story forward. So this is what you want to do, even if it's nonfiction. And if you do write nonfiction, or any kind of writing, you want to make sure that your listening ear is very attuned.

[00:04:47] So, I would recommend reading some books that are essentially short narratives that have been gained through interviews or oral history. So, I would recommend anything by Studs Terkel, one of the best interviewers ever. I would recommend, um, Anna Deavere Smith and her plays that are essentially interviews with actual people who either lived through and participated, in some way, in the 1992 conflict over the Rodney King verdict.

[00:05:27] So that book and play is called Twilight. And then there's also her Crown Heights, Brooklyn, one, which was a conflict, and she interviewed many of the people involved, or just witnesses, and put it on stage. Dialogue is frequently a duel, and that's a great way to think about it. Two characters who are just going at each other, and it can be in play, it can be in humor, or it could be in some serious conflict where they are dueling.

[00:06:08] They are talking to each other, not necessarily in the language that people use every day, but in a much more heightened and meaningful language.

[00:06:20] Um, there's also something called simultaneous monologue, which can work really well. I was able to employ that at one point in a theater piece, and I was surprised at how well it worked, after it got onto its feet, with just two actors on different parts of the stage.

[00:06:41] And this was a nonfiction piece. It was about Edwin Pratt, who was the Seattle Urban League director.

[00:06:48] And in 1969, he was assassinated. And, this was such a time of tension. Of course, lots of assassinations of well-known people and also people who were only maybe known locally or, um, not, certainly not the kind of national name, um, that the political leaders had. But Pratt was trying to open up the construction market in Seattle to employ, specifically, black men and people of color, and he was getting, interfering with money, with lots of money, construction money, and it was a very, very tense time. The Urban League was in the Smith Tower building and was on, I believe, the 16th floor. And one of the things when I interviewed people who'd worked with him, one of the things someone told me is, she said, “You know, people would be so angry to see a black man in a suit

ascending the elevator in a building like the Smith Tower. What was he doing in there? Where was he going to work? Why was he standing so straight? Who did he think he was?" So, I thought, what, you know, I can, this would be a great scene. If I have a young man who is in construction or, not quite construction, but in something related, who is essentially confronting Pratt about being this black man in a suit. And who did he think he was? But that would not be a natural confrontation to happen with the two of them speaking in a dialogue.

[00:08:38] So I thought, okay, how about if this guy is a window washer, and he's washing the windows of the Smith Tower, and he's outside of the window, and here is this black man in a suit who has a white woman secretary, which he did have, bringing him coffee, and what that would look like to this young white man who was not ready for black men, black women, Latinos, any people of color, to rise to that level. So we were literally dealing with this rising. So the two of them are not talking to each other, but talking about each other, and Pratt is getting a little bit creeped out. You know, what's this guy doing? Why is he here for so long? And the, and the guy is, is talking and sometimes he's addressing Pratt. But he's also just talking about him. And it worked incredibly well, even though it wasn't true dialogue. Um, any time we talk about dialogue, we also have to talk about monologue, and one of the exercises that I recommend is an exercise where you interview your characters, and this can happen early in the writing process, or it can happen much later. But it can actually even happen with character development, where you don't know yet who your characters are. You don't know much about them.

[00:10:13] So you might ask them what makes them angry, or why are they so angry, or how do they express their anger, or anything you wanted to know. I'm using anger because it's such a strong emotion, and people are so different in how they do anger. So it's a way to define a character. Some people are very slow to anger, but then they blow up, and they blow up big, and that's a monologue. Other people are maybe angry all the time. They feel like there's some injustice that's been done to them, or they have a chip on their shoulder. And if you ask them about their anger, they will go on about this thing that has happened.

[00:10:55] So you want to get to know your character. And these interviews, I mean, you might get dialogue that you could use or maybe not, but it, it lets you know about a character, asking people about hope, asking them about who they love and who loves them. I mean, you could ask this of a character, um, and let them talk like they would talk if they went to a counselor, even though the character might be one that would never go to the counselor. But, you know, didn't The Sopranos guy go to the counselor? I mean, if he can go, if the mob guy can go to the counselor, you can take any character to the counselor. Let them talk, let them talk about their lives, and then you get a voice that is really unique to that character.

[00:11:42] One of the problems that I hear people talk about the most in, in dialogue writing workshops is having all these characters that sound like the writer, that, that have the same voice as the writer and the same voice as each other. So, this is no good.

[00:12:01] These are the kind of books that I stop reading when I get to the dialogue, cause I think why is that character talking exactly the same way as those other five characters? You don't want that.

[00:12:11] So you want to make sure that you know your characters so well and your characters that, if you put them in conflict, if you drop them down into any situation, you will know not only what they would say, but how they would say it.

[00:12:29] People speak in different ways, and they use different words, and they pause in different places. And your punctuation, all of that, becomes very, very important when you're writing dialogue.

