### Mira and Kelly’s Webinar on Voice: Video Transcript

Mira Hello everyone! Welcome to our webinar tonight. Kelly is going to be talking about the author’s voice and I’m going to be talking about character voices.

Kelly Alright everyone! I’m so excited to be talking to everyone about voice today. I think voice is one of those things that is very mysterious and illusive. It’s very common to hear about a rejection based on the fact that the editor just didn’t connect to the voice. But it’s sort of hard to know where to go from there in terms of proving your work, which is really frustrating. So, it’s good that we will be able to talk about it a little bit and hopefully we can clear some of that mystery up.

Voice is really what makes your book yours. You know, it’s that tangible quality that this story can only be told by YOU and no one else. In the same way that I can’t teach you to be you, I can't teach you how to make your voice your own. What I can do is explore this idea of what voice is, give you some pointers on how to find your voice, and give you some ideas on how to strengthen it so that it’s as clear and compelling as possible.

So what is voice exactly? As I said, it’s a little bit mysterious and hard to describe, but let’s give it a go! Voice is what gives your story personality, even when a character isn’t speaking. Your writer's voice is in every aspect of your story: plot, character, and dialogue –and Mira will be going into more detail about all of that stuff next, but Voice often offer it’s own personality, which is why the best stories are those that come from the heart. Your voice is going to come a lot more naturally if your telling those kinds of stories The best writers really make you feel like you know them already! So let’s look at a couple examples of strong voice [...] And see what you can pick up from not only the characters, but the author telling that story.

This is a sort of kooky one that I love [...] ***Space Dog***, by Mini Grey. I’ll just read a little bit and your guys can follow along. (Reading):

*“It’s the year 3023 and for as long as anyone on Home Planet can remember space dogs, astro cats, and mouse-tronauts have been sworn enemies–after all that’s the ways that it’s always been. But there’s no time for that now because... in the vast depths of space as small ship is zooming. At last, space dog is about to go home. It has been a long mission of sorting out planetary problems in the Dairy Quadrant”.*

So this is obviously a very funny book, but it also retains some of that majestic quality. It has this sort of “tongue and cheek” quality that appeals to readers. [...] She’s really a master of humor with other aspects of tone, which is a really good quality to have as a children’s book writer.

Here is another example [...] this one is a little bit different. [It] shows a different personality. ***Duncan the Story Dragon,*** by Amanda Driscoll. (Reading):

*“Duncan the Dragon loved to read. When Duncan read a book, the story came to life...and his imagination caught fire. Unfortunately, so did his book. ‘I just want to finish a book,’ said Duncan. ‘I need to know what happens. Do the pirates find treasure? Does the captain save the ship? Do the aliens conquer Earth? And I want to read those two wonderful words like the last sip of a chocolate milkshake...THE END’”*

So even though the first few pages of this book has a dragon, fire breath, and aliens, Amanda voice [...] let’s you know that it’s a pretty gentle story. Her art really echoes that too. It has such a soft quality that extends her voice from beyond just her words. This connection between the words and the illustrations as an author is [comes off] a little more naturally. So you want to know why people want to read your story. Why is this story something you, and only you, has to tell and has to share with the world? At this stage, don’t think about your audience and don’t think about sales. Think about why YOU have to tell this story. That passion is going to help your voice shine.

[...] So what do you bring to this story that no one else could? I don’t mean a degree in child psychology, or a PhD in children’s literature, although those are things that undoubtedly would help contribute to your writing. In kid’s books, it’s going to be about your experience as a child, as a sibling, as a parent, as an aunt or an uncle, as a grandparent, a teacher and a friends–anything you can gain perspective into. So again, I’m talking about your passion for telling your story. So on that note [...] here’s another example that could have be told by anyone, but it works because it was in the exact right voice.

It’s ***Apes A-Go-Go***, by Roman Milisic and illustrated by Richard Allen. And fun fact, they have actually been friends since kindergarten so that helps when the author and illustrator has a good relationship and can work together. So it's about a very tiny town that needs to be repaired. And at this part of the story, everything about this town is still perfect [...]

