Mary Anne Mohanraj: Hi everybody. (Not on your screen) I'm Mary Anne Mohanraj with the Speculative Literature Foundation and I'm here today with writer Walter Jon Williams. I know Walter because we both write together in George R.R. Martin's *Wildcard* series, which is a very fun shared world. But Walter is the author of many, many books. His most recent is *Lord Quillifer*. Unconventional, high fantasy. And it is part of a series but can be read as a standalone. So I'm really excited to read this. It looks like a lot of fun. That one just came out. So. But today, he's going to talk to us about some aspects of craft, which he calls the three R's.

Walter Jon Williams: The three R's, yes. I should point out just as brief commercial interruption, that I teach with Nancy Kress, at a yearly workshop every summer in the mountains of New Mexico called Taos Toolbox, and which would cover this and many other ways to make your work more awesome.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I'll note that I love Nancy, as a teacher. I haven't studied with her. But I read her essay in Those Who Can, I think it was, about plotting one damn thing after another. And it was just a terrific essay.

Walter Jon Williams: Nancy is an absolutely brilliant teacher, much more brilliant than I am.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh shh, well, we're delighted to have you with us today. So I'm looking forward and we will link to Taos Toolbox in the show notes.

Walter Jon Williams: Okay, as I was saying, this is for the three R's for writers. And the three R's are *reveals*, *reversals*, and *raising the stakes*, any of which can be deployed, alone or in sequence, or simultaneously, to make your work more awesome, and make it more exciting and surprising. So let's start with raising the stakes. 'Raising the stakes' is otherwise known as 'things get worse.' The situation grows more complicated, more desperate, and has more significance, the farther into the story you go. And the obstacles the protagonist has to overcome get bigger, the menaces get more menacing, and the prize gets bigger. For example, Robert Heinlein's juvenile novel from the 50s, *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel*: at the beginning, Kip's problem is to get to college; he needs to raise money. So he enters a contest and he gets second place. First place would be enough money to get him through college. Second place is a used spacesuit. So he thinks, well, at least I can fix up the spacesuit and sell it. And he fixes it up. And just before he decides to sell it, he decides to go for a walk in it, just in his own neighborhood. And he is picked up by a UFO and carried off to the Moon.

Okay, that's raising the stakes number one. Then his problem is to escape captivity on the moon, which he does. But he's recaptured; stakes raised again. And then he's moved to Pluto. And he has to signal the interstellar police from Pluto in order to save Earth from invasion; that's raising the stakes a lot. And then he is put on trial before the galactic court or whatever, in which he has to save the human race from annihilation. Now that's about as high a stakes-raising as you can go. And it is all plausible, you know, once you accept the initial premises. Heinlein did this a lot in *The Star Beast*. He starts out with a teenage boy trying to save his alien pet, and ends up with a confrontation between Earth and a powerful interstellar civilization. In *Double Star*, he starts with a down-at-heels actor agreeing to impersonate a kidnapped politician for a few days, and the days keep getting longer as the politician falls ill and eventually dies. In order to save civilization, the actor has to keep up his impersonation for the rest of his life, so that's stakes raised throughout.

The movie *Juno* starts with a teenage heroine getting pregnant, which raises the stakes considerably. Right at the outset, she decides to give up the child and finds an upper middle class family who need a child, but the stakes get raised again when later in her pregnancy, the couple splits up, and so she has to face a whole new momentous series of decisions.

In Spider Man, Peter Parker starts out with typical teenage problems. He gets bitten by a radioactive spider; he develops superpowers. And in an attempt to buy a car and impress the girl he's got a crush on, he gets involved in a cage fight with a wrestler. He's cheated out of his winnings, then refuses to intervene when somebody steals the gate. The stakes get raised when he finds out the thief has killed his Uncle Ben. Then he finds out the girl he's in love with is going with his best friend who is secretly the Green Goblin, who is his best friend's dad, kidnaps his Aunt May and then later kidnaps Mary Jane, and stakes are raised everywhere you look.

