

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

This is Write Your Novel, a podcast all about developing and writing your novel. I'm Yvonne Battle-Felton, a lecturer in creative writing at Sheffield Hallam University, and also a writer.

In each episode, I sit down with a different leading author to discuss their writing craft, through the lens of just one writing mechanism or technique. We look at the specifics of how stories are constructed, and what decisions writers might make.

At the end of each episode, there's a writing exercise to help you to take risks, try something new, and build the confidence to write the novel you want to write. Funded by Arts Council England, supported by New Writing North, this series is very much for you, the writer. Let's get started.

In this episode, the author and screenwriter, David Nicholls, joins me. David is an award-winning writer known, among other things, for his skillful dialogue, development of characters, and engaging stories. Some of his literary contributions include writing the screenplay for the movie *Simpatico*, as well as writing for successful UK TV series, *Cold Feet*. His debut bestselling novel, *Starter for Ten*, as well as *One Day*, have both been adapted into movies.

Today, we're discussing his novel, *Sweet Sorrow*. It's a coming-of-age tale set in 1997. Charlie has recently completed school and is navigating life after it, when he meets Fran. Over the course of summer, we witness the transformative impact of first love on a semi-ordinary life. Within this conversation, we're focusing on dialogue, how it can be used to develop character, heighten tension, and drive narrative. Dialogue can develop characters, narrative, tension, setting, and/or story. First, this is David reading a passage of *Sweet Sorrow* to help set up our discussion.

**David Nicholls:**

This is from a chapter called Love.

"But love is boring. Love is familiar and commonplace for anyone not taking part. And first love is just a gangling glandular incarnation of the same. Shakespeare must've known this. Take a copy of the world's most famous love story and pinch between finger and thumb, the pages where the lovers are truly happy. Not the buildup that precedes it, not the strife that follows, but the time when love is mutual and untroubled.

"It's a few pages, a pamphlet almost, the brief interlude between anticipation and despair, the confidences and the intimacies of new lovers, the formation of private jokes, the confessions of doubt and insecurity, the reassurances and vows. There's only so much of that stuff that anyone can bear. And if Shakespeare ever did write the scenes where the lovers talk about their favourite food, or pick the fluff from their belly buttons, or earnestly explain the lyrics of their favorite songs, then he was right to exclude them from the second draft.

"The beginning and the end, the anticipation and despair, that's where the story lies. But the state of being in love, and in particular of being young and in love, is like listening to someone describe their parachute jump, or their bizarre dream. It's the blurred photograph of a life-changing performance taken from too far away. The more intense the experience, the less inclined we are to hear about it. And while we're happy that their life was changed and it must have been thrilling, can we move on?"

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

Thank you so much. Throughout reading this book, it's such a strong narrative voice. We often talk about that communication, that verbal or otherwise, between characters. And yet in *Sweet Sorrow*, there's a clear sense that the dialogue is also between the character and the reader.

You just jump us right in, and we're touched by this voice that draws us and engages us. We feel like we're in on private jokes and insights, and especially the end of the world. It's humorous, personable. How did you develop the narrative voice in a sense that the narrator and reader are in dialogue?

**David Nicholls:**

Well, before I started writing the novel, I did a lot of notes, just random stream of consciousness, into a document that I know no one is ever going to see, except me. And a key decision with all of my books has always been this choice between the first person voice and the third person voice. Where is this narrative voice coming from?

And with this book, I tried for a long time writing it in the third person, but I wanted to write about memory and nostalgia. And so gradually, it moved towards the first person voice. And the first person voice of someone who is very different now, when they're telling the story, to how they were during the events of the story. So there's also a dialogue between Charlie as a, I think a 37-year-old man, and Charlie as a 16-year-old.

He's listening to himself speak and then commenting on it. And he's listening to the dialogue that he has with other people, and often rolling his eyes in excruciating embarrassment. The key tone for the novel was fond embarrassment. And so once I got that kind of voice, that rueful, rather regretful, sad, but amused point of view, it became quite easy to write the bits in between the dialogue.

