

Casting Shadows, Hearing Voices: The Basics of Point of View

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Point of view is one of the most basic elements in the craft of fiction. Through this medium, storytellers see (hear, feel, smell, taste) from particular consciousnesses and metabolisms as well as from spatial temporal and spatial perspectives. Since most contemporary fiction involves a “growth of perception” (among characters and readers), the selection of viewpoint is crucial. Who is telling what story? *Who* is integral to *what* because the narrator shapes content.

Many emerging writers ignore this element of craft, perhaps because point of view seems automatic. While it's true that one may have a natural affinity for first person or third person, experienced writers rehearse fiction with a variety of instruments. A single piece of music may be played by a violin, flute, piano, and oboe. In each case, the tune is the “same” but the music is “different” because of the chosen instrument. Likewise in fiction, while basic details of plot may be similar whether told from the first person or the third person, the *story* varies greatly depending on the narrator. Or narrators. With chamber performance or larger orchestration, music is different yet again as instruments are combined. So, too, in fiction, harmonious or dissonant narration can add dimension. Playing with the narrator's perspective acquaints writers with the range of their voices. Even authors who loyally stick to one point of view for their whole careers can learn something about the strengths and limitations of their preferred medium by occasionally fiddling with who is telling the story.

FIRST PERSON

First person usually employs the “I” voice and sometimes the “we” voice. A first-person narrator can give the impression that a story is “more real.” This point of view implies intimacy and makes a dramatic story even more immediate. A first-person protagonist narrator often heightens readers’ sympathy with certain characters because the story-telling appears more personal.

On the other hand, first person may reveal a solipsism in writers who only want to tell their “own” life stories. Or a voyeurism in readers seeking vicarious experience of other people’s joy, loss, sexual ecstasy, ambition, and violence. Perhaps some satisfactions provided by the “truer” voice of the “I” narrator comes from the simple human impulse for gossip.

Skillful use of first person avoids an impression of self-centeredness. As Jack Hodgins says in his wise book *A Passion for Narrative*, “the most successful first person narrators talk less about themselves than about others. We learn about them indirectly.” Grace Paley models this lesson in *Later the Same Day*, in which her character Faith discloses volumes about herself in a description of her grown sons.

The boys were in different boroughs trying to find the right tune for their lives. They had been men to a couple of women and therefore only came to supper now and then. They were worried for my solitariness and suggested different ways I could wear my hair.

Authors less experienced than Paley can confuse first-person fiction with memoir. The current American fashion in autobiographical fiction and criticism is complicated enough to be the subject of an entire essay, but here I will raise only a few caveats. *Some* autobiographical fiction is no more than score settling or retrospective psychoanalysis. Not evils in themselves, but projects distant from the imaginative artistic search that attends to the instinctive unconscious. When we insist our “real life” stories into fictional frames, we often fail to distinguish between the “I” author and the “I” narrator. How can we *know* what we know if we only reassemble from lived and remembered experience? How can we transcend the moment if we don’t imagine? Ironically, I find that the strongest fiction is autobiographical not in the form of “memory recorded” but in the form of premonition—when what we write predicts what will happen to us, when life follows

art. While memory is at best a reconstruction, imagination sometimes bears the grace of prophecy.

One learns so much about the story, the character, and the writerly self by examining habitual use of point of view. For years, I tried to avoid the first person. Gradually I noticed that I had more empathy for my “he” and “she” characters than for my “I” characters, a problem directly linked, I believe, to a serious penchant for self-criticism and apology. *Mea Culpa* is my Latin name. Only when I concentrated on and practiced that crucial distinction between authorial identity and narrative persona was I able to do a book in the first person.

Recently I rewrote the final drafts of my seventh novel, *Range of Light*, in the first person after writing several drafts in the third person. First person allowed me greater access to the internal lives of the main characters, Adele and Kath, and also a more direct channel for expressing their feelings toward one another. To underline the subjective unreliability of this first-person narration, I often related the same incident twice, through the separate “I” voices of Adele and Kath. One challenge of this mode is that the language of the *narrated action* and *description* as well as the language in the dialogue must be character identified. For instance, Kath and Adele are walking in the same mountains at the same time of day and yet, in their internal monologues, the setting is portrayed differently by each of them, through the lenses of their idiosyncratic consciousnesses and through the distinct registers of their individual voices. My insight into each protagonist was deepened by listening so directly to Kath and Adele that now I don’t know how I could have considered using the third person.

