Writing Literary Fiction: Dialogue

Dialogue is one of the main ways the reader gets to hear characters speak. A character can reveal a secret, provide insight into the conflict, or even reveal motivations through how they speak. As the writer, you control both the narration of the story and what the characters say. What you choose to put into dialogue will inform the reader what is going on in your story, and what is important. Have you ever noticed how characters in movies and TV shows rarely say “goodbye” before they end a phone call? The “goodbye” is often implied, as viewers we don’t really need to see it. The story must go on. Similarly in your fiction story, you must decide what the reader really needs to “hear” from your characters.

Direct Dialogue:
Periods and commas go inside quotation marks, even if the last word of the sentence is inside a quotation:

“You know,” she said, “nobody understands me.”
“Nobody understands me.”
She said, “You know, nobody understands me.”
“You know—” she said.

In the sentence above, she said is the dialogue tag. Dialogue tags let the reader know who is speaking, and help readers follow a conversation between multiple characters. Some writers use alternatives to “said” like “she whispered,” or “she yelled.” In general, literary fiction does not approve of melodramatic dialogue tags. The idea is that the writing will let the reader know how the character is speaking. Of course, if your character is actually yodeling, it may be appropriate to write: “I love the writing center,” he yodeled.

Indirect Dialogue:
There may be points in the story where we don’t need to see exactly word-for-word what your character has said, but rather just the general idea of what was said. Implied dialogue can happen in many ways, but essentially it is when the narration (or narrator) tells us what was said. Perhaps you want a character to tell a long anecdote, or summarize a conversation that takes place over dinner.

For example: Jason nodded. “I know exactly what you mean,” he said. “I’m all for preserving history, but that old movie theater holds a lot of bad memories for people here.” He told the story Heath knew so well. It was a story Heath heard over family dinners, over campfires at Camp Hope. Thirty years ago, a group of high school kids hid in the movie theater until it closed. When the janitor came in to clean at four in the morning, he found three bodies in the projector room. The fourth one was never found.

So, rather than us reading Jason’s version of the story through his voice, the narrator sums up what the conversation contained.

Tips for Writing Dialogue with Emotional Impact
-Answer a question with a question.
-Say the dialogue you write out loud to see how it sounds.
-Consider the tempo of the words. What does a string of short staccato sentences do? What about a run-on sentence rant?
-Depending on the POV you are writing in, you can give your characters internal dialogue (meaning, we see their direct thoughts).

Jason nodded. “I know exactly what you mean,” he said. This town can't let go of this story, he thought. He settled into the armchair, waiting for Heath to begin.