*"Everything except for one flower, which had grown a little taller than the rest. 'Bah that pesky flower,' grumbled the town's persnickety mayor. Luckily, a passer-by at that very moment heard the mayor's complaint...It was a Fussy Great Ape. 'Why, all it needs is a little nudge,' said Fussy Great Ape, who liked things just so. 'I can fix it, Mr. Mayor!' And, delicately, he did!'"*

*"Unfortunately, he trampled the whole flower bed in the process! 'See what you've done you Fussy Great Ape!' cried the irate Mayor. 'Oops!' winced the Fussy Great Ape. 'But not to worry–I know just who can fix this.' And before the Mayor could say a word, Fussy Great Ape lifted his head, pounded his chest, and yodeled, 'Bogo! Pogo! Apes-A-Go-Go!' (Which is how Great Apes greeted each other)."*

So there are a lot of little clues here that point to a great unique voice, but I love that parenthetical at the end. You know, because it didn't really need to be said, but they way it was included really tells you a lot about the author. So I just want to share one more part of this book quickly, which picks up after the apes have just about completely ruined the town, despite their best intentions. (Reading):

*"And who should turn up but Baking Great Ape.* '*Well now dears, I'm sure I can fix this!' smiled Baking Great Ape, for she had some experience in fixing disasters. Then she baked a huge cake and put a little piece in front of the Mayor who, through his tears, took a nibble. 'Mmmmm.' And then a little more. 'Yum.' All the townsfolk and all the Great Apes had a slice too. Some one brought balloons. And, you know, people really started to enjoy themselves."*

So this was a book that I edited and acquired, and the first time I read it I immediately was drawn to it. And that line, "[...] You know, people really started to enjoy themselves." That little piece of text was [just] what made me want this book–I had to have this book! There was just something about it that really brings everything together, shows the author's sense of humor–the sort of tongue and cheekness, and just really sells the project. With that seamlessly tiny line. That is really what voice can do. That is what your voice has the potential to do.

So the most important thing you can do to find your voice is to trust yourself and write honestly. It sounds cheesy but, you should write from the heart. That's where your voice comes from and that can't be forced or faked. If you have a story in your head, get it out on the page. And as you begin to strengthen all the other aspects in your story, your character and your voice only becomes stronger along the way. So don't think about finding the perfect word[s] or the perfect cadence just yet. If you write on the computer, you can try typing with your eyes closed so you don't get caught up in the way it looks. Just let it come naturally, practice, and then rest will just follow. Which leads me to the most important point, practice! Yes, this is the best way to find and refine your voice. It shouldn't be a surprise as it's true with most things. Your voice is a part of you, but communicating it is something that will take practice. Write every day, even if it's just for five minutes. It doesn't have to be an entire manuscript, you know, don't assume everything you write is going to get published or is even going to be shown to people. Write for yourself! That's what you love to do, right? That's why we're all here, you like to write. And that's what makes this exercise fun. That why I think it's very important to be as prolific as possible. And the more you practice and the more you create, the stronger your voice is going to  be when you do find that story. So try writing something and rewriting it in first person, [then] second person, omniscient narrator third person, different points of view [and] see how it changes as you change the writer–developing more skills, practice writing in different styles, different genres, [and] see what moves you in a new direction for you. See what you enjoy the most, you know, but do it every day.

So this is a really great exercise, if you're having a little trouble finding your voice. Just talk to yourself. Read what you've written out loud. The best writing sounds like speaking and your picture book voice should feel natural when you hear it out loud. I think the reason why people have a knee-jerk reaction when they hear people talk with words like, "LOL" and "OMG" in real life, is [because] that's how people write, but not how people talk in real life. So see how your written word sounds. Record yourself on your phone or some other device, or find yourself a writing partner and write down what the other person says out loud.

