**Writing Excuses**

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# Season 4 Episode 13 Juggling Multiple Viewpoints

* Brandon: We can of worms'd this last week. Juggling multiple storylines. Let's dig into it. This is one of the hardest things to learn in fiction, I think. What are the pitfalls of using multiple viewpoints... actually, let's back up. Why do you... why would you want to use multiple viewpoints in a book? If it's so hard...
* Howard: Per the last podcast, so that you can broaden your scope so that you can write an epic.
* Brandon: Yeah, it helps you with writing an epic. Even in... not in an epic, though, having multiple viewpoints on the same events or... letting characters describe each other is a much better way to show who a character is than having the character describe themselves. It's one of the things you gain by adding more characters, is that different perspective in the world.
* Howard: It can also broaden interest in the story. If you have a male protagonist and a female protagonist whose point of views you are switching between, and you do both of them well, you have now potentially doubled the size of your interested audience.
* Dan: The book that I am currently writing is a science fiction about a kind of society reacting to a new technology. I went with new... I went with multiple viewpoints because I wanted... I knew that different people would react to that technology in different ways.
* Brandon: It's a wonderful tool to use... and... so... anyway, let's talk about how to do it. Pitfalls. What are some of the pitfalls of changing viewpoints in your books?
* Howard: Losing momentum. Losing steam.
* Brandon: OK. Explain on that. What exactly does that mean?
* Howard: If you're pacing... when you are writing a single viewpoint, if you're doing it correctly, as you're writing that viewpoint you're building up momentum, you're building up a good head of steam, you're moving the story forward. Now you are going to change viewpoints, and that momentum... that momentum is immediately sacrificed because you change viewpoints. The only way you could capture that exact momentum again is for the viewpoint that you've switched to, to be somebody who's in the room or part of the same event. Now you've recaptured that, but sometimes that's not an option.
* Brandon: I suppose we ought to split this apart and say switching viewpoints and switching storylines are two completely different things. In my mind, most of the time when I'm switching viewpoints, I'm switching storylines, because I'll pick a central viewpoint character for a story. But not always. You can have three people in a room or on a plot and switch between them and keep your momentum.
* Brandon: But the type of stories I write, you aren't going to do that. You're not going to pick up a 200,000 or a 400,000 word epic fantasy and generally you're not going to read it in one sitting. I can't afford to have the tension constantly ramp up all the way to the end. I've got to have dips and troughs. Multiple viewpoints... I can actually use the momentum as beats to let me do that.
* Howard: So what you're doing... you're actually taking the disadvantage or taking a potential pitfall in your using that as a control rod to slow down the reaction of the story.
* Dan: And to give a wider scope, to give it a sense of size.
* Brandon: OK. What are other potential pitfalls?
* Dan: The reader will forget who a character is, or they'll forget about a key plot point, because they haven't read about them in a while.
* Brandon: I think this is the most important... most problematic. Do you have any advice for that, Dan? How they don't do that?
* Dan: What I'm trying to do... when I do multiple viewpoints, is I'll kind of figure out maybe a couple of different tiers. Here's my main character or characters, here's my side ones, and then here's the ones that I'm just going to throw in, maybe one or two chapters throughout the book. Then I know how frequently I need to get back to them. The main characters, we need to see them a lot. If we go three or four chapters without the main character, that's too many. Whereas those kind of side characters, we can maybe go four chapters without getting their viewpoint because they're not as big of a deal.
* Brandon: Let me talk for a minute about the different strategies authors use, just so that you are aware of them, as listeners. I see two major strategies for character jumping. The one is... first is the way I call the George R.R. Martin way. The George R.R. Martin way is, if you read his books, he's very... he has brief viewpoints from a character and he switches frequently. It's like Bam, Bam, Bam, Bam, Bam, Bam, Bam. Because he is telling one overarching main story, he's able to use each of these viewpoints to keep that rolling. The other big way is the large chunks from a character's viewpoint... several chapters or very long chapters, where we did a big piece of their story, and then we know we're leaving them for a while. Robert Jordan did this very frequently in the later books of the Wheel of Time.
* Dan: Another thing you can do to facilitate multiple characters... like you had a very strict rotation in Elantris. If you're not going to do that, so it's not immediately obvious which character you're in, you need to set that scene right off the bat.
* Brandon: Oh, yeah. I think that's important no matter what.
* Dan: You need to give us a very clear sense of who this character is and where they are, because we just got finished reading about somebody else.
* Brandon: That's excellent advice. In fact, if you're using the large chunks of story, where you're going to give us a big thing, I would suggest trying to make each of those chunks have a beginning, middle, and end, even if it's across five chapters. Tackle one issue, and bring us to a resolution point. Which is bad for people who are writing thrillers. They're going to say no, you want to end with a cliffhanger. I say don't end with a cliffhanger. End with a satisfying conclusion, and then they will feel OK picking up the next chapter. It's what I'm doing in the Wheel of Time books. When I picked up tackling these, I said I've got to do something like that, where I give complete arcs. Because there are just so many people in these books that if I tried the rapidfire sort of thing, number one it would feel wrong for the Wheel of Time, but also you wouldn't get the complete story arcs and nothing would feel satisfying. You get one third of the book, second third of the next book, and then the final third in the final book.
* Dan: If you've never written viewpoints before, that's very different. If you're just writing one guy straight through, you could start a chapter in the middle of something. You can give us some thoughts without telling us where he's standing. Whereas when you do multiple viewpoints, you really gotta give us that information.
* Brandon: Right. That's not to say you can't use cliffhangers occasionally and whatnot. But I would suggest that most of the time, if you're going to use a cliffhanger, you should be planning to get back to that character very quickly, rather than just leaving for chapters and chapters and chapters.
* Dan: Don't do what Tolkien did to me when... I think it was Pippin was fighting on the front line, and a troll fell on him, and then we cut and we get about 400 pages of somebody else.
* Brandon: Yeah. Tolkien did that all the time. Another big piece of advice... and this ties into what we did... talked about last week with epics, but... you'll notice that what Howard did is quite ingenious. It's what Tolkien did. It's actually what George R.R. Martin did. Which was most of the viewpoints started together, and then broke apart. So you have an initial situation where you can explain all these characters, they can look at each other, get to know them all. Sometimes just from one viewpoint. That's what Robert Jordan did. We start with Rand. We get to know all the people around Rand. Then when the group shatters, then we start picking up other viewpoints because Rand is no longer there. It works wonderfully well. It's actually what Martin did essentially. He kept us to a few viewpoints until the shattering happened, and then the viewpoints multiplied.
* Brandon: I mentioned in the epic one that when I first tried to write The Way of Kings, I did a very poor job. That was partially because I didn't understand these things. This is what killed me on this book. I was trying to write a grand epic with lots of multiple viewpoints. I just picked all of these people around the world, and started telling their stories without any hint or indication that it was eventually going to converge. It was very... the readers kept having trouble keeping track of people, it was maddening for them. I eventually realized when I did the rewrite, I needed to bring some of these characters together. I eventually ended up doing only two separate storylines in two separate places, with some occasional glimpses here and there. But it's what Dan said, we know who the main characters are, and yeah, we have to keep track of two places. But there's a group of characters in one, and then there's another character in another place. Rather than having dozens of viewpoints, I ended up writing the book with three or four.

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