E P I S O D E   T R A N S C R I P T

episode 004 - r.r. campbell
On Poetry, Prose, and Voice in the Void
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r.r. campbell 00:01 This is the Writescast Network brought to you by Dandelion Web Marketing and the University of Wisconsin Writers’ Institute and always streaming at writescast.net.

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[intro music begins]

r.r. campbell 01:45 Our manuscripts are more than words. They live and die by their prose, the rhythm and feel of which can be all too easy to forget when one's fretting shows and tells, passive voice, and lingering far too long and the excision of adverbs. Harmful or helpful, ignored or exalted, much of the more commonplace writing advice is, in my view, well-intended.

But today I want to focus on something deeper than structure, on something deeper than the basic grammatical mechanics over which copy editors and proofreaders toil.

Today we are talking texture. Today we're talking rhythm. Today we're talking poetry and prose.

Hey there, I'm author, writing coach, and Writescast Network founder r.r. campbell, and welcome to episode four of Biblio Breakdown here on the Writescast Network brought to you by Dandelion Web Marketing and the University of Wisconsin Writers’ Institute.

It's been quite some time since we've had an episode of Biblio Breakdown and I'm excited to be returning to them in 2020. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Biblio Breakdown, here's the, well, breakdown.

Over the course of this episode, we'll take a look at a number of books and analyze them from a writer's perspective, discerning from them what we can in order to help us think more critically about our own work. To help with this, I'll offer writing exercises along the way that you can take on or consider in your own time.

[intro music fades, ends]

Today, as I mentioned, we're talking prose, which is, as literarydevices.net explains “a natural flow of speech and ordinary grammatical structure--rather than rhythmic structure.” This might seem surprising at first. Didn't I mention at the top of the episode that we'd be talking texture and rhythm?

Yes--and we will be--but I also want to explore how the line between prose and poetry need not be so rigidly defined. Our novel's manuscripts can be rhythmic. They can be lyrical. They can be poetry--without becoming purple prose.

To explore how, let's begin with an example taken from this episode's show notes, a pdf of which can be downloaded from the link in the episode description. I'll be reading from example one here, for those of you who'd like to follow along.
For those of you who can’t, well, hang in there a moment. I promise you what's about to sound like unintelligible word salad--or possibly High Valyrian--will make sense soon enough.

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Lorem ipsum, dolor sit amet.


Esse cillum dolore, eu fugiat nulla: pariatur sint occaecat, cupidatat non. Proident sunt in culpa lorem ipsum.

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Okay, so what just happened here? No, seriously, I’m asking you: what just happened here? At no point in the previous paragraphs did I speak anything resembling English, but did the flow and feel of the words not instill some sense of sorrow, of danger, of urgency?

I think they did anyway.

If you’re still not convinced, let’s compare the flow and feel of those paragraphs with another set entirely. For those of you following along at home, this is example two in our show notes.

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Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet.

Consectetur adipiscing elit.

Sed.

Do eiusmod tempor incidunt ut labore, et dolore magna aliqua ut enim.


Commodo consequat... duis aute irure. Dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate, velit esse cillum. Dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur, “sint occaecat cupidatat non proident sunt in culpa.”

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Very different, right? But why? How? These were--and you can run the tape back, I promise you--almost the exact same nonsense syllables presented in example one,
so how did we wind up not with a sense of sorrow, but with one of irreverence? Not with danger, but with submission? Not with urgency, but with surrender?

There are a few answers of course, one of which is that I employed two unique dramatic reading styles. But the style with which I read had to be informed by something, right?

For those of you who were reading along, you’re probably nodding about now, thinking to yourselves, “Yes, example one was punctuated differently than example two. The sentences were of different lengths, commas were in different spots, the use of italics and quotation marks implied a different reading from one sentence to the next.”

And to think—we were able to discern all of this from prose metadata: from the literal shape of the words on the page, the borders created between them by that which transcends words themselves. With only the most raw linguistic input and a few thoughtful deployments of periods and pauses, we took prose and made it poetry... if there ever really was a difference between the two at all.

So what’s the point? Anyone can take a run of nonsense syllables and arrange them however they want. That’s not the same when one’s restricted by using, you know, actual words that need to invoke more than emotion. And sure, emotion may drive stories, but there's more to stories than that, much of which can come only from the arrangement of the right words in the right order at the right time.

I know. I get it. But what if I told you the manner in which I punctuated those paragraphs wasn’t arbitrary? What if I told you I pulled them from New York Times Book Review Editors’ Choice and New York Times bestselling fiction?