Okay, when you raise the stakes, the narrative tension increases. The reader is all the more involved in the story. Care should be taken that the stakes aren't raised in ways that violate the reader's trust, which I had always felt happened in Frank Herbert's *God Emperor of Dune*. The emperor is presented as knowing the future, because his whole family does, right. But because it amuses him, he decides not to view the future of one of his relatives, who is the one involved in a plot to kill him. So I feel that was cheating.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Can I ask a question? I recently tried to write commercial science fiction. Right? And I typically have done more intimate family stories. And so ...

Walter Jon Williams: It is possible to do both.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I think it is. But when I gave the book to my agent, he gave it back to me and basically said that it was pretty much fundamentally broken. It wasn't working, because I had tried to do a world-saving story. But I had kind of like shoved it on to a character and a set of circumstances that were not plausible: it didn't make any sense for her to be the person at the center of this, etc. So, when you're doing the stakes-raising, you talked about Heinlein, about his examples being one where it made sense at every stage of *Have Space Suit, Will Travel*, that this kid would end up in this position. Do you have any tips for trying to make sure that ...?

Walter Jon Williams: Look at the opening scenes of Star Wars, the original film. You know, it's a farm boy down on a desert planet, right? And he gets the message that he has to set out on a quest. And he does. It's nothing that he *does*; it's something that *happens to him*, the plot happens to him. And it isn't until the very end that he takes control. If then.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah. So he's kind of a chosen figure, though, right? He had secret powers and it was like the king revealed thing.

Walter Jon Williams: Yeah, but you want to plausibly foreshadow anything that your character can do outside of the ordinary.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's right.

Walter Jon Williams: So if you need to do some gymnastics later on, start out in a parkour championship.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's helpful. Thank you.

Walter Jon Williams: Now, reveals, the second R, also called ‘plot twists’ and/or ‘epiphanies.’ Or as Aristotle called it, agonic morosis. This isn't new.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Pullin’ out the Greek, it's impressive!

Walter Jon Williams: The origin is in theater, which is why Aristotle was commenting on it in the first place. A ‘reveal’ is a scene in which either the reader or the character, or both, is given a piece of information or makes a realization that causes them to reevaluate everything that has gone on before. Reveals keep the narrative from plodding directly from one point to another, and often sends it off in another direction entirely. This comes from theater in which there's a curtain, you don't know what's behind the curtain. Action goes on, the curtain is pulled back and suddenly you're in another place that is very different from where you were before. So reveals are the staple of whodunit mystery novels, where the entire point is for the detective to reveal the villain at the end. Revelations abound in classical literature: Oedipus reveals his own past, Arthur is revealed to be the rightful King of Britain. Lord Ruthven is revealed to be a vampire in *The Vampyre.* Rose Maylie is revealed to be Oliver Twist’s aunt, the author of Pip’s Great Expectations is revealed to be Magwitch. The Prince is revealed to be the Pauper, and vice versa. Heinlein was good at this one too. In *Starbeast*, there's a huge revelation when the protagonist’s pet is revealed to be an alien overlord. And which is doing a reveal and raising the stakes at the same time.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: There's actually a similar moment in *Lilo & Stitch*, right where she finds this little alien creature, but then it's revealed to be like a criminal mastermind and the cops are trying to come and take him away.

Walter Jon Williams: And that's done wonderfully when he's playing with your blocks, and is creating a whole city and then turns into Godzilla and destroys it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's right.

Walter Jon Williams: I thought that was beautifully done. There are huge plot twists in movies like *Psycho*, *Planet of the Apes*, *The Crying Game*, *The Sixth Sense*. In Memento, a film I recommend to you all just because it's just an awesome piece of plotting. The protagonist has a mental defect which causes him to forget the revelations within seconds of learning them. So it's only the audience that experiences the full effect and can understand the whole story. And this adds irony to revelation, which is an interesting combination.

