

## CHAPTER SIX

# Who's Telling This Story, Anyway?

## Some Basic Definitions

First, let's define "narrator." It's important to understand that this is where there is a key difference between writing fiction and nonfiction: in fiction, a narrator is different from the author. The author is writing the words. The narrator is the *intelligence* that is *telling the story*. In fiction, the author controls the narrator, but is not synonymous with the narrator.

**NOTE:** This is different in nonfiction. In nonfiction, the author and the narrator are the same. There's no convention that differentiates the nonfiction author from the narrator of the story. More on this later.

A brief warning: when you read about fiction writing and point of view in many textbooks, the word "narrator" is used in various ways. It's more than a little confusing. Some texts might even tell you that the only stories that have narrators are those with first-person narrators (an "I" who is telling the story). I disagree. For the purposes of this textbook, therefore, *every* made-up story or novel has a narrator. Even if the story is being told by an invisible and bodiless intelligence which never personally enters the story as a character, and which appears to be godlike in its scope of knowledge, I want to refer to that as the narrator. Some people assume and/or insist that it is the author, that we're getting the author's perception of the world. That might be true sometimes. But it's untrue enough of the time in fiction for us never to assume that. So we will always talk about the *narrator* of the story or novel, not the author, when we talk about fiction.

Think of it this way: it's like the relationship between a puppeteer and a puppet. They might sometimes raise their right hands at the same time, or move to the left simultaneously, but they are not the same. The author controls the narrator, but is not synonymous with him or her.

So what are our choices of narrators? Simple. Well, deceptively simple. Just three:

First person

Second person

Third person

Let's move on and define these terms and look at some examples.

### First Person

First person point of view is possibly the most popular point of view for beginning writers. With it, the narrative is being told by an actual charac-

## Part 1: INTRODUCTION TO POINT OF VIEW

### Getting Started

In Chapter 5, we talked about the difference between scene and narration, how narration is also called "telling," and why "show not tell," despite being a popular piece of advice, isn't always the best way to go. Sometimes you'll want to tell your readers things directly—narrate things. And even if you like to keep narrative to a bare minimum, it's almost a given that you'll have *some* telling to do. You might want to set the scene ("the prairie was hot and dry and the ground shimmered in the heat"), or start or stop the clock of the story ("later that same day," or "ten years passed without incident"). All this requires telling.

To do this telling, or narration, you must have a *narrator*. Pretty basic. Someone must be telling those parts of the story that can't be witnessed first-hand in scenes. This is called *point of view*, and the point of view is one of the key things you must decide when you sit down and try to get your story or nonfiction material onto paper.

This is what we're going to talk about in this chapter. First, we're going to define "narrator," then we're going to talk about the different narrative choices you have when settling on a point of view. You'll then be given some exercises—complete with student examples—to practice the different kinds of point of view. Finally, we have some readings that illustrate the different points of view you can choose when writing your story, novel, or creative nonfiction piece.

ter within the piece, an "I." In nonfiction, this "character" is the author, relating something that has happened to him or her. In fiction this character is made up, not real.

So the first person narrator is a character—made up, in fiction—who is telling the story. Again, in fiction, we never assume that it's the author, even if the narrator tells you, "I am writing this down for you. I am the author." If the narrator were the author, it would be nonfiction. It would be someone telling of a real experience.

There are actually two kinds of first person narrators we can look at. First, there's a narrator who is *directly* involved in the story or nonfiction piece. Someone who is intimately and obviously affected by what is happening. Second, there's a first person "observer." A character that is standing back, saying, "I have a story to tell you, about something I witnessed, but I was not directly involved."

A fine distinction, but let's look at examples of both.

"Tell me things I won't mind forgetting," she said. "Make it useless stuff or skip it."

I began. I told her insects fly through rain, missing every drop, never getting wet. I told her no one in America owned a tape recorder before Bing Crosby did. I told her the shape of the moon is like a banana—you see it looking full, you're seeing it end-on.

The camera made me self-conscious and I stopped. It was trained on us from a ceiling mount—the kind of camera banks use to photograph robbers. It played our image to the nurses down the hall in Intensive Care. "Go on, girl," she said. "you get used to it."

I had my audience. I went on.

This is obviously first person of the involved kind. The narrator (a character, made up) is telling a story that directly involves her. (This is from the excellent story "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried" by Amy Hempel.) We know, in a story of this kind, to be looking at the narrator as key to what the story's about; it's "her" story, because all the events and emotions are filtered through her point of view. We're interested, ultimately, in the impact of the events of the story on the narrator, because that's where our attention is being focused. It's pretty unambiguous in that regard.

Now, a famous example of a detached first person narrator:

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

"Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me, "just remember

that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natives to me, and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently, I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.

And, after boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit. Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on. When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart.

Probably every American, at one point or another, has read *The Great Gatsby*—most of us for the first time in high school. We tend to remember it as the story of the doomed love affair between the mysterious, flamboyant Gatsby and the beautiful (and married) Daisy, and we sometimes forget it's told by a first person narrator, Nick, a distant cousin of Daisy who is a transplant from the Midwest and who witnesses the entire riotous affair. It's a terrific example of a *detached* first person narrator.