I did. Don’t believe me? Let me read back example one to you, but in the original English. If you’re keeping up with me on the pdf from the show notes, this is example three on the document’s second page.

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At first, they blame the air.

It’s an old idea, a poison in the ether, a danger carried by the wind. A strange haze is seen drifting through town on that first night, the night the trouble begins. It arrives like weather, or like smoke, some say later, but no one can locate any fire. Some blame the drought, which has been bleeding away the lake for years, and browning the air with dust.

Whatever this is, it comes over them quietly: a sudden drowsiness, a closing of the eyes. Most of the victims are found in their beds.

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Whoa. Hey. Words! We’ve got words. And not just any words: these are the opening lines of Karen Thompson Walker’s enthralling sophomore release, The Dreamers.
While I read them, could you not feel the same sense of sorrow, of danger, of urgency coming through? Now, too, I hope, you were also confronted with more concrete images to accompany those sensations. There was poison, danger on the wind. A strange haze, smoke, a bleeding lake.

And air browned with dust. Victims found in beds.

See, even now I can’t help but recap those opening paragraphs without delivering their images in a manner that complements the emotions they’re intended to invoke, and there’s no doubt in my mind that Karen Thompson Walker was deliberate in how she chose to fuse the feel of the page with the content driving it.

Let’s consider now an alternative presentation of the same content. Don’t worry, this will be in English, and it’s example four on our accompanying pdf.

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Everyone starts by saying it's the air.

You know the story as well as I do: the air is toxic, the wind dangerous. It's foggy on that first night, the one when it all starts. It's almost like weather or maybe smoke, but no one can find a fire anywhere. Some people blame the drought, which has been draining the lake for a long time now, and has made the air brown with dust.

Whatever it is, it takes its victims in silence: they get sleepy and close their eyes. Most of them are found in their beds.

---

Hm. Quite the difference, right? Word choice and sentence length and structure had a huge effect in how this version came across compared to the original.

In this most recent iteration, you’ll notice I kept a few key phrases the same, but to me, this version wasn’t driving the sense of urgency and danger that the original instills—even if the content and imagery was unchanged from one example to the next.

This is the part where I suspect some listeners are thinking, “We get it, but we’re not Karen Thompson Walker. We aren’t professors of creative writing, we don’t have an MFA, and we’ve definitely never had any of our work named as one of the best books of the year by People or O: The Oprah Magazine. What’s more, we seriously doubt we have the years of experience and natural, raw talent that someone like her does.”

Fair enough, but I’d encourage you to not be so down on yourself. Furthermore, one need not be a highfalutin vox literaire to have or develop an understanding of these phenomena.
Think back now to example two, the other one that consisted entirely of nonsense syllables. Remember the sense of irreverence, submission, and surrender it suggested?

I’m going to read it again now, though this time in the original English, save for a few expletives that I’ll sensor for the sake of keeping this podcast from being marked as explicit by Apple Podcasts. If you want to follow along with the example from the show notes, this is example five.

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I’m pretty much effed.

That’s my considered opinion.

Effed.

Six days into what should be the greatest month of my life, and it’s turned into a nightmare. I don’t even know who’ll read this. I guess someone will find it eventually. Maybe a hundred years from now.

For the record… I didn’t die on Sol 6. Certainly the rest of the crew thought I did, and I can’t blame them. Maybe there’ll be a day of national mourning for me, and my Wikipedia page will say, “Mark Watney is the only human being to have died on Mars.”

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Aha! Many readers of science fiction will no doubt recognize this as the opening to The Martian by Andy Weir. Though a New York Times bestselling novel, Weir didn’t exactly earn an unending list of literary accolades for it, nor was this novel even originally a traditionally published work.

That’s right; for those of you who didn’t know, The Martian was actually self-published in 2011 before Crown Publishing purchased the rights to it and republished it traditionally in 2014. If it can happen for him, it could happen for you!

Though it of course doesn’t happen to just anyone. It doesn’t happen to just any book.

But I’d argue it’s more likely to happen to a book and to an author who’s been deliberate in the rhythm of their prose, the shape and feel of it on the page. As some might frame this, it’s about voice; and this next example, number six on our episode pdf, will prove it.

Here we’ll be doing precisely what we did with the example from The Dreamers: the content will be the same, but the word choice and rhythm will not.

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This is definitely not good.

That’s what I’m thinking.

Not good.

I’m supposed to be having the greatest month of my life. Instead, I’m six days into it and it’s not going well at all. I don’t even know why I’m writing this. Maybe someone will find it in a hundred years or something.

