



Library podcast

Seattle Writes – Conflict: The Machine of Fiction with Karen Finneyrock

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[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 writings, 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](http://SPL.org/SeattleWrites).

[00:00:38] Karen Finneyrock is the author of two young adult novels, one collection of poetry and an editor of a poetry anthology. She's been a teacher and writer in residence at Hugo House, teaching for Seattle Arts and Lectures Writers in the schools program and was the curator for the 2016 Jack Straw Writers Program. Over the past three years, Karen has taught numerous classes for Seattle Writes, including Start Your Novel and aspects of novel writing - a four part series which covered character, conflict, scene and the hero's journey. We're pleased to welcome Karen to talk about Conflict: the machine of fiction. So, Andrea, I'm going to start out my podcast with a question. What do you think of when I say the word conflict?

[00:01:25] Oooh,

[00:01:26] I think of fighting and I think of arguments. Yeah, just two people really kind of going at it. Great. Any chance that you think of wanting to avoid conflict? I do. I am a classic conflict avoider. So that is that is one of my goals in daily life, is to avoid conflict.

[00:01:48] So many of us are. And one of the reasons that I stumbled across the idea for this workshop is that I realized that in life I tend to avoid conflict. And I found that I was bringing that to my fiction that not only was I being conflict avoidant in my fiction, but also that I was protecting my characters too much, particularly my protagonists. Like a lot of writers, I come to love my protagonist. And I found myself wanting to protect them, which unfortunately is the wrong instinct for a writer and not the one that we should follow. Charles Baxter says it this way, "In daily life, a writer may practice conflict avoidance, but in fiction, a writer must welcome conflict and walk straight into it." So my podcast talk today is called "Conflict: the Machine of Fiction" and I always like to begin with an overarching idea, quote from a particular craft book. This one comes from Robert McKee's book Story,

“The Law of Conflict : nothing moves forward in story except through conflict.” So the brutal truth of life is that we all must face conflicts. Conflicts are how we learn and grow and how we communicate to one another through storytelling. Imagine had we been raised from the time that we were children to believe that everything we did was rosy and perfect, the impossible adults that we would grow into. It's really through conflict that we learn to grow as people.

[00:03:18] And when we went to show a character arc, a character change from the beginning of our story to the end of the story, the way that we show that change and bring that change about is through the conflicts that that character encounters. Let me give you this example. If I said oh I want to tell you about my best friend. Let's see. We met 25 years ago and we liked each other right away. We have had such a great relationship. Let me tell you all of his hobbies and interests. You're probably already falling asleep. But if I said I want to tell you about a huge fight that I'm having with my best friend in the world, I've probably already gotten some of your interest. It's a conflict that keeps readers interested. It's conflicts that keep our stories feeling necessary to readers. So I'm going to present this in a series of sections and a few little sort of, you know, play along at home examples and mini workshops for you to do as you listen. And I'd like to start by talking about the central conflict of the story. Writers all work differently and not all writers know what the central conflict is going to be when they begin writing their stories. It's okay if you're working on a novel and you don't know yet what the central conflict of the story is. That said, it's really helpful for you to take a stab at writing down what the central conflict might be.

[00:04:50] So we're going to start with the hardest question of the day. The hardest thing that I will ask you to do is happening first, and that's that I would like for you to try and write down the central conflict of your book. Here's the way John Truby from his book *The Anatomy of Story* suggests that you go about this workshop. To figure out the central conflict, ask yourself who fights whom over what. And answer this question in one succinct line. So go ahead and pause this podcast right now and answer the question, who fights whom over what? And answer that question in one succinct line.

[00:05:39] Welcome back. I hope you're still with me and you haven't given up on me or your novel yet. If you don't know the answer to that question, it's okay.

[00:05:46] You can continue on with this podcast, but I do encourage you to return to that question and wrestle with it as you work on your novel.

[00:05:55] So for the next section, we're going to go to a writer named Donald Maass, who wrote a book that I really enjoy called *Writing the Breakout Novel*.