Reveals can also be personal as in *The Dead* by James Joyce, a classic short story, where the character realizes that he's emotionally dead. Or in *A Little Cloud*, also by James Joyce, where the character realizes that his baby son has supplanted him in his wife's affections. When you do a big reveal, you don't want to just spring it on the reader unless you're looking for shock. This is why the writing gods invented foreshadowing, so that you could spring a surprise on the reader, but do it fairly. In *The Sixth Sense*, and I hope I'm not spoiling the movie for you, we find out

that Bruce Willis, his character in *The Sixth Sense*, is dead. And we get the hints over the whole movie. And when the reveal occurs, the director walks us back through all the clues.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I have friends who are murder mystery writers. And I feel that's the toughest part of their job, because they have to do that for every book. When you get to the end and it's revealed who done it, you should have this moment of, oh, of course, right! All of the little clues will suddenly click into place and the ideal thing is to have the reader figure it out, maybe just before it's revealed.

Walter Jon Williams: Yes, and there is art to hiding clues. And I have another talk about that. But that's not for today.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: We'll just have to make you come back.

Walter Jon Williams: Okay, so we know about Magwitch's relation with Pip ahead of time in *Great Expectations*, "great revelations," nice title, also. But we've got so many clues that Lord Ruthven is a vampire that the narrator seems really dense for not getting it. A combination of reveals and raising the stakes is your best bet to maintaining reader involvement.

The DaVinci Code is by almost any other standards, a dreadful book. It's got cardboard characters, contrived situations, unbelievable action, but it has reveals a-plenty. And the stakes are raised throughout and millions of people read the book and liked it.

Anything else before I go into the next R?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I think I would just point out that I think- So when Harry Potter came out, I stayed up to 4 a.m. reading it, which was the first time I've done that in so many years, right? And so later, I went back to try and figure out what was it that she did to keep me so engaged? Part of it is this raising the stakes and reveals that you're talking about here. In the opening chapter, someone's trying to deliver a letter to Harry, and it just gets, as his aunt and uncle are styming it, (the letter's delivery), the question of what's in the letters gets more and more intense. And you get to the point where they're on a raft in the middle of the ocean, and floods of letters are falling on top of them. So it's clearly incredibly important. And then there's the big reveal at the end of the chapter, that it's an invitation to this wizard school. But then immediately, he's not allowed to go.

Walter Jon Williams: And people forget about the actual first chapter, or preface or whatever it was, where the infant Harry Potter is delivered to the Dirsleys by several wizards who have a kind of enigmatic conversation about what was going on.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's right.

Walter Jon Williams: And that also sets you up that there are lots of things that are going to be revealed later in the story. But yes, and also in Harry Potter, you get reveals that aren't plot critical, but are kind of wonderful. You get to sit in this beautiful, magical world that is revealed to you just as it's being revealed to Harry. And that doesn't necessarily advance the plot or make the plot more exciting. But it does reveal the world to you.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It works, you were saying, for reader engagement. It's very engaging.

Walter Jon Williams: Okay, next we have reversals, or as Aristotle called them, peripateia. Peripateia just means walking back and forth, by the way. There was a school of philosophy called the Peripatetics, who are also called the Stoics, nowadays, but in the day, they were called the Peripatetics. And that's because they were walking back and forth, while delivering their lectures.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Nice, I didn't know that. I know the word "peripatetic," but I did not know its connection to the stoics. So that's cool.

Walter Jon Williams: So yes, and they would walk back and forth under a stoa, which is basically a pergola. It's a shady spot, because it's warm in ancient Greece. So, reveals often lead to reversals, in which the action takes an unexpected turn, or in which characters suddenly act in strikingly different ways from what you've been led to expect. In *Macbeth*, the revelation that Birnam Wood has come to Dunsinane, results in a reversal of Macbeth's fortune. In *Oedipus*, the revelation that Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother results in Oedipus blinding himself and abandoning his kingdom. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet's reversal occurs when he has a chance to kill Claudius, but decides against it. And this sets up an inevitable tragic ending for the whole cast.