### Whose Story Is It?

Now, here's the important part. Whose story is it when we have a first person narrator? This is an important question, and one that invariably comes up when we sit down to analyze a story, novel, or nonfiction piece.

What do we mean when we ask that question? We're asking, who are we primarily focused upon, who does the piece end up being *about*? The answer with an involved first person narrator is easy: the narrator. It's about him or her. But what about first person observer, you might ask? And the answer one comes back to, almost inevitably, even with the most

detached first person narrators, is that the piece is ultimately about that narrator. Nick in *The Great Gatsby* is detached. In this opening section, as we saw, he goes to great lengths to talk about his propensity to be told the stories of "wild, unknown men" and boasts about his tolerance for being an observer of all sorts of humanity. You might say he pats himself on the back a little bit about his abilities as a detached, nonjudgmental listener (even as he makes judgments all over the place—even to the point of saying that some of his confidants have "abnormal minds"). A little later in the book, he says, "Everyone suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known."

As it turns out, the book really revolves around Nick. Despite all his disclaimers that he's just an innocent bystander, it's about Nick's involvement in the events of the summer, and his propensity to fool himself by calling himself honest. By the end of the book, it's the impact of the events on Nick that matters—on his moral fiber, on his ability to think honestly about himself.

This is one of the conventions of modern creative writing, and, to be honest, I cannot think of many exceptions. When you have a first person narrator, when you have a character telling a story—no matter how detached or impartial he or she seems to be—it's *that* person's story. Somehow, it's the effect on that narrator that is the important thing—even when the events being observed are as dramatic as in *The Great Gatsby*—that, ultimately, is the point of the story or nonfiction piece, even if it's a subtle point. Otherwise, why not tell the story straight? Why filter it, unless there's a point to having it filtered? Why not just tell it from a straight third person point of view?

Here's another first person narrator from Richard Shelton's short story "The Stones," in which the narrator starts out very present but ends up dropping out of the story altogether:

I love to go out on summer nights and watch the stones grow. I think they grow better here in the desert, where it is warm and dry, than almost anywhere else. Or perhaps it is only that the young ones are more active here.

Young stones tend to move about more than their elders consider good for them. Most young stones have a secret desire which their parents had before them but have forgotten ages ago. And because this desire involves water, it is never mentioned. The older stones disapprove of water and say, "Water is a gadfly who never stays in one place long enough to learn anything." But the young stones try to work themselves into a position, slowly and without their elders noticing it, in which a sizable stream of water during a summer

storm might catch them broadside and unknowing, so to speak, and push them along over a slope or down an arroyo. In spite of the danger this involves, they want to travel and see something of the world and settle in a new place, far from home, where they can raise their own dynasties away from the domination of their parents.

And although family ties are very strong among stones, many of the more daring ones have succeeded, and they carry scars to prove to their children that they once went on a journey, helter-skelter and high water, and traveled perhaps fifteen feet, an incredible distance. As they grow older, they cease to brag about such clandestine adventures.

It is true that old stones get to be very conservative. They consider all movement either dangerous or downright sinful. They remain comfortable where they are and often get fat. Fatness, as a matter of fact, is a mark of distinction.

And on summer nights, after the young stones are asleep, the elders turn to a serious and frightening subject—the moon, which is always spoken of in whispers. "See how it glows and whips across the sky, always changing its shape," one says. And another says, "Feel how it pulls at us, urging us to follow." And a third whispers, "It is a stone gone mad."

Why make it first person? Why not tell this straight third person ("Stones grow better in the desert, where it is warm and dry, than almost anywhere else")? Because this story is, ultimately, about the narrator's experience of the stones, about his/her (we never know the sex of the narrator) own thoughts and fantasies about what stones believe and feel and act like. The story has meaning because of what is *projected* onto the stones by the first person narrator.

And then there's this famous story of Alice Munro's, "Meneseteung," which has such a disguised first person narrator that we almost forget she is there:

In 1879 Almeda Roth was still living in the house at the corner of Pearl and Dufferin streets, the house her father had built for his family. The house is there today; the manager of the liquor store lives in it. It's covered with aluminum siding; a closed-in porch has replaced the veranda. The woodshed, the fence, the gates, the privy, the barn—all these are gone. A photograph taken in the 1880s shows them all in place. The house and fence look a little shabby, in need of paint, but perhaps that is just because of the bleached-out look of the brownish photograph. The lace-curtained windows look like white eyes. No big shade tree is in sight, and, in fact, the tall elms that overshadowed the town until the 1950s, as well as the maples that shade it now, are skinny young trees with rough fences around them to protect them from the cows. Without the shelter of those trees, there is a great exposure—backyards, clotheslines, woodpiles, patchy sheds and barns and privies—all

bare, exposed, provisional-looking. . . . The town has taken root, it's not going to vanish, yet it still has some of the look of an encampment. And, like an encampment, it's busy all the time—full of people, who, within the town, usually walk wherever they're going; full of animals, which leave horse burns, cow pats, dog turds that ladies have to hitch up their skirts for; full of the noise of building and of drivers shouting at their horses and of the trains that come in several times a day.