SECOND PERSON

Second person affords a different kind of intimacy, whether we imagine “you” as the listener, as the narrator’s alter ego, as a particular third party or as an anonymous character tracing his or her way through the story. The “you” can be singular or plural: “you” as in “you, Robert Burns,” or “you” as in “you, the Scottish people.”

Perhaps the most familiar literary use of second person is in romantic poetry, when a loved one is addressed directly. (“How do I love thee, let me count the ways. . .”) The poetic tradition of the *apostrophe*—speech in which the absent (person, people, abstract thing) is being addressed—can convey intimacy not only with lovers but with friends, family members, objects or ideas. *Apostrophe*

comes from the Greek, “a turning away.” Here’s an example from “A Deep-Sworn Vow” by W.B. Yeats.

*Others because you did not keep
That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine;
Yet always when I look death in the face,
When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
Or when I grow excited with wine,
Suddenly I meet your face.*

Tone varies according to the nature of the relationship between the narrator and the person being addressed. Two very different forms of patial address are found in Dylan Thomas and Sylvia Plath. In “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” we hear Thomas’ exhortation.

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray
Do not go gentle into that good night
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

In “Daddy,” Plath makes a declaration.

*Daddy, I have to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal. . . .*

Second person is also recognizable in common aphorisms, “You don’t know what you have until you lose it.” Yet Western fiction exhibits a fascinating resistance to this figure of speech. Writing second-person fiction is as much a taboo as dismantling the theatre’s fourth wall (the imaginary wall between actors and audience). While the person “I” is comfortable to many authors, second person seems intrusive, almost as if the writer were asking, “To be or not to be, that is *your* question.” Ultimately, of course, in our efforts to provoke readers, we’re always trying to incite self-questioning.

Engaging the audience immediately through the second person has various advantages. To admit readers this directly into the story can be both demystifying and empowering. It is demystifying in the sense of inviting audiences into the rarefied chambers of the text itself, and

empowering in allowing the writer to ask questions of and make demands of those readers. Storytellers using second person put the audience more on the spot, in much the same way as the dramatist Bertolt Brecht did with his “in your face” and “agitprop” tactics that challenged the artificial catharsis of traditional theatre.

One of my writing projects is a cross-genre book about my Edinburgh family in which I use second person to address my grandfather. Since Daniel Campbell died forty-two years before I was born and left no records, I am addressing a fictional character. Yet, I also feel that by speaking to him directly, first with anger at the way he treated his wife and children, then with increasing compassion for his own difficult life, I am coming to know the actual man, and so is my audience.

Second person can be written as scolding, informing, inquiring, arguing, reassuring. The effects range from immediacy to irreverence, congratulations, and distance. My favorite second-person fiction is Randall Kenan’s story “This Far,” in which Booker T. Washington’s career is exposed to him as a series of failures, strokes of luck, successes, and compromises. “This Far” opens as the fifty-nine-year-old Washington is visiting two college friends and reflecting on their early days together.

So ignorant and pitiful you were then, the shame of it still lingers like the smell of shit on the fingers, just like the hunger which still gnaws beneath your wool suit, tailor-made for you in London, beneath the solid-gold watch and chain that dangles from your vest pouch, a gift from E. Julia Emery, one of your many wealthy white patrons—but it gnaws and bites and growls just the same. You cannot rid yourself of it, can you?

Here Kenan achieves a kind of intimacy (between narrator and protagonist, between reader and protagonist) unavailable in most traditional third-person historical fiction. Washington’s wardrobe is more vivid because the narrator addresses the wearer himself. Likewise, the feeling of shame is made palpable as the owner of that shame is confronted directly. Some readers will relate more closely to Washington and to the narrator as the word “you” conflates the character who is being addressed with the reader who is also being addressed.

Two frequently cited models of second-person fiction are Lorrie

Moore's *Self-Help* and Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*. An excellent example of using second person to introduce characters to their own stories is the short-short "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid, in which a daughter comes to terms with her complicated mother by "recalling" mama's alarmed instructions about womanhood. Another short-short story, "Bread" by Margaret Atwood, confronts the reader with questions of survival and responsibility.

Should you share the bread or give the whole piece to your sister? Should you eat the piece of bread yourself? After all, you have a better chance of living, you're stronger. How long does it take to decide?

THIRD PERSON

The two most common forms of contemporary fiction are third-person limited and third-person omniscient. Normally, third person is singular. But the omniscient version can switch back and forth between observations about "he" or "she" and then refer to "they" when observing families or societies.

In a third-person limited narrative, the story is told from the point of view of a participant in the action, although that character is not directly speaking. This approach is more intimate than third-person omniscient because the point-of-view character must be present for any action or dialogue and all feelings are filtered through that individual's consciousness. For instance, if you're writing third-person limited from Michael's point of view, this doesn't work: "When Michael was out of the room, Andrea walked over and whispered a secret to Mary."