I find writing in the third person a little bit intimidating, because who am I? Who am I, the novelist? What is my take on the world? Am I cynical? Am I playful? Am I pessimistic? What is my point of view? Whereas if you write in the first person, it's a little bit like acting. It's a little bit like getting into character. And so once I have that character, I find writing in the first person far more fluid than I do writing in the third person.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

One of the questions I was curious about, your characters... So you include everyday language, so there were hi's, goodbyes, hello. I know for me, I usually avoid those, but one thing I quite enjoyed about in *Sweet Sorrow* was they added to the character's awkwardness.

It shows that tenderness of language, because while they were dancing around or leading up to these other conversations, and instead they're saying, "Hi, how are you?" So there's that challenge of saying the right thing at the right time. Like when Charlie and Fran, when they part after their first night together. I'm curious about how you decide what dialogue to tell, and what you leave implied?

**David Nicholls:**

I mean, your instinct is absolutely right. And one of, I think, the biggest mistakes that writers make initially, both as screenwriters and in fiction, is they start scenes at the very beginning,

and they end scenes. So every scene starts with a hello and ends with a goodbye. And everyone's constantly using the other person's name, so that you can make sure that the listener or the reader gets the name. You know that if you were in an edit suite, you'd lop off the beginning and you'd lop off the end, and you do take the bit in the middle, because that's where the action really is.

And that is usually my inclination, but because this is a novel about adolescence, and because adolescence is about learning how to do, it's the baby steps of conversation, of real life interaction with other adults. And so Charlie does find hello and goodbye difficult. And if you can play with his awkwardness, with his tendency to... There's a little comic moment where Fran, who he falls in love with, asks his name, and it takes him a little while to remember to ask for her name.

Now, what's going on there, the business of them finding out each other's names is banal. But if you can find a comical way for it to be indicative of Charlie's anxiety and Fran's confidence, then that's great. So I would only include, as you say, the everyday language, the everyday interactions, if they were serving some other purpose as well.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

Thank you. You know what else you included that quite amused me? When the character, Emily, is coming over to ask Charlie about the dance. And she says something that they can't quite make out. And you put this ellipses in the quotation marks, and then it's like, "What?" is the response, and is the ellipses in the quotation marks.

And then throughout the book, there's other times when there's those silences. And instead of the silence, it's the actual silence, what it might look like in dialogue. Can you talk a bit about that decision, and I guess that as a technique?

**David Nicholls:**

Yeah. I think there's a way to put your words on the page in such a way as it enables the reader to hear. And so I try to be very precise with punctuation. It sounds a bit pedantic, but my personal rule, which I try to stick to, is that an ellipses, a dot-dot-dot, means something fading away and dying out, and a dash means interrupted dialogue.

Something I'm quite careful about when I proofread the final, final, final draft of the novel, is to make sure that that works, and that it works in such a way as the reader will pick it up without necessarily me having to explain it. That dot-dot-dot is just silence, or an uncomfortable pause. Whereas a dash means that there's a kind of energy and pace. And I'm also careful about when I use he saids and she saids, and descriptions of how the other person is speaking or reacting. Because again, you can use those extra moments to put a little pause into the dialogue, or to suggest.

I mean, there's a lot of awkward conversation in this novel. So there are a lot of bits where someone will make a big speech, and then they'll walk on for another 10 yards before someone else says something. And there are ways of putting that on the page. There are ways of picking the characters up and moving them around the space during dialogue. And so I'm quite careful about that.

I am wary of giving out tips, but I do think punctuation can be your friend in terms of recreating the dialogue you hear in your head, when you sit down to write. What you're

trying to do is communicate that to the reader. And there are ways, by using line spacing and the punctuation very, very carefully and precisely, that you can help that along.

It's never going to be perfect, because books are read in an infinite number of ways. But you can certainly point the reader in the right direction, if you're precise about things like commas, ellipses, full stops, stage directions, the precise placing of stage directions, he said, she said. You can do a lot.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

That amused me, because Fran told Charlie that too, about punctuations being your friend.