Just so you know, I didn’t die on Sol 6. The others probably think I did, so I can’t be too upset with them. Maybe there’ll be a national day of mourning for me and I’ll be remembered as the only person to die on Mars.

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So how does this version compare to our original? Again, the same sentiments are being conveyed, and the voice here is, yes, still casual, but it’s missing its bite.

What’s happened here is, in my view, due to a shift in what sociolinguists call register. Simply put, register has to do with the kind of language one employs when speaking or writing in distinct situations.

If you’re giving a speech to accept a major award granted to you by a prestigious organization, for example, you’re probably not going to use the same vocabulary, sentence structure, or delivery that you would if you chose to say a word of thanks at a small family gathering. And you’re certainly not going to use the same language that you would when engaged in a casual conversation with your friends by, say, text message.

Sure, our faux example from *The Martian* was still, where register is concerned, rather casual, but it wasn’t conveying the same degree of frustration as the uncensored version that appears in the actual book. On *The Martian*’s first page in real life, we immediately get a sense of character from the narrator’s choice to curse; from the start, it establishes the register with which we’ll be working, and that register remains consistent throughout not only the book’s opening page, but throughout the entire text whenever Mark Watney is our narrator.

In this case, then, what we’re seeing is a choice to work within a particular subset of a sociolinguistic register, and even this choice, as an author, is one we have to make with much care. Who is our target audience? What makes sense for the characters on our page to say? With whom are they speaking? When? Where? All of this will have an effect on the register those characters employ, and, even beyond that, we as writers have to choose what our manuscript’s standard register is going to be for the voice of the narrator—especially when the narrator’s voice doesn’t belong to that of a character within the book itself.

This is the part where, if I were speaking about this at a conference or in a classroom, someone would likely pipe up and say it’s unreasonable to apply sociolinguistic principles to a medium that doesn’t participate fully in the communication cycle as
it's traditionally defined, by which they would mean that since readers aren't actively sharing feedback with the writer as part of a conversation, there's nothing socio about what's happening here.

To that, I would say 1) that's extraordinarily pedantic and 2) that the point itself misses the nuance that's at the heart of this discussion. Though it is true our readers aren't generally in a position to let us know what they're thinking and feeling in real-time as they read our work, we as authors are still in the business of conveying ideas and presenting symbols in ways that are intended to invoke certain thoughts and feelings within readers and, with that in mind, we want to be mindful of the register, rhythm, and flow of our words, as they obviously inform a reader's perception of a page's content.

Are you still with me? We've started waxing philosophical, I know, so let's maybe pull all of this back into a more practical, craft-focused space.

So far we've used two very distinct approaches to the shape and sound of the words on the page in these examples from Karen Thompson Walker and Andy Weir, but what does it all mean? How can we apply it to our work? Which of these approaches is better?

Let's take the last of those questions first, because I think this is an important one to tackle any time people want to engage in debates about how so and so is a better writer than whatever-their-face.

The answer, of course, is that neither style or approach is better than the other. One might be more likely to garner literary acclaim than the other, but that has less to do with the quality of the writing and more to do with entrenched, long-standing ideas about what defines literary works.

The important thing here is that for both Karen Thompson Walker’s *The Dreamers* and Andy Weir’s *The Martian*, the register and cadence they employ is what’s most appropriate for their work. Both authors no doubt took into consideration the manner in which they wanted to portray their characters and their worlds when electing to write the way they have, and that’s exactly as it should be. Different genres come with different expectations, after all, and no two stories or authors are the same.

I asked earlier, too, what we might do to apply these principles to our own work. This is where this episode's exercises come in. I'll offer a few different options here; I encourage you to listen carefully to all of them, and then pick and choose where you want to begin based on what makes the most sense for you and for your work in progress.

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[ad begins]
Before we get into this episode's exercise, however, I want to let you know this episode is brought to you by Dandelion Web Marketing. Dandelion Web Marketing helps writers build a thriving author platform through strategic web marketing. You can go to dandelionwebmarketing.com/writers to explore services designed specifically for writers and authors.

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All right, thanks again to Dandelion Web Marketing, but here's exercise one, think about the feel of your opening pages--not the words, mind you, but rather the emotion, the imagery, and what it is your characters are going through.

Okay. Have an idea in your head? Can you feel what it is you want to invoke in a reader's mind and heart as they open your book to its first page?

If so, I want you to convey those images, thoughts, and feelings using nonsense syllables like those employed in our earliest examples from The Dreamers and The Martian. Just let it all go: punctuate where it feels natural, release yourself from the restrictions of grammar and spelling and see what it is you end up with in the end. How does it make you feel when you read this back to yourself? If you're feeling daring, read this out loud to someone else. What do they have to say? Are the emotions that come to them in line with what you aimed to convey? How have they interpreted your nonsense syllables relative to your original intentions?