Third-person limited does allow more latitude than first person for physical and emotional description. "When Michael returned, he smiled ruefully at Andrea and ran a pink comb through his purple hair." In the first person, Michael would seem self-conscious describing his smile as rueful and explaining that his hair is purple. Gish Jen makes fine use of third-person limited in her novel *Mona in the Promised Land*. Here the very American Mona reflects on the infuriating cautiousness of her immigrant Chinese parents.

Make sure, more sure—the endless refrain of her parents' lives. Sometimes Mona wants to say to them, "You know, the Chinese Revolution was a long time ago; you can get over it. . . ."

Third limited can be used in multiple voices as I do in *All Good Women*, a novel about four friends set during World War II. Once each protagonist's voice is distinguished, occasionally all of them speak in the same chapter. By having multiple points of view, I retain the option to describe action when one of them is absent. I can directly describe Wanda's experience at the internment camp and Ann's work in London with refugee children and Moira's and Teddy's lives back on the San Francisco home front. I don't have to keep them all in the same room. Or the same country.

THE COMPLEXITY OF OMNISCIENCE

What is the distinction between shifting third-person limited and third omniscient? With the limited point of view, *less* (knowledge on the part of a fallible narrator) can lead to *more* (reader empathy with the struggling point-of-view character). If the narrative voice in *All Good Women* were omniscient, I could describe a scene in which none of the protagonists was located. I could relate histories and futures unknown to them. The omniscient speaker often knows more (about tomorrow, for instance, or about the motives of minor characters) than can be expressed in the third-person limited point of view. The omniscient voice can distance readers from the protagonist and may even establish a sense that the narrator and the reader are in league together—beyond the ken of the main character. The omniscient point of view was often used in the Victorian novels of Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Anthony Trollope. Many twentieth-century readers mistrust such authority and prefer a non-omniscient voice (which reveals private confusion and other vulnerabilities) to a god voice (which knows more than characters or readers). It is much harder to convey a “growth of perception” through an omniscient narrator whose knowledge is unassailable and eternal.

But novelist Dorothy Bryant doesn't think these complications should stop us, and she says so in *Writing a Novel*.

We seem, most of us twentieth-century writers, to have lost scope, to have lost the ability to move about as freely as Tolstoy did, or Thackeray or Hardy or Austen. Critics write all kinds of philosophical explanations for this loss: the powerlessness, impotence, alienation of modern man reflected in the interior,

limited point of view, etc. Maybe. But I think we lost range through lack of use. We traded omniscience for other effects. The only way to get it back is by trying again, probably in a different form.

A recent, successful omniscient novel is Brian Moore's *The Magician's Wife*, about French colonialism in North Africa in the 1800s. At first, readers view a scene observed by Emmeline and Lambert, which could indicate a third limited point of view. Then, as the horsemen move out of the characters' view, it is clear that the narrative voice is omniscient.

At eight o'clock the following morning Emmeline and Lambert saw, circling below in the courtyard, four horsemen: Deniau, Hersant, and two young lieutenants of a Zouave regiment. Two additional horses were held by grooms, waiting their arrival. Once mounted, their procession trotted out into the streets of Milianah. There, ten Arab riders, wearing red burnouses and armed with rifles, moved in an escort. When they reached the gates of the town, a further twenty armed Arabs dressed in red burnouses joined the cortege. Two hundred yards farther on, a third escort surrounded them, and as they reached the open plain, yet another twenty riders joined them. . . .

Perhaps one reason the omniscient works so well here is that Moore is writing from the hindsight of a century. Present-day readers expect to be more knowledgeable about the shifts of history than characters living through that history. Thus, the "authority" of the omniscient narrator is a consequence of temporal reference point and not of supernatural power.

SHIFTING, MULTIPLE-PERSON POINTS OF VIEW

Yet another option is the shifting multiple-person viewpoint, as used in Rosellen Brown's intriguing novel *Before and After*, about a family in which the seventeen-year-old son is a fugitive suspected of murder. Brown writes about the Reisers' ordeal in the first-person voice of father Ben, the third-person limited voice of mother Carolyn, and the first-person and third-person limited voices of their daughter, Judith. Missing is the point of view of Jacob, the absent young murder suspect. Jacob's silence and the shifting voices of his family heighten the haunting suspense.