[00:12:44] Um, when I was wee little, there was a priest at our church who, actually, was a substitute priest.

[00:12:55] He lived down the street from church. He was in retirement. And when they needed somebody in a desperate sort of way to say the Mass, they would call Father Redfern, and Father Redfern would come down the street, and he'd be very excited, um, to say the Mass or to hear the confessional. You know, he was that kind of character. And he had this shock of white hair, um, I think he was Scottish. And he would run back and forth across the altar, and he would say, “And Jesus said to Peter.”

[00:13:29] And then he'd run to the other side of the altar, and he'd say, “And Peter said [unintelligible].”

[00:13:33] You know, and he'd make this dramatic dialogue out of whatever the day's reading was. Which, of course, as a child, that was very amusing to me.

[00:13:44] But I think, um, you know, when we're writing dialogue, I mean, there is a little bit of that, cause you're alone, basically, writing this dialogue, and you're kind of running back and forth between these characters. And they're talking to each other in their own voices and making their own demands, and if you don't want to be that strange person talking to yourself, running back and forth across a room, you should ask a friend or another writer to work with you on an exercise in which the two of you kind of drop yourselves down into a scene where you don't know each other's characters, you don't even know your own character.

[00:14:25] All you know are roles. You know that one of those characters has more power than the other. That's all you need to know, to have a good scene of conflict and dialogue writing and discover who these characters are. So you just decide. You decide is one the boss, one the employee, is one the teacher, one the student, parent, child, whatever, somebody has more power. And the person who has more power, or who ends up having more power, may not be the one who started out with the power, or who would seem to have it from their role.

[00:14:58] So that becomes interesting, too, as the conflict develops. The only thing you need to have for conflict is you need to have one character who could be the one with less power, who's making a request of the one with more power, who is not inclined to fulfill that request. Or you could have the one with more power make a demand on the one with less power, and then see how that one reacts.

[00:15:27] But that's all. You, you just need an unequal relationship. And then you drop down into a room, so the two of you writing the exercise, or if you're doing it yourself, you just put those characters in a situation, in a scene, and you start right into the conflict. No “Hello, how are you?”. Nothing. You just drop down into the conflict.

[00:15:48] Um, I have done this kind of dialogue exercise many times in many classes, including when I was an artist-in-residence in the public schools. And if you want to hear good dialogue and see good conflict, put yourself in a middle school anywhere, anywhere in this country at any time. So I was in a middle school. It was a particularly chaotic middle school, which actually no longer exists. But anyway, in this middle school, I was explaining to the students how they needed to be in a scene and, they, it had to be conflict, and that they should just start right away with the conflict.

[00:16:24] So, these two girls who were good friends started their scene with, “I seent your boyfriend with that hoe Larry Hoe-cake at the mall.” And, you know, what could I say? I said, that's a great way to start a scene. The teacher was horrified. The students, of course, were very amused, you know. And I thought, hey, that's a great character. You know who that person is from the first thing that comes out of her mouth. And then now what's the other one going to say?

[00:16:54] You know, what kind of character is she? And we'll stop that right there, because we don't need to go further with that. But, it's a good example of students who got it, right away, of how to write a good line of dialogue.

[00:17:09] So, put yourself back in middle school and see where that takes you. Um, examples of dialogue are often, um, really good examples of dialogue are, of course, in plays where there's more dialogue. Playwrights are telling everything through the dialogue. In fact, as a playwright, it's really all you own.

[00:17:32] I mean, the director is going to decide everything. The actors are going to decide, the set people are going to decide. Everyone else is going to, um, interpret this play. And you really are just almost giving them this skeleton, and they're putting everything else on the bones.

[00:17:50] So, if you want a character in a play to weep, I mean, you almost have to write something that mentions it, or someone's reacting to the weeping, because otherwise the director could decide it would be better for them to stomp around, or something else, or throw the chair.

[00:18:13] Um, you don't control the action. So, everything has to come out through the dialogue. And the richer the dialogue is, the better. The audience has to know exactly what's going on. The

audience has 90 minutes to know these people's lives and, you know, this intimate information about these people.

[00:18:34] So, lots of talking. Movies, generally, not as good.

[00:18:39] But if you're a screenwriter, then you're writing dialogue for movies, and you know that, um, as Bergman said, the film often starts and stops with the human face. The fact that you've got that face where you can have one tear coming down, filling the screen, you can give so much information without any words at all. And a, a, really good movie does that. You can watch it and not know the language. You can know everything that's going on, because it's showing it.

[00:19:16] However, of course, you still need dialogue, and your dialogue sometimes in a movie doesn't need to say much. I mean, if this, this, couple has been trying to hook up the entire movie, and they finally get together and somebody says, you know, “Hi, How you doing?”, I mean, that, it doesn't look exciting on the page, but it could be exciting on the screen.