**David Nicholls:**

Yeah. No, absolutely. I suppose one of the ideas that I'm playing with in *Sweet Sorrow* is that Charlie and Fran are involved in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. And the language of the play is wonderful and beautiful, but it's so a million miles away. It's a great play about first love. And it certainly expresses the kind of ecstasy and thrill of first love, and the poetry of first love.

But what's happening, while they're putting on the play, is everything else about first love, is the awkwardness and the embarrassment, and the loneliness and the anxiety, and saying the wrong thing. And Fran is much more direct in her speech and expresses herself far more clearly. Charlie, a lot of the meaning is in the dashes and the ellipses and the pauses. And every now and then, there will be a moment of lyricism from Charlie and Fran, that is almost Shakespearean, but it's self-conscious. They're self-aware.

Often, Charlie's thoughts will be far more profound than what he says, but 16-year-old Charlie doesn't quite have the confidence to express them out loud.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

Do you know, it's interesting, because you're right. So each of your characters, they do sound distinctive and they bring something else to the story, in terms of either their interests, their experiences, their perspectives. And so everyone sounds really distinct. And so it's quite refreshing when you get to entire pages where there are no dialogue tags. So we don't know who said this, but we do know it through the text.

Can you talk about how you decide, I guess, how you use them, when you don't use them, is there a formula of balance? How do you know when you have it just right?

**David Nicholls:**

I read it out loud a lot. I mean, I'm not self-conscious about running through dialogue and checking that it works, that it bounces and that the pacing is right, and that it doesn't go on too long, crucially. Reading anything out loud, a prose passage, a descriptive passage, I think can be extremely helpful.

And even after the book is published, if I'm doing an event and I'm doing a reading from the book, I can tell that I should take out a sentence or two, or that it's not quite clear who's speaking. And so I try to remedy those mistakes, before it gets to that stage. And so I probably, at some point, will read every single page out loud. And if it's not entirely clear, if I feel the reader is going to lose track, or the tone of the line isn't quite right, and it needs a

description, an adverb, then I will put it in. But generally speaking, what they say doesn't change. But the manner in which it appears on the page does change a great deal.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

It does feel like everything in this book, like every choice you make is intentional, and it adds all these different elements and layers to the book. So one thing I found quite useful was, so in that internal dialogue with the reader, Charlie often uses similes and metaphors. And I found for me, this gave me a point of reference, since the narrator and I don't have that shared experience. My high school experience was different than Charlie's. I mean, least of all, because I was in a different country. So I guess for you as the writer, what do those comparisons allow the narrator or the narrative to show?

**David Nicholls:**

Oh, you mean the images that Charlie comes up with?

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

Yeah.

**David Nicholls:**

Yeah. I mean, there's a certain sleight of hand, I suppose, because Charlie... One of the structural ideas in the book, which is something that I've taken from *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*, those are first person narratives, and you don't know where the narrator is when they tell the story. You don't know what their present day circumstances are. And also often, there's a certain amount of contrivance in that, Pip's capacity with language in *Great Expectations* is clearly Charles Dickens's capacity with language in *Great Expectations*.

As you read the book, Dickens's consciousness and the character's consciousness get a little bit muddled. So it's true that sometimes in this novel, Charlie is perhaps more eloquent and more literary, or more writerly, I suppose, than he would be if you met him in the street, or had a conversation with him in the pub. And that's part of the artifice of a first person novel.

So I would say, probably a lot of them come from me, and I'm not the same as Charlie. My life experience is quite different, but not entirely different. So again, there's a kind of hybrid voice that's partly the novelist, partly the character. And if you feel that it's straying too far from the character, then you have to take it out.

If there were ever times where I felt that Charlie, either as a narrator or as a character in the world, was getting too wise, too lyrical, too poetic, then I would try and pull back on that. But the structural trick with *Sweet Sorrow* is that it's largely set in the past, 90% of the first part is set in the past. And then it's 70%, and then it's 60%, and then it's 30%. And then the present day takes over, and you find out what happened to Charlie that has enabled him and motivated him to tell the story, which is a similar trick as you find in *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations*.