I think that importance of practicing your own written word is why editors are can't stand those picture books that rhyme. Obviously they kind of work, but I think a lot of people start there and really strains your voice. When you are working yourself into a rhyme scheme you're skewing your actual voice. If you have to work too hard to make your writing fit in with your story, your voice is going to strain and it's going to show. You can really tell when someone's voice is flowing and sounds natural. Don't try and sound like a "writer" and definitely don't try and sound like other successful writers. If you try and sound like Mo Willems or John Klassen, it's going to sound forced. Just try and sound like yourself. So I want to show another great example, it's called ***10 Hungry Rabbits.*** So it's a counting book [...] so it doesn't sound like there would be much room to show off voice, but I just love Anita because she's able make her voice come through. And she has a lot of concept books and all of them sound like Anita, it's really impressive. (Reading):

*"The ninth rabbit saw nine green peas in a pod. The tenth rabbit remembered the ten black peppercorns in his pocket. [...] The Rabbit family sat down to bowls of delicious vegetable soup. Yum! The happy rabbits were hungry no more."*

So this story could have easily ended [...] it could have been easily been dry. It has the illustrations, it has the hooks, the counting concept, it has the vegetables and the colors. It could have easily ended with something dry like, they enjoyed their soup and had a nice dinner together. It gets the point across fine, but Anita's stories are always simple, but at the same time, told in a way that no one else could tell them.

So another exercise that you can do and that I think is fun, is to take an existing piece of text, something short that you can use. The best thing to start with is something like a Wikipedia page on your hometown or on an animal. Something that you are already have some familiarity with. You take that piece of text and retell it. How would you relay that information? How would you tell the story of how to bake the perfect cookies. You know, tell this story and walk away from a while. And then when you come back you can examine the flare and the personality that you brought to your telling next to the original text. So that's your voice, you know, it's that easy. So I’m going to do a quick example of that. I love sea creatures and I'm really fascinated by this one type of jellyfish so here is the Wikipedia summary on this type of jellyfish and I'm going to tell you what I know about the jellyfish. And I don't know if you guys already new this, but it is actually possible for some species to live forever. For this jellyfish species, they actually do live forever–they're immortal jellyfish. Which is kind of scary, because they're jellyfish, but I think it's fascinating. There is a small species of jellyfish called the immortal jellyfish, which lives in the Mediterranean and around Japan. For most of their lives they look like normal jellyfish, but unlike most jellyfish, if they encounter physical danger or environmental stress they can actually turn to their state as a polyp or a newborn jellyfish. The process is called transdifferentiation, which means the cells are changing. In this case, [they're] changing in a way that they were when they were polyps and theoretically, they can do this forever. They can go back to being babies, mature, encounter danger and revert to that stage again. Most don't do that, so it's not like the sea is going to be overcome with jellyfish. [The ocean] won't be overcome with crazy immortal jellyfish, just knowing that they have this potential to do that is something that I think is so amazing.

So that's easy right? It's definitely not the most scientific complete telling, but that's not one of my strengths, that's not a part of my voice, that's not something that I bring to the table. But I hope I was able to convey my passion and a sense of wonder about the topic because that's how I feel connected to it. And honestly, this is probably something that you do on a regular basis. When you tell your friends what happened on your favorite TV show last night, or recount an eventful weekend to your co-workers, all of these little moment that your probably don't think twice about–that's your voice. You're using it every day to tell stories. It's just a matter of sorting it out and looking at it a little bit differently. Think about all the fairytales you've heard, people aren't reading them to hear the same story again, they want to know what's new and different about the Wicked Witch this time. It's successful because the author is telling it in their own voice. Growing up we would read a different ***Night Before Christmas***– and there are so many! And you know, the ***Night Before Christmas*** isn't an exciting story, it's not the story that makes it exciting I should say, it's the telling. Each of these tellings is captivating in their own way and each story can be told in a limitless number of ways. That's why voice is important, ever more important than plot.

So editors can't tell you how to find your voice, but if they see and hear your voice in your story and they connect to it, everything else can be fixed. Everything else can be worked on together, can be strengthened, they can help you shape your story to preserve and even strengthen the voice together. Because once you have that nugget your can really go anywhere from there. So you guys all have stories to tell, or else you wouldn't be here and the more you strengthen your voices the better you'll be able to tell them. Which is really exciting. So I hope this helped and I hope you guys are ready to look for your voice. I'm going to turn it over to Mira, who's going to tell you about how to develop you character's specific voices.