Reversals are also common in comedy. In *When Harry Met Sally*, the characters realize that they're in love only after they spent most of the movie disagreeing with each other. In *Tootsie*, the Dustin Hoffman character begins as a misogynistic exploiter of women, until he lives as a woman for a while, and then he becomes a better human being; not a perfect one, but better. In *Lord of the Rings*, there are major reversals when Gandalf dies, when Boromir is seduced by the Ring, when Gandalf returns, when the Ents enter the action, at the climax of all the battle scenes. When Frodo is taken by Sheilob and Sam, a supporting character, has to become the hero. When our heroes come to Mount Doom, and when Saruman is revealed to be the corrupter of the Shire at the very end. There are reversals of character in *The Godfather* when Michael Corleone decides to enter his father's criminal world in order to seek vengeance on his enemies. There's a reversal of characters in the first *Star Wars* film when Han Solo enters the fight for the Death Star and saves Luke's life. Because the last you saw him, he was leaving, he was saying, I've got my reward. Thank you, have fun with your war. Bye. Okay.

In *The Maltese Falcon*, there is a reversal of character in the scene where Sam Spade sends Bridget to prison, because up till that point, he's behaved as if he's no better than the criminals. So it's a surprise that he's kind of a good guy. In Casablanca, Rick undergoes a reversal of character in the final scene. So does Captain Louie Renault. Care should be taken as always to foreshadow any reversals you make.

So those are the three R's, and I hope you can profit by them.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: [Laughter] profit greatly! I'm trying to think if I have any good questions about reversals. I think that the only thought I had was that I think it's almost required in a romance, right?

Walter Jon Williams: Oh yeah absolutely.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: You kind of start off, I know, my students often talk about the 'enemies to lovers' trope, which is, I think, like in *Pride and Prejudice* at the beginning, where they meet each other and they're disgusted by each other, and then they have to overcome their own character flaws in order to be able to fall in love, right? Or, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the thing that's standing in their way is another character, I mean, to some extent, her character a little bit, but more like societal, economic, and other pressures that then have to be overcome in order to suddenly make it possible. So there there are ton of reversals actually in those.

Walter Jon Williams: And the reversals are foreshadowed very interestingly. Particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*, because Darcy is behaving kind of abominably towards most of the cast. And then when Elizabeth's little sister runs off with the guy that Darcy, the abusive character, Darcy has been kind of hiding him. Right? And Elizabeth calls him out. So this is what you've been doing. And then Darcy suddenly realizes what he's done wrong, and how to behave and how to become an acceptable hero to Elizabeth's heroine.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, I think it's interesting, you talked at the beginning about kind of keeping the reader's trust and earning the raising of the stakes and so on, but it seems to apply here too with the reversals: they can be surprising, but they have to make sense.

Walter Jon Williams: Yes if they are completely surprising, you have to explain them later.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. I think those are those are three fabulous techniques. And now I'm going to just try to get my students to incorporate them in their stories. It would be good practice for them.

Walter Jon Williams: It's been fun!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Thanks so much, Walter. And everybody, you should go read *Lord Quillifer*. And of course, *Wildcards*. And if you want more of Walter, tomorrow, we're currently at ICFA conference in Florida. And tomorrow, we're going to be recording a talk about shared worlds. So by the time you see this, it will have been recorded and should be available on the SLF's YouTube channel where Walter and David Levine and I, who all Write for *Wildcards*, will be talking with Ellen Kushner and Delia Sherman about writing and shared worlds.

Walter Jon Williams: Okay.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Excellent. Thank you.

Walter Jon Williams: All right! Buh-bye.

END

Transcript created by Terence Kuch