One of the things pulling you forward through the novel, is how did this narrator become this narrator? He's both a character in the book and the person telling the story, and how do the two collide? And that's the structural idea that I like a lot. I've used it in this, and I used it in my last novel called *Us*, which had a much more distinctive narrator's voice. But you did read the book with this mystery in your head. Where is he when he tells us this?

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

It was a delight to get to know Charlie and his world.

**David Nicholls:**

Thank you.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

But we were curious though, so we know about Charlie through his dialogue and his inner thoughts. We don't have an external narrator describe him. What does this access make possible? And were there any constraints with this as a mechanism?

**David Nicholls:**

No. In a way, it was sort of deliberate. Charlie's attempt to describe himself in the opening chapters runs aground, because he's neutral. His most distinctive quality is his lack of distinctive qualities. He's not the most popular kid at school, but he's not unpopular. He's not incredibly handsome, but he knows from things that happen around him, that he's not unattractive either. He's a blank. And when he joins the Romeo and Juliet theatre company, he takes on the role of Benvolio.

Shakespeare plays always have these characters, they're usually called Sebastian or Antonio, who don't really sing on the page. They don't really have a personality. They're neutral. They're narrators. They tell the prince what just happened in the market square. They don't shout out loud. They're not like Romeo or Mercutio. They have a functional, almost prosaic role.

And I liked the idea that Charlie finds out who he is, he becomes more than Benvolio, the part he's cast in, as the novel goes on. The twist in Sweet Sorrow is that it's Benvolio and Juliet, that this character who seems almost neutral, almost a blank, just a narrator, grows and becomes fleshed out through the act of falling in love and taking part in this ridiculous production. So there's almost a deliberate blankness to Charlie.

Certainly, he can't quite see himself either. He looks at the people around him that all seem to have big personalities and attitudes to the world, and he hasn't found his yet. And that's what the novel's about.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

There was a lot of conversations that I was so happy that he had a chance to have, because he was thrust in this role of being a carer and this responsibility, one, because the mother couldn't carry this responsibility. And of course, why should she? But for me, I think it raised some interesting questions around mental health, identity, responsibility, family.

And it also gives people a chance to have some of these much needed discussions in life, as well as through the book. And so I was curious about, given some of society finds it challenging to talk about mental health in life, how might that affect how you write about it, and discussions that the characters did or do not have about mental health crisis?

**David Nicholls:**

Well, I think in this world, at this time, there's something of a taboo around the subject of mental health. I mean, Charlie's father is clearly clinically depressed and is combining his

medication with alcohol, and clearly something is going to go badly wrong. But no one dares use the words. Again, the prose gives you an opportunity to describe what's really going on, when the dialogue actually contains nothing at all about it.

The word depression isn't really used in the novel until much, much later. And they're finding all kinds of euphemisms for it. The dad's got the blues, or it's to do with circumstances, rather than his mental health. So yes, again, it's finding, are the characters going to have a full on, frank conversation about the father's condition, or are they going to bicker about the washing up? And is there a way to write the bickering about the washing up, so that it reveals something else about the real situation?

And again, that I think is something I like to do with dialogue, is always to have more than one thing going on at any one time. You have the words, which hopefully should feel authentic and should flow. But underneath, the reader should be able to pick up everything else that's going on, that's churning away under the surface.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

Who does Charlie think we are, as the reader? Because there's a difference between how he narrates to us, there's that openness, that vulnerability, and a difference between how he speaks to Niamh. But who does he think that we are? Because we have that access, and it's a really nice intimacy that he trusts us in this way.

**David Nicholls:**

Yeah. I don't necessarily know the answer to that. I always think that writing in the first person, there's this sleight of hand involved, isn't there? I mean, why is Jane Eyre telling us about the life of Jane Eyre? She hasn't become a novelist, so who is she talking to? When she says, "Reader, I married him," it implies that what you're reading has been written down, but why has she written it down?

It's the same with Pip in Great Expectations. He's a middle-aged customs and excise officer. And yet, he has this extraordinary capacity as a storyteller. So there's an element of artifice often in first person voices, unless you're writing a novel in the form of letters or a diary, where there's a practical reason for why the words are being set on the page. And so for me, the conversation is between the character and a friend.