[00:06:03] And he talks about the premise of the novel and how the premise of the novel should have inherent conflict. There should be conflict already embedded within your premise. We're going to break this down into two sections. The first section will be place and the second section will be people. I warned you about that because you can avoid, for the most part, people in this first exercise we're gonna do. So, uh, here's a quote from Donald Maass, “Does the world of my story have conflicts built into it? Opposing forces, both strong, perhaps both in the right. If the milieu of the story

is not only multifaceted, but also involves opposing factions or points of view. Then you have a basis for a strong, difficult to resolve conflict. To put it another way, if problems already exist in your place, that is a good thing.” Donald Maass goes on to talk about how difficult it is to set a book in a place like the suburbs, places that were built to provide comfort and to avoid conflict. He says that, of course, great writers have set books in the suburbs, and the way they were able to do that was to dig below the surface to find the conflict that is hidden in the place that appears to be conflict free. I was recently helping out a student with a book that she's working on and her book is set on a cruise ship. And the book was full of wonderful conflicts in many ways. But I found that there was some conflict missing within the idea of the cruise ship itself. A cruise ship is a great example of an environment that has been set up to give the false sense of security and comfort and plenty.

[00:07:59] And so we had some great talk about how can you destabilize that place within the story of the cruise ship? Can there be a storm coming? Can the boat be old and failing in various ways? Can there be infighting amongst the crew? Can there be an unreliable captain? You know, what are the ways that the cruise ship can provide some conflict to your story and work against the sense of safety? So here is exercise number two. I'd like for you to pause the podcast and write down some of the inherent conflicts in the place of your story. What are the broader systems that backup the protagonist and antagonist? And don't forget about the natural world. What sorts of conflict might the natural world provide within the setting of your story?

[00:08:53] Welcome back. We're moving on to the inherent premise conflict with people. Here's another quote from Donald Maass, “Inherent conflicts can be a facet of more than just your novel setting. Mother-daughter relationships are full of conflict. So are father-son relationships. So are most groups. Generations have gaps. Armies have divisions. All are plagued by power struggles and ideological oppositions. Anywhere that there are people, there is inherent conflict. If your place is lacking trouble, dig deeper. Your job is to bring it out.”

[00:09:33] So consider all the relationships of your story in writing your central conflict, you've probably already begun to consider the inherent conflict between antagonist and protagonist. But I invite you now to move beyond those conflicts. If your setting is, for example, a PTA, which Donald Maass mentions, you know, what are the ideological factions that divide that PTA? If your characters are if you have a lot of scenes at work, there should certainly be some sort of rift happening in that office or work environment.

[00:10:08] What are the big divides happening within your story? Take a few minutes, pause the podcast and write them down.

[pause]

Welcome back. We're moving on now from the inherent conflict of the premise and into something that Robert McKee calls the forces of antagonism. Here's a quote from McKee, “The principle of antagonism. A protagonist in his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them. The forces of antagonism is the sum total of all

forces that oppose the character's will and desire. When they are added together, the protagonist should appear to be outmatched." I invite you to take out a fresh sheet of paper. Write down at the top of that paper.

[00:11:12] What your protagonist's goal will be in the story. And consider, if you will, that the goal is not the protagonist's deeper need. Generally speaking, protagonists have both a goal and a deeper need. The goal is obvious. It's stated. It should always be clear to the reader how close or far away the protagonist is to her goal. The deeper need, on the other hand, is generally unstated. It operates on a more subconscious level. The reader still enjoys seeing the protagonist achieve her deeper need, or perhaps not achieve her deeper need. But it's not a clear, stated event happening on the page. One example that I like to use is from a film called *Up in the Air* starring George Clooney. And in that film, the protagonist's stated goal is a really simple one. It's in fact, mundane.

[00:12:16] The goal for this businessman who has been flying around a lot for his career is to get the most frequent flier miles to achieve an elite level of frequent flier miles that gives him some sort of card and access to special perks. Really seemingly boring premise for a film, right? I can't believe that this people were excited to go see this movie. It sounds terrible, but that is the mundane goal of the character. It's not the character's deeper need. In the story the character is flying around, always flying off to a new place. And really, at the same time, what he is seeking is to discover where he belongs, to discover some sense of family or some sense of place where he feels he should stay. It's beautiful when the story structure creates an environment in which the goal is actually working against the character's deeper need. But that's not always necessary and not always the case. So I invite you again to write down the goal, your character's goal, which again is mundane and stated. Please write that down at the top of your paper.