Mira Oh yeah, cool! So Kelly shared with you some great techniques for finding your writer's voice and how some author's styles of writing or voice shines through in what ever they write. Many of the techniques that Kelly shared in her presentation also apply to creating your character's voices. And here I'm using voice to apply not only how your character speaks but also how they act. First I want to show examples of some of my favorite characters and talk about what gives them great voice. And then I'd like to share some specific writing tools and techniques related to creating character voices.

So let's start with one of my favorites, ***Saving Sweetness***, by Dianne Stanley. Have a listen to this voice in this dialogue [...] (Reading:)

*"'Now I come to take you home,' says I. 'I don't wanna go home,' says she.*

And then in these actions, (Reading:)

*"'I'm tired to srubbin' floors with a toothbrush.' 'What can't be cured must be endured,' I told her. Now I thought this was very wise advice, but the orphan didn't seem to think so, 'cause she lit off like he was tryin' to catch yesterday."*

Part of what makes these voices memorable is their use of vernacular language set in the wild West, with words like "Scrubbin'" and "'cause she lit off light she was tryin' to catch yesterday." And the homey platitude, "what can't be cured must be endured." Vernacular language is great for creating place specific characters. So now imagine if this story was set in Boston, or somewhere else. We'll go into this a little later, but meanwhile think about how your character's language and voice would change if it was set somewhere else. And just the subtleties of the different places.

Our next example comes from the very well known author Eric Carle. Having no dialogue is also another way of having a strong voice. For example in his book, ***"Slowly, Slowly, Slowly," said the Sloth*** we hear, (Reading:)

*"Slowly, Slowly, Slowly a sloth crawled along a branch tree."*

Page Turn. (Reading:)

*"Slowly, slowly, slowly the sloth ate a leaf."*

With slow page turns, repetition, and short page text the book slows the reader down so we experience the sloth's character and experience him through his slow actions. the sloth doesn't say a word even when a slue of jungle animals ask him why are you  so slow, so quiet, and so boring. Still the sloth doesn't answer. The actions and the lack of response tells us so much about the sloth's voice in his refusal to speak. He's a strong animal who knows who he is and what's important to him. And then finally when the jaguar asks him, "why are you so lazy?" The sloth thinks, and thinks, and thinks, for a long, long, long time. Note the rule of three of each of Eric Carle's repetition. This also helps slows the story down. Sloth's voice is strong and consistent in his actions. Will it be the same in his speaking voice or dialogue now that he's finally broken his silence and the pattern in the story? Here's what he says in the gentle climax, (Reading:)

*"Finally the Sloth replied, 'It's true that I'm slow, quiet and boring. I am lackadaisical, I dawdle, and I dillydally. I am also unflappable, languid, stoic, impassive, sluggish, lethargic, placid, calm, mellow, laid-back, and well, slothful! I am relaxed and tranquil, and I like to live in peace. But I am not lazy.'  Then the sloth yawned and said, 'That's just how I am. I like to do things slowly, slowly, slowly.'"*

Is that not exquisite, slow, lyrical language that's totally congruent with who sloth is? Another charming thing about this story is the way that it uses three different points of view. The third person omniscient narrator sees all and describes the sloth's action. Third person usually used "he", "she", or "they". The other animals respond in second point of view, speaking to the sloth [using] you directly. And then the beautiful climax where the sloth speaks in the first person using "I" statements. Each point of view has strengths and weaknesses, which unfortunately we don't have time to get into right now. But the point of view contributes to the voice of the character as well as the author's voice. Let's have a look at a different book that also uses three points of view. But with a totally different author-illustrator voice voices. Intrigued? I hope so!

So who's ready for a Power Point's equivalent of a page turner? A page turner is basically using specific techniques to build suspense so that the reader has to turn the page and read on. Ok, you ready for the big reveal? We are really building that suspense!