When I started writing, I was very intimidated by the idea of writing prose, or poetry, or plays. The only form of writing I did in my 20s were letters. And I wanted to entertain my friends, make them laugh, make them smile, summon up a scene. That's why I became a novelist really, because I so enjoyed writing letters. And I suppose that's what I'm trying to do a little bit with fiction now, is imagine that I'm writing a letter to a friend and telling a story in the most entertaining, accessible, frank, and emotional way that I possibly can.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

I think you do such a lovely job of that, and you do show us these nuances. And it did feel like we were friends, like we were Charlie's friend and he's telling us these things, he's sharing this and giving us his perspective.

As the writer, how do you know when it works? When you've given us this dialogue and you've given us this story, how do you know that, yes, this is exactly what this character would sound like, and this is exactly the story that he wants to tell?

**David Nicholls:**

It takes a while, I think, to get that voice. I was an actor for a long time. And improvisation was a big part of my acting training. I mean, I was a terrible actor, but I loved improvising. And I could improvise dialogue until I was told to stop. I've always found dialogue to be a great pleasure. I find writing dialogue much, much easier than I find writing, say, descriptive prose.

And so a lot of what I write in the preparation stages is just improvised chat. I just imagine two characters with a particular point of view, a particular set of experiences, particular aims and objectives. And I imagine where the conversations would go. And there's no expectation of using those conversations, but it's a way of finding the character's vocabulary, the rhythm of a character's speech. Thinking about the physicality behind the way they speak.

And once I've done that, if I've done enough of that preparation, then I find the writing of dialogue very, very fluid. I very rarely revise dialogue, only slight tweaks to the rhythm and to the humour, perhaps. I might tighten up some jokes. But dialogue, for me, comes almost instinctively. And I think again, I talk going back to acting, a lot of the... This is pretentious, but a lot of the work you do, the Stanislavski Approach, the method approach of what did I have for breakfast, and what do I want, and what are my aims and objectives? All of that stuff, I do find it useful when writing prose, even though we're a very long way away from the theatre. I think applying some of that discipline really helps.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

What might be the differences between, for you, writing for screen and writing for a novel?

**David Nicholls:**

Well, a novel gives you very easy access to a character's inner life. You can just say, you can just point out the differences. I said this, but I meant this. I said this, and then I rolled my eyes. I said this, and I couldn't quite believe I'd said it.

When you write a screenplay, you don't have any of that. You don't have the commentary. You just have the words. Screenplay is only about action and dialogue. It's only about what people say and do, whereas a novel is a brilliant vehicle for expressing what people think and feel. And when I started writing fiction, I'd spent quite a long time writing screenplays. And the biggest note I got from my editor was it's okay to say he was embarrassed. It's okay to say he had never felt so sad in his life. It's okay to say what's going on inside. Because if you put any of that in the screenplay, it will probably be crossed out by the actors. They don't want to know. And so with the screenplay, you have to trust the actors to fill in those gaps.

With a novel, you have this wonderful opportunity to press pause on the action and talk about where the dialogue comes from, why the character is behaving in that way, a memory, an image, a metaphor, a past experience. You can't leap around in time and space and consciousness in the same way in a script, as you can with fiction, which is why I love writing fiction.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

Thank you for that. That's a really great answer. And I think it helps us when we're thinking about writing across different forms, and how techniques that we might take from one to use to the other. But it also reminds me, so there's the things Charlie can't say to Helen, and there's things he can't understand about her and about the things that she says.

When describing their friendship early on, Charlie tells us, I'm just going to read a quote from the book, "Her sentences contained more words than necessary. Every other word given a twist of irony, so that I never knew if she meant one thing or its opposite." And so we know, reading it, that Charlie is missing something. And then something about that sentence allows us, as the reader, to also second guess what she says, or what he tells us that she says.

And for me, during the dance, Helen asks Charlie to dance, and he says he's alright. He doesn't really dance. And then Emily asks him, and he says yes. And as a reader, I was stuck feeling like he's missing something, and that I was missing something because he was missing it. So you show us the dialogue in the scene, so we see everything that unfolds. How did you create this element of misunderstanding?