[pause]

[00:13:32] When you have finished that, I would like you to try now to write down everything that your character is up against. Every type of conflict, every type of hurdle, every type of block that will get in your character's way of achieving that goal. Try and make a list and you're brainstorming.

[00:13:56] So don't question yourself too much. Don't spend a lot of time perfecting it. Just take a few minutes and write down everything that comes to mind. Pause the podcast now.

[pause]

[00:14:11] Welcome back. For step two of this exercise, I want you to look at your list that you've just created. Robert McKee divides conflict into three levels. The first inner conflict, the second personal conflict and the third extra personal conflict. Inner conflict, I think, it's clear we all know that that's a conflict happening inside the protagonist. Personal conflict is conflict the protagonist is having with another person. And extra personal conflict is something that's not personal. For example, an earthquake is extra personal conflict. So take a moment now and go back over your list and try to

identify every block, everything that your character is up against. With either inner conflict, personal conflict or extra personal conflict.

[pause]

[00:15:20] Sometimes you'll come across something on your list that doesn't fit neatly into one of those three categories. For example, something I struggled with in creating my list is if my character is struggling with a mental illness, for example. Well, that certainly would create some inner conflict. And it is a struggle happening primarily inside the character. But I also think of illness as being an extra personal conflict, something that happens to the character that they have no control over. If you find something on your list that is not easy to place within one of those three categories, don't worry about it too much. Put it in the place that you think it belongs or talk about it with a friend and see what you end up coming up with. Go ahead and look back over your list and see if there was anything you had a question about and just label it in the way that feels most accurate to you. So there is no golden rule about how much of these three different types of conflict that you should have on your list. However, Robert McKee warns us that an interesting, well crafted story will have all three types of conflict.

[00:16:31] So if there is a particular type of conflict missing, that's a red flag. You want to look at that type of conflict and see where you can insert it into your story or if there's a type of conflict that surprises you. For example, if you're writing primarily a story that is focused in word and is primarily about a character's growth and change, I would be surprised if you didn't have quite a bit of inner conflict in that story. So hold on to this piece of paper, hang it up by your laptop or your writing station. Keep it handy because this list of everything that your protagonist is up against will help you create your plot, especially if you're the type of writer who creates plot as you go and you ever find yourself grinding to a halt. Not sure where your story needs to head next. This piece of paper will be invaluable to you at that moment. Look back over the list. What is it that your character has not yet faced? And how can you now make your character jump that hurdle?

[00:17:42] Ok, we're going to move on now to a fun little activity. And Andrea, I'm going to invite you back to play this little game with me.

[00:17:51] This is something that I called character equals contradiction. And I met the Seattle writer Claire Dederer at the checking out writers conference. And I was preparing to actually teach this workshop for the first time when she started telling me a story about how she had been traveling and she met someone who she described as an uptight hippie. You know, the kind of person I'm talking about. She said, like she burns incense in the car. But then she worries that we have to be everywhere five minutes early. And I loved it. It was a great story. Everyone was charmed by the story. And the reason why that character feels familiar and humorous is because of the contradiction. If she had just been telling us about how she met a hippie, quote unquote, hippie who always burned incense in the car, you know, that would be vaguely interesting, but it would really serve as more of a stereotype. It's the contradiction, the uptight hippie, that makes the story amusing and it makes the character feel familiar. I feel like I have met that character before in my life.

[00:18:56] So this activity has to do with conflict within a character, contradiction or conflict within a character.

[00:19:03] And we're gonna start off with a fun version of this which will help you quickly sketch minor characters.

[00:19:12] So, Andrea, here's we're gonna do. I've handed you a sample character traits list. Would you mind starting by just sharing maybe five or six of these that stand out to you with our audience? You can just read a few of them off the sheet.

[00:19:28] So we have traits like loving, loyal, pleasant, polite, grouchy, grumpy, bored, bossy, brainy, decisive, demanding, short, shy, silly, wise or worried.