***Chloe and the Lion*** starts with super smart author, Mac Barnett, introducing himself using first person point of view. (Reading:)

*"This is me, I'm Mac. I'm the author of the book."*

He then introduces the illustrator Adam Rex and then introduces the main character of the fictional story, Chloe*.* Adam shows Mac as this goofy, awkward 3D character, giving us a great sense of what Mac is like as a character and his voice as a character. Note that Mac refers to himself as Mac, rather than Mac Barnett–showing himself as friendly and informal. Mac clearly wants to be in the story and is breaking the fourth wall by letting the reader in on the fact that they all know that they are really in a book. This is called metafiction or metanarrative. The story then moves into the fiction story of Chloe and the Lion, which is told in the third person and continues on until the illustrator, Adam Rex, interrupts the narrator with his illustrator voice. AHA! That's right, illustrators bring their own visual voice to the story in how depict the characters, setting, what happens, and what they bring or include that the writer doesn't. In this case, Adam decides it should be a dragon rather than a lion. Here the conflict and drama begins, and it's hilarious. Different fonts are used for Mac and Adam in their speech bubbles and the story itself. Different phrasing and language is used by each character especially Mac's as his character gets progressively more frustrated and angry as Adam flexes his illustrator voice in how he depicts Mac throughout their argument. Much more happens that I don't want to get into, because I want to leave time to actually teach some techniques, but I will share that even Chloe breaks the fourth wall by explaining that she asked Mac to draw the lion and Mac had fired Adam and another illustrator. The other illustrator has his own voice of course, using phrasing like, "look buddy". This phrase gives him a somewhat confrontational, somewhat of a working class, no nonsense kind of feel. And even though the second illustrator is a very minor character, it's great that he has his own distinctive voice. There are so many books with wonderful character voice I would like to share, but I'm just going to share this excerpt from the great Barbara Bottner's ***Wallace's List,*** which she co-authored with her husband Gerald Kruglik. There are two contrasting characters in this story–Wallace, who tries to control his world by making lists and sticking to them and the free-spirited Albert. Here's a short snippet after Wallace meets Albert and he can't respond because it's not on his list. Now here's Barbara and her character voices: (Reading:)

*"The next to-do list Wallace wrote read: 1. Say hello to Albert 2. Laundry. So Wallace introduced himself to his neighbor. 'Would you like to listen to some music?' asked Albert. 'I have to do my laundry,' Wallace explained. 'Laundry is laundry,' said Albert. 'But music is life.'"*

Is that not a beautiful contrasting characters with exquisite voice?

Now, I want to break it down a little into some techniques for writing great character's voices. First of all you need to know your characters really well before you can hear them. Now I'm not telling you to become mentally unwell and hear voices, but I am telling you to do this a little. In my opinion, the best way to write your characters voice, which is really their personality, is to inhabit them the way that an actor inhabit a role–but do it your way. The way that Ryan Gosling and Johnny Depp would each inhabit the same role very differently, according to each of their personalities. You need to find out who your characters are, what they want, how they move and how they sound. A couple of weeks ago I wrote an article about writing strong characters with a character map–right here. And here's the template I made for folks to use for their own characters. [...] There are many ways to suss out your characters' personality. Are they an introvert, and extrovert, intuitive, emotional, snarky, critical, defiant, loving, affectionate, suspicious, competitive, funny, serious, or anxious? ***The Emotion Thesaurus***, is a wonderful resource to help you narrow down you character's personality traits for a character with a strong voice.

Another way to develop your characters is to use models or archetypes. With models, think about who your character might resemble. Imagine a perky, cute, but sometimes obnoxious character, modeled after Adam Levine. Watch an episode of "The Voice" and write down everything that he says and any actions he takes and then translate them into a kid character. See what you can steal \*AHEM\* be inspired by to infuse into your character. You don't want to plagiarize but you do definitely want to get inspired. No think about Audrey Tautou from the movie "Amelie" for a more introverted character. Raymond in "Everybody Loves Raymond" is also a great model for a complex character. Think about popular culture and think about the characters are and how you can \*AHEM\* appropriate some of their traits and ways of speaking and acting to make and develop your own kid's character voices. Think about your friends and relatives or any quirky characters that you know and write down neat or weird things that they say. You never know when it might be perfect for one of your characters. Archetypes go way back and if you want to see a brilliant use of them, check out the ***Harry Potter*** books that are full of archetypal characters from mythology and folklore.