**David Nicholls:**

Well, I think you have to remember that when one is writing, one has to remember that we very rarely say what we think or feel. It's extremely rare to be frank in life. There's always something else going on. And often, I think when dialogue doesn't work, it's when it's too on the nose, it's too explicit. It's someone explaining in very plain, eloquent language, how they feel about a particular relationship or situation.

Again, with a novel, you get to just put that on the page. You can say, you can explain why Charlie is a little bit intimidated by Helen's wit and intelligence. And then everything he says after that is informed by that knowledge. You can tell that he's trying a little bit too hard, or that his jokes aren't landing, or that he's nervous. And the bits in between the dialogue are your opportunity to almost put up subtitles, if you like, to say this is what's really going on. And I love doing that. That's a great comic technique.

When you think of really successful comic novels, a lot of them play with this mismatch between what is spoken and what is intended. If you think of Bridget Jones or Adrian Mole, characters who always say the wrong thing, it's because the voice in their head is nothing like the voice that speaks out loud. Playing with that difference and knowing why that difference exists, I think is crucial. I think that's probably the biggest flaw I spot in dialogue, is people being extraordinarily, unrealistically frank. There should always be something else going on, I think.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

I think you're right. And I know when I write dialogue, I try to show what they feel and what they might be doing, and those things. But I think you've given me also that other element of when I'm writing my own dialogue, that reminder, it's not just what I would say, or even what I want them to say. But it's what they might say in that situation, the characters.

**David Nicholls:**

But do you enjoy it? Do you enjoy writing the dialogue? Is that your favourite bit?

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

I do. It is one of my favourite things. When I do it, I do it as if I'm acting. I was meant to be an actor in another life. So I do it as if I was the actor, and I was telling it to whoever I think is listening, to the other character. It just makes it fun for me.

**David Nicholls:**

Yeah, I mean, this is sort of a secret, I don't know why I feel that this is a bad thing to do, but I do often think in terms of performance and performers. The performer will change, as you go through the novel. But I think in *Sweet Sorrow*, when I was thinking about the mum, I thought she had a kind of Julie Walters energy, but also with quite a hard edge at times. And she's not like that all the way through. But in certain scenes, it's fine, I think, to have a real life person's physicality and attitude in your head, as you write the dialogue. For me, anyway, it really helps hearing the voices.

I imagined one of those real, tears and snotty nosed, and rage, one of those real meaty confrontations that you see in the best naturalistic drama, with the characters talking over each other and interrupting each other. And the conversation petering out, and then starting again, like a fire that you think has gone out, but is suddenly rekindled. And again, that's about three or four pages of almost uninterrupted dialogue, but I love writing those scenes. I like to think that if you were to give those chapters to actors, to perform straight off the page, that they would enjoy the energy and the bounce and the rhythm of it.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

I think you're right, because I think I often end up reading it out loud, in a way that it lets me feel. And so I felt like there was a lot of conversations that I was so happy that he had a chance to have. Can you tell us a little bit about your planning process? Do you have one process that fits all of your books, or does that change? What is it like for you to plan a novel?

**David Nicholls:**

It changes every time. I wish there was a technique, because I'd be writing a novel now, and I'm not. I wish I was more productive. With a book like *One Day*, my third novel, which had a very high concept of a love story told through the same day, every year, for 20 years. There's something in that, even as I pitch it to you now, that's clearly going to require a lot of planning. Because it's not enough to know what happens on that one day, you have to know the other 364 as well. And you have to hide details in the events of a single day, for the reader to be able to make sense of the story. So that was a kind of photo album of a book. You were just looking at 20 snapshots, but 20 snapshots told a much bigger story or relationship over 20 years. That was planned to a very precise extent, over a 30 page document.

Us, the novel that came after, was a kind of road trip. So that novel had not so much a plan, as an itinerary. I knew which city they were going to be in, and which train they were going to catch. And I knew dramatically what the events were that were going to move it on to the next city, and the next catastrophe in this family's story, as they travel around Europe. So that was planned quite heavily.