When done well, the multiple-person, multiple-point-of-view narration can reach beyond catharsis to illustrate the multiplicity of truth. Such complex narrative strategy requires a lot of the reader, much in the way multimedia art stimulates audience members to use various physical senses and understandings of temporality. At any one point in this kind of narration, the reader doesn't know whether to turn his head or look up or duck or close his eyes. In contrast, by the final draft, the *writer* must always have her eye on the speaker.

Poet Diane Glancy has divined the ideal narrative form for *Pushing the Bear*, a novel about the Trail of Tears. At first, the short, dissonant segments of testimony from a vast number of Cherokee forced to march from North Carolina to Oklahoma seem jarring, confusing. Readers hear, but have trouble listening to, concentrating on, so many urgent, competing, contradictory voices. How can we follow? Whom do we follow? Where are we going? Glancy compels her audience to experience the very questions native people asked of themselves and each other throughout the death-and-disease-ridden trek. *Pushing the Bear* disrupts conventional story expectations by juxtaposing the words of main characters with voices from completely new players who may appear only once or twice. Glancy's fragmented story line keeps readers in the painful present of the Cherokee ordeal.

PERSONA

Person is born of *persona*. Successful fiction requires the writer's understanding about the standpoint, character, and tone of the narrative *persona* (the speaker, the actual teller of the story). *Persona* derives from the Latin word for the mask worn by classical actors. The carrying or wearing of a mask was the ancient equivalent of using makeup and costumes in contemporary drama to enhance the identity and/or credibility of characters. In fiction and poetry, "persona" is the personality assumed by the narrator.

Strategizing point of view entails not only choosing among first-, second-, third- and multiple-person voices but also understanding the character and purpose of the narrative *persona*. Is the narrator the main character or a more peripheral observer of/participant in the action? From what point in time and space is the narrator recounting the story? Is she in the next room or in another country?

Our narrators can be dull, incendiary, coy, anxious. *Persona* comes

across in the language of description and action as well as in dialogue, in the idiosyncratic uses of vocabulary, grammar, and figurative language. Narrative idiom can reveal not only nationality, region, race, education, class, age, but also many subtleties within those identifications. Is our narrator verbose? Apologetic? Hesitant? Bold? Rash? Measured? Does he stutter, emphasize certain words or syllables, drone on and on? A narrator's distance can imply detachment, cautiousness, or forgetfulness. The persona's confiding tone can make readers either sympathetic or suspicious.

Even the third-person omniscient requires the creation of a narrative persona. It may have been simpler in a more homogeneous literary scene like nineteenth-century Britain to assume one's readers subscribed to the same worldview, to write from an omniscience rooted, for instance, in a Christian moral framework, an increasingly industrial economy, and an imperialistic sense of entitlement. But the Empire is fading, and more human beings are reading. This diverse, modern audience understands that there are distinct brands of omniscience. Is our narrator Yahweh? Krishna? Venus? Buddha? Jesus? Higher Power? Zeus? Einstein? What one knows has a lot to do with *how* one knows, with the values through which one filters attitudes about forgiveness, justice, generosity, contradiction, tolerance, humor. The choice of an omniscient narrator in a psychologically sophisticated, culturally complex world requires disclosure.

"Who's calling, please?" It's a natural everyday question. Likewise, readers are curious about both the who and why of the narrators they encounter. Narrative motive is key to audience sympathy and attitude. Today's audiences want to know (or be able to discern) at some point if we are being told this story to win an argument, to enlighten us spiritually, to persuade us philosophically. Every narrator has blind spots and gifts of insight. The central question is not, Is this point of view reliable or unreliable? but rather, How unreliable is the narrator, and in what interesting ways?

As with most elements of craft, point of view has no rules, just intriguing and sometimes perplexing possibilities. We can temporarily borrow a map from a fellow writer, but the real adventure of point of view doesn't begin until we strike out on our own and trek cross-country, discovering new territory, listening for elusive voices, and observing the angles of those shadows.

EXERCISES

1. Rewrite a story you have written in the first person by using the first-person voice of a different character. What impact does this shift have on plot? Tone? Theme? What do you learn about the story by doing this?
2. Borrow a classic scene from literature—Lear's disowning of Cordelia, Achilles' mourning for Patroclus, the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden—and write both a first-person account of this moment and an omniscient account of the moment. What freedoms, insights, and restrictions did each point of view carry?
3. Try writing a shifting, multiple-person, multiple-point-of-view story about a familiar experience: family at Thanksgiving dinner, shoppers in a department store on Christmas Eve, people working out in the weight room of the local Y, fans enduring or enjoying a baseball game. Aim for cohesion in the midst of this "confusion." What holds a story like this together?

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