[00:19:52] Thanks, and for those listening at home, it's easy to find these lists online. The one that I use is from ReadWriteThink and so you can easily find that one. If you look online, but other lists exist and they're great for making characters. So what I like to do is start with a list of these traits and then I begin circling traits that I find contradictory in order to create a sketch and a character like the uptight hippie. So, for example, this type of activity can bring us to some familiar tropes that we know, like The Honorable Thief or the Absent Minded Professor. But it can bring us to new, humorous or nuanced sketches, too. So, Andrea, we're going to take a minute and play along. If you want to do this at home, find yourself a sample character traits list and start circling and see what you come up with.

[pause]

[00:20:53] Welcome back. So you may have found as you're looking over your list of sample character traits that some of these really create, uh, sort of a spark. Some of them create an exciting idea for a character. Sometimes when the contradiction is too on the nose, like, for example, someone who's childish but mature, it's such a clear and exact contradiction that you might think, well, sure, we're all sometimes childish and sometimes mature. That feels very true, but it doesn't necessarily build a character in my mind. Then you just move on. Maybe you find one that's a little more off kilter, a little bit more sideways. That works better as a contradiction.

[00:21:34] So some of the examples I came with were a realistic dreamer, humble but proud, strong willed but insecure and a foolish leader. So Andrea shares some of yours with us.

[00:21:54] All right. So looking over these, I came up with a few pairs, came up with decisive, yet lazy, sweet, but jealous and afraid, but easygoing.

[00:22:08] I love those especially sweet and jealous. That one felt almost too familiar. Made me a little uncomfortable.

[00:22:15] Some of the ones I came up with today were the easygoing tyrant and the secretive gossip.

[00:22:25] So these can be great ways to draw on the secondary characters, especially when you're not sure what to do with them. I write young adult fiction and there's certain characters that need to recur in young adult fiction, like teachers and guidance counselors. And those characters can be really difficult to write. They don't necessarily get a lot of time on the page, but they sort of have to be there. And this can be a great activity to quickly create a character that readers can identify without spending a lot of time on the character development. However, this activity can do wonders for creating our more important characters, including our protagonist. Here's something that Christopher Vogler says about creating the main character. And this is from *The Writer's Journey*.

[00:23:13] "A real character, like a real person is not just a single trait, but a unique combination of many qualities and drives, some of them conflicting. And the more conflicting, the better. A well rounded hero can be determined, uncertain, charming, forgetful, impatient and strong in body, but weak in heart all at the same time. It's the particular combination of qualities that gives an audience the sense that the hero is one of a kind. A real person rather than a type."

[00:23:48] So if you want to use this activity also to draw your major characters, then I encourage you to increase the amount of conflict, the amount of contradiction that you place in the character until you have enough sample character traits that you find that they start to feel real. They start to draw a complex individual. I'm going to end off my podcast today by mentioning conflict and dialogue. One of the best ways to make dialogue grab your readers is to ensure that your dialogue is full of conflict. That does not mean characters are always fighting or arguing. Conflict can be as simple as a misunderstanding. In the book *Leaving the Atocha Station* by Ben Lerner, the main character, Adam is living in Spain learning Spanish. And he's constantly misunderstanding or not understanding what other people are saying to him because of the language divide. It creates humor, but it also creates a disorientation and isolation for the character that supports the theme of the story.

[00:24:54] Since characters always have conflicting drives, they will naturally use their dialogue to achieve their ends. So there are many ways to have conflict and dialogue. For example, lies, compliments, manipulations, half truths, subversions, backhanded compliments, red herrings, coquettish enticement and passive aggressiveness. These all make for great scenes and great dialogue. One of the things that I like to do is rough in my dialogue first. And then when I feel that I've got a basic sense of what's happening in the scene, I go back through my dialogue and make sure the characters are never agreeing with one another. In fact, no one ever says yes to another character unless they are lying or purposefully misleading the other character

[00:25:51] Well, that is the end of my talk today on conflict. Thanks so much for listening and look forward to seeing you at Seattle writes.

[00:25:59] [MUSIC PLAYING]