And, lastly for this exercise, how does what you've written compare to your manuscript's first page? Are you using a similar rhythm, feel, style? Is there any way you can map your work in progress's first page onto the feel of what you've produced in this exercise? Remember, word choice and not being afraid to tinker with traditional sentence structure plays a big role in this, too, so don't hesitate to experiment!

At this juncture, I suspect you might be wondering how or where, exactly, you can get nonsense syllables like those I've been using. Well, you can always pull them, of course, from the downloadable pdf in this episode's show notes, but you can also head to loremipsum.io to check out their Lorem Ipsum generator. That's l-o-r-e-m-i-p-s-u-m-dot-i-o. I'll include a link to this on the pdf document, too, in case that's easier.
At any rate, you now have one possible exercise that might get you thinking about the relationship between prose, poetry, and reader feeling and emotion more critically, but let’s explore another exercise now, too.

Exercise two is, more or less, the inverse of what we did in exercise one. Using the lorem ipsum generator or this episode’s handout as your guide, this time I want you to take a look at your manuscript’s opening paragraphs and map these nonsense syllables onto it, just as I did for this episode with *The Dreamers* and *The Martian*.

As you do this mapping, bear in mind it isn’t about doing a word for word swap. “Lorem” need not replace your manuscript’s first word, and “ipsum” need not replace its second. This is about feel and shape, remember, so it’s worth focusing more on that than it is on making direct substitutions.

Once you’ve done this mapping for the first couple of paragraphs, give the nonsense-syllable version a read. Is this how you want your manuscript’s opening to feel? Is your intent to deliver readers something that fits this mold? Can you read this version aloud to someone who preferably hasn’t read your manuscript’s actual opening page? Is what they’re taking from the nonsense version in terms of emotion and rhythm in line with what you aim to suggest in your first page as it currently reads when written in English? If not, what might you do to close the gap between what you aim to do and what you’ve actually done with your draft so far?

This may seem daunting, but I do think either of these first two exercises are worth doing with one’s own work. If you’re not quite ready to put your pages through this, however, there does exist another option, which is where our third exercise comes in.

For this one, I want you to take your favorite book or books off of the shelf and do the same sort of nonsense-syllable mapping that we did in exercise two. Can you still recognize these books’ opening paragraphs as your favorites after having put them through this? What is it that stands out to you as you read? What’s lost? Why? Really put some thought into this; I suspect the answers will vary from book to book and for different reasons to boot.

As a bonus fourth exercise, you might consider doing this not with a novel, but with non-fiction and poetry, too. When putting these different kinds of writing side by side, is it apparent which is which once you’ve run them through our nonsense-syllable mapping process? What might that say about this undertaking as a whole or about the nature of writing in these distinct—or maybe now not so distinct—lanes?

I’ve gone ahead and provided some additional examples of this for fiction in the episode handout, including the opening paragraphs from *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, just in case you’d like to use those for any of your exercises instead of having to do the nonsense-syllable translation on your end.

Ultimately, though, no matter which of these exercises you choose to do or whether you choose to do the mapping yourself or rely on what’s on the handout, the takeaway here should be this: our manuscripts are so much more than their words.
Our stories are so much more than their words. And, for as unusual as it might sound, *writing* is about so much more than words. We have to consider rhythm, feel, flow, and narrative voice as part of our writing process as well, and what we've covered in this episode will, I believe, help shed some light on both how true and important that is.

Thanks for listening. If you enjoyed this episode or found its exercises useful, I'd love it if you could leave the Writescast Network a five-star rating and review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to podcasts. This will help the Writescast Network reach more writers like you, and building that sense of community is what we--and I hope you--are all about. To those of us who have already left us a five-star rating and review, thank you.

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Coming up next on the Writescast Network is an episode featuring Laurie Scheer, director of the University of Wisconsin Writers' Institute. She'll join me for what's quickly become an annual conversation about what writing conferences have to offer authors of all backgrounds, and we'll talk specifically about what writers can look forward to at this year's Institute in Madison, Wisconsin. Laurie's episode will debut on Apple Podcasts, writescast.net, and wherever you listen to podcasts on February 7th.

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To reach me personally, you can visit rrcampbellwrites.com or holler at me on twitter as @iamrrcampbell. I love hearing from listeners of all backgrounds, so don’t hesitate to reach out.

Thanks again for listening. Until next time, this is r.r. campbell signing off. Write on and write well.