This book, I wanted it to be more dreamy and lyrical. And so I wrote 50 or 60,000 words of just notes, just little ideas, little passages of description, little exchanges of dialogue, because dialogue is a great way to find out about character. So I could work out who Charlie and Fran and their friends were. Notes about settings, little story ideas. I re-read Romeo and Juliet, and some other Shakespeare plays, and made notes from that. And I had 60 or 70,000 words, which I put to one side, while I went to work on something else. And then went back and re-read them, and highlighted the things that I thought were still exciting to me, and affecting to me.

So I knew when I started, that I wanted it to be a memory book, that it was going to be told by someone looking back at their adolescence, that it was going to be a kind of commentary on Romeo and Juliet, that it was going to be about theatre, and how brilliant and awful that can be. The big emotions of putting on a play, and often the silliness and pretension of putting on a play as well.

And I knew that it was going to have a sort of end-of-summer feel, that the novel was going to feel like that time in summer, where the leaves start to turn and you start to put on a jumper in the evening. And that sense of impending autumn and winter was going to be the tone of the book. And that was enough for me to start writing. But usually, I do a great deal more planning than that.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

I feel like there's so many tips in how to plan a novel, and you've just given us so many ways to get started. And yet, I'm going to ask you if there was one piece of advice that you could give people on how to create it, or how to sustain it, or developing dialogue in our own work, what would that one tip be, please?

**David Nicholls:**

Yeah, I think just put it on the page, just write it out, because the voices will come to you. And if you can just improvise the back and forth, the tennis match of dialogue, then you will start to hear the voices. And you don't have to use any of it. It can just be a way into working out the character's vocabulary, the character's attitude, the character's intentions, the character's ambitions. You can do that in that very neutral way of saying, "Tom is 27, he was born here." But you'll get it much more immediately, if you put Tom in a room with someone and get him to talk.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

That is such great advice. And I think that's a reminder too, that not everything we put on the page has to stay on the page, that they are drafts and there's several drafts that might come before that completed book. So thank you for that reminder, and for all of your information and all of these tips, and all the insight into not just writing this book, but writing in general. Thank you so much for your time.

**David Nicholls:**

Thank you. Thank you. I hope it was helpful, but thank you. It's been nice to talk to you.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:**

Inspired by David Nicholls's tips on writing dialogue in *Sweet Sorrow*? Take a character. It could be one you've written about in the past, one you're currently writing, or curious about writing more, or one you've created especially for this exercise. Place them across the table from someone they've been wanting to apologise to for 20 years, and haven't had the opportunity to, until now.

Consider what each character wants to say, and what they don't. What might they remember about that time? What gets forgotten, misremembered? What happens if one character wants to have the conversation, and the other one doesn't? Where are they for this chance encounter? Consider what the setting sounds, feels, smells and looks like, and what one character might focus on, while the other wants to engage them in a discussion they may or may not want to have.

Try writing dialogue only for about 30 minutes, and see what happens. When you're finished, try putting them in a different place to see what changes. Are there more people around? Do they want to be overheard and/or seen? The more we write characters in uncomfortable situations, the more they'll show us what they do and don't want us to know. Dialogue can be messy, broken, misunderstood, misheard, made up of gestures, missed opportunities, and interruptions. There's no one way to write dialogue. This exercise is about taking risks, exploring, and there is no right answer.

That rounds off our exploration of dialogue. Thanks again to my guest, David Nicholls. His book, *Sweet Sorrow*, is available at all major books shops, and through libraries on and offline. *Write Your Novel* was presented by me, Yvonne Battle-Felton, and it was produced by Candace Wilson. The music was by Joe Gardner.

This is a Sonderbug Production for New Writing North, with the support of the Arts Council England. Next time, Carmen Marcus joins me to talk about the use of rhythm and language in her work. See you there. And if you want to know more, you can follow me on Twitter @YBattleFelton. And remember, the conversation continues on the Write Your Novel Discord server. For more information, head over to the New Writing North website.