Once you've narrowed your personalities down, it's time to work on how your characters express themselves, both in terms of what they say, how they say it, and how their bodies and actions support what they say. Fortunately the illustrator usually show the body language, however the author will include a written description to show rather than tell. For example, (Reading):

*"Joanie's shoulders drooped, would she ever get an A?"*

Or alternatively, there might not be that description. Instead, there will be an illustrator's note.

[...] You want to be very frugal with these because some editors hate illustrator notes, while others are fine with them. Next up I want to talk about ways to make your characters speaking voices, aka dialogue, more distinctive. So here they are, and I'm going to go into each of these briefly.

Syntax of sentence structure is the way that you organize your words in a sentence. People from other countries or folks who may be a bit social awkward will often have unusual syntax such as, "To school we go!" And I'm someone who has unusual syntax because English is [my] second language. While other writers will use unusual syntax for a cool creative writers voice like former student Deborah Underwood does in ***The Quiet Book.***

Another way is in sentence lengths, especially if you only have two characters. One character might speak in long, long-winded that could be lyrical  or frustrating. The other character might speak in short, staccato sentences like he or she has A.D.D. or short sentences that only provide minimal, but important information.

Sophie, in ***Sophie's Squash,*** by Pat Zietlow Miller and Anne Wilsdorf speaks this way in her denial, definace, and determination to have, keep, and care for her squash. Listen to this after Sophie and her surrogate child/ doll, Bernice (which is her squash), starts to go off. (Reading):

*"At story time some kids pointed and stared. 'What's that spotty thing?' a boy asked. 'Her name is Bernice and she's a squash,' Sophie said. 'with freckles.'*

Short and to the point. This girl knows she doesn't need to do much talking to be heard.

Verbal tics or habits: when Mac Barnett's second illustrator says, "Look Buddy", it's a small moment for a small character in the story. But if he had a bigger role in the story, and also said things like, "Look, it's like this" and "Look, I don't want to go there."–those are verbal tics or verbal habit. Are there words that your character can repeat as a verbal tic or habit? Maybe they mumble, or maybe they use metaphors.

The kinds of words or language that your characters each use is also very important in developing character voice. Does your character use monosyllabic or multisyllabic words? Simple or fancy language? Does he or she use vernacular language like, ***Saving Sweetness, Dirty Dawg, and Swamp Angel?*** Make a list of places and cultures that have distinctive sayings and ways of saying things. Think about the different ways a Norwegian decent in St. Paul Minnesota versus a hipster kid in San Francisco versus an African American in Philly versus an Eloise type kid in Manhattan would describe themselves getting up in the morning or a day in their life. Now try this as a practice exercise with your own story. In terms of diversity, we need more diverse kids in children's literature and not just as secondary characters, but as powerful main characters and they have to be written right–with sensitivity and great kid appeal. You especially need to be careful not to stereotype, particularly if you're writing about a racially different culture outside you own culture. One of the best ways to do that is to have your word bettered by [a] cultural insider, preferably someone in the educational field. I'm not saying don't write outside [of your] culture, but your need to do it very carefully.

The last thing I want to share with you is one of my all-time favorite books that I can consider one of the best books every written in terms of voice, which is called appropriately, ***Voice in the Park***, by Anthony Browne. It's a different kind of point of view story where an experience or episode is shared from four characters very different points of view, with exquisite differentiation in each character's voice. I've shared this book before because I love it so much and because it is makes such a great mentor text! I could do a whole webinar on this one book alone–and I love doing the accents.

So I hope you guys loved this! It was fun doing it and bye for now!

Kelly Bye for now!