[00:19:42] There are lots of movies, though, that are rich in dialogue. And, I'm going to recommend at least a couple, because they're a good way to see well-written dialogue that could work in a movie or work in a play. One of them is by the British director, Mike Leigh.

[00:20:02] Mike Leigh has a very interesting way of making movies that's a lot more organic than a lot of movies. So, the actors get so much input into their characters and into what the characters say.

[00:20:14] I'm going to probably mangle this scene and misquote it horribly, but it's a scene with two characters in a movie called Secrets and Lies.

[00:20:26] And, the one character is Cynthia, and Cynthia is the mother of Roxanne. And it's the first time we're introduced, I believe, to either one of these characters. So, it's early in the movie, and Roxanne is watching television. I think it's a tennis match, cause all you hear is a ball back and forth, and, um, her mother comes in and bothers her or is in the room and, as we so often do as mothers, and she comes in, and she starts talking about or asking Roxanne, is she going to go out that evening? And, why isn't she going out? And, you know, “When I was your age, I could have, I was out every night,” or I don't know, she says something aggravating, and then starts talking about her legs and how she has such great legs, and wouldn't her daughter like legs like these, and, “These legs could turn heads.” And, the daughter says, “You mean turn stomachs?” And, you know, they kind of just go right for it. So, it's great that there's the tennis match on TV, because it's a duel. It's a match. They are, you know, hitting that ball, whacking that ball across the net.

[00:21:38] So, at one point, the conversation really heats up. Um, I think, um, the mother says something about, or maybe this is another part of the movie, anyway. I'm going to mangle this, but the mother says something about, “It's okay if you have a little baby. I'll take care of it.” And the daughter says, “You know, I'm not gonna have a baby. What are you talking about? It doesn't have anything to

do with you.” And then the mother says, “Yes, it does cause I don't want you dropping it at my door.” So she said that right after she said, “I'll take care of it.”

[00:22:14] And, she talks about her mother, and her mother dying, and how she had to take care of everyone in the household. The daughter says, “Yes, I know.”

[00:22:26] You know that, again, kind of broken record thing. And, she said, you know, “My problem is I got saddled with you.” And the daughter says, “I never asked to be born.” And she says, “I never asked to have you.” And then the daughter says, “Well, you should have thought about that before you dropped your knickers.” Wow! That's conflict. That tells us everything we need to know about those people and about their relationship and about the story and the back story. Um, so, movies can be just terrific that way.

[00:23:12] Um, if you, if you end up checking that movie out, it's just rich with this dialogue. It's Secrets and Lies again, Mike Leigh. And, there's another scene you should tune into if you check it, check it out. Um, the character’s Hortense, Hortense Cumberbatch, and Hortense is a young African-American, African-American, she’s African-British, woman who is searching for her birth mother. And she goes to see a social worker, I guess at an adoption agency, and the social worker is written entirely through dialogue, through what she says, and it’s just brilliant. The acting is brilliant. The dialogue is very, very rich, the way that the actor pauses and strings together the sentences. They're having a conversation. She's interviewing Hortense, trying to find out why she has come in, why she's going on this search for her birth mother now. And, she starts out asking Hortense questions, but pretty soon everything is about her.

[00:24:29] You know, it's like, um, “Are you hungry?” “Do you want a Rolo?” “I'm really hungry.” “Have you had lunch?” “I haven't had lunch yet.” “Oh, you live in a flat.” “You live by yourself.” “Oh, that's so nice.” “I used to live by myself when I was young.” And they go on with this conversation, and it goes through so many different twists and turns.

[00:24:48] And you see this character develop and all of, I don't know, four or five minutes, you see this woman go from being this kind of frantic social worker who you think is not very sensitive and just kind of pushing her through one client after another, to being this really compassionate, tender person who expertly handles it when Hortense breaks down.

[00:25:18] Um, so, again, great, great opportunity to see some good dialogue.

[00:25:25] So dialogue is a duel. It's a dance. It can have lots of humor in it. For humorous dialogue, there's nobody who beats Archie Bunker on All in the Family.

[00:25:37] If you see that on, in reruns, Archie's dialogue always defines him, his way with words, the way that he misspeaks.

[00:25:47] Um, all of those characters on that show, it's brilliant, humorous dialogue. And I'm, I'm sure there are many, many others. Um, scenes you always want to remember, think of it as scenes. And it can be a very short scene, but a very meaningful scene.

[00:26:03] And there are silences in dialogue. There are important silences. There are times when characters are speechless. And that's also very important to include and very important to remember. One last thing, Fences, August Wilson's brilliant play. Wonderful dialogue. Now a movie. Denzel Washington, Viola Davis. What could be better? Great example of dialogue that is meaningful, that moves the story forward, that expresses character and conflict and everything you want to do with dialogue.