**The People Are the Story / Audio Lecture / Dinty W. Moore**

Think for a moment of how you form opinions of people. Real people.

You hear things about them, maybe. Perhaps someone tells you that your new co-worker is stand-offish, or “a great guy.”

You register that information, but you don’t embrace it.

The information – Bob, the new guy working in the department or office, is “a great guy” -- does not become fact in your mind.

Not until you meet Bob.

And then you watch him, listen to him, talk to him, see how he acts, reacts, and follows through.

This is how it works in the real world:

We come to believe what we believe about other people as a resultofhundreds, probably thousands, of minute observations. starting from the day we meet them, and continuing on for as long as we are acquainted.

That’s real life.

But it happens no differently on the page.

A novelist – someone writing about fictional characters – knows that she must build up a character slowly from page to page, action upon action, brushstroke upon brushstroke.

The novelist can tell us – the readers – that a character is this way or that way – generous, proud, evasive, loving – but we don’t really believe it – it is not real to us – until we see the character acting that way on the page.

In fiction, we as readers come to know a character by

* What he says
* How he reacts to what others are saying
* What he does
* What he doesn’t do
* What he doesn’t say

Just as in real life, sometimes a character rises to the occasion, shows himself to be honest or kind, and sometimes he doesn’t.

Remember: In real life, We come to believe what we believe about other people as a resultofhundreds, probably thousands, of minute observations.

Starting from the day we meet them, and continuing on for as long as we are acquainted.

In fiction, the writer must create these moments for us to observe, allow us to see the character on the page, read the character, make assumptions about the character, and eventually come to believe what we believe about the character, building it all up page by page.

Well, in nonfiction it is no different.

The people we write about in our creative nonfiction are real, and our descriptions of them are true, but these people we write about—whether they are strangers, family members, interviewees, historic figures from the 17th century, or the author/narrator herself—still function as *characters* on the page.

They must be brought to life and they must hold the reader's interest long enough to allow your story to be told.  

It is important to remember that the reader has never met these people. The reader has no pre-conceived notion of who they are or how they are.

And though the writer can tell the reader what to believe –

– Margaret was a strong person –

– Tom was shy and withdrawn –

The reader only comes to really believe these descriptions when they see it with their own eyes.

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The challenge, then, is to bring the people in your writing to life through their **actions, reactions, dialogue and intimate detail,** including:

* + What they do
  + What they say
  + What they don’t do
  + What they don’t say
  + Body language
  + Idiosyncrasies of hair, clothing, jewelry,
  + And any other small details that make a person real.

You want the reader DEEPLY INVESTED

You want the Reader REACTING, not MERELY UNDERSTANDING.

The readers want to be able to form their own judgments. That’s part of the pleasure of reading: thinking, feeling, forming your own conclusions.

When the reader forms his or her own judgements, the reader is fully engaged, and the reader is convinced.

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So what do I mean by “small details”

Let’s say you are writing about your high school physics teacher:

Show us a moment when he steps forward to help.

Or show us a moment where he gives a struggling student – maybe you, maybe the student next to you – a quiet word of encouragement,

Or when he has the opportunity to offer words of encouragement or kindness, and does not do so.

Also:

How does he dress,

When does he reach up and push the glasses back up on the bridge of his nose? How often does he do this?

What does his voice sound like? When does it change, in tone, or volume:

-- when he’s excited by some aspect of quantum physics that he’s explaining?

-- When the students in front of him seem to be spacing out and ignoring him?

Are his shirts ironed? Does he wear the same tie every day?

Maybe he isn’t such a good teacher. How does he react when a student gives the wrong answer?

What does he say when a student on crutches walks in ten seconds late?

YES, these things matter, even if the “point” of what you are writing is something else. Even if you think what you are writing about is related to ecology, or theology, sustainability, or some principle of oceanic science.

It is the people that make the story real.

That is how you allow readers to care about the story you are telling, not just register it as information.

That’s the difference between a textbook and literary writing.

It is the people that make the story real.

And your job, as writer, is to make them real on the page.