I read about that life in the *Vidette*.

This is a story about (again) an unnamed first person narrator, going through old newspaper archives and other historical artifacts, ferreting out the details of a dead poet's life. We see the narrator taking the bare-bones facts and filling in the blanks out of her imagination. She's fantasizing, in effect, what it must have been like to be Alameda Roth, to have lived in that town and in that place with those kinds of personages. Indeed, ultimately, it is about *her* (the narrator's) fantasies—and also about the stories we tell ourselves—as much as or more than it is about the dead poet Alameda Roth. Here's another interesting variation on first person narration: *plural* first person, i.e., there's a group of people telling the story. "We did this, we saw that." This is relatively rare, but here are two examples:

Whenever we saw Mrs. Lisbon we looked in vain for some sign of the beauty that must have once been hers. But the plump arms, the brutally cut steel-wool hair, and the librarian's glasses foiled us every time. We saw her only rarely, in the morning, fully dressed though the sun hadn't come up, stepping out to snatch up the dewy milk cartons, or on Sundays when the family drove in their paneled station wagon.

Notice the use of "we" in this excerpt from the novel *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides. And here's another plural first person narrator, from William Faulkner's "A Rose For Emily":

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years.

As always, our eye is on the first person narrator when figuring out what the story is about. Just because in these examples it's a *group* of people (in the first case, a group of young men who have worshipped a family of girls from afar; in the second, an entire town that has been interested in this eccentric old woman for decades) doesn't alter that basic rule: it's the narrators' story, ultimately. Think about it: otherwise, why filter the

story through that consciousness? Why not just tell it straight, without interjecting a character (or, in this case, characters) between the reader and the story? Because, ultimately, the story is about the narrators. This is one of the strongest conventions (not rules; there are no rules) of fiction writing: when in doubt, in a first person story, look at the narrator for clues as to what the story is really about.

### Second Person

Second person is one of the more complex points of view, and it is rarely used. In second person, the narrator speaks via a "you," who can be one of four types of characters:

1. The "you" is actually an *inverted* form of first person. That is, it is a first person narrator referring to himself or herself as "you"—usually because they are dissociating themselves from distasteful thoughts, actions, or memories. For example, "You really don't like yourself very much when you act like this."
2. The "you" refers to a specific character, so that the piece, in effect, becomes a monologue addressed to a person or persons. For example, "David, you didn't realize how much damage you could cause, you obviously weren't thinking when you stole that letter from my desk."
3. The "you" is a direct address to the reader: "And you people, you who are reading this book. . . ."
4. The "you" can also, occasionally, be an attempt to turn the reader into an active character in the story. "You walk into the room. You are aware that something is wrong. You can't figure out what it is."

Let's look at each of these kinds of second person narrator in turn.

The first use of second person, as inverted first person, is, in fact, the most common.

You're not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head. The club is either Heartbreak or the Lizard Lounge. All might come clear if you could just slip into the bathroom and do a little more Bolivian Marching Powder. Then again, it might not. A small voice inside you insists that this epidemic lack of clarity is a result of too much of that already. The night has already turned on that imperceptible pivot where 2 a.m. changes to 6 a.m. You know this moment has come and gone, but you are not yet willing to concede that you have crossed the line beyond which all is gratuitous damage and the palsy of unraveled nerve endings.

This famous example of second person, from the novel *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney, has a narrator who is so distanced from himself, so psychologically removed from his actions (and wanting so much not to take responsibility for them) that he refers to himself as "you."

And here's another example of this kind of second person narrator, from Lorrie Moore's "How to Be a Writer":

First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/ astronaut. A movie star/missionary. A movie star/ kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age—say fourteen. Early, critical disillusionment is necessary so that at fifteen you can write long haiku sequences about thwarted desire. It is a pond, a cherry blossom, a wind brushing against sparrow wing leaving for mountain. Count the syllables. Show it to your mom. She is tough and practical. She has a son in Vietnam and a husband who may be having an affair. She believes in wearing brown because it hides spots. She'll look briefly at your writing, then back up at you with a face blank as a donut. She'll say: "How about emptying the dishwasher?" Look away. Shove the forks in the fork drawer. Accidentally break one of the freebie gas station glasses. This is the required pain and suffering. This is only for starters.

You see that these are both really characters referring to themselves as "you." It's really a variation of first person, in that a character is telling us a story, it's just that he or she prefers to distance himself or herself. Most commonly, it's a way of showing a character that is alienated from himself or herself, and has trouble identifying with the thoughts and actions he or she is engaged in. This is certainly the case with these two examples. In *Bright Lights, Big City*, the first example, the main character is so far removed from himself that he can't admit to himself the destructive behavior he's engaged in. In "How to Be a Writer," a young woman distances herself from reality (in a humorous way) in order not to face up to certain truths about her life.

The second use of second person, that of direct address to a specific character or character, is used in stories that are written as either oral monologues or letters. Below is an example:

You must be aware, first, that because Susan is my girlfriend pretty much everything she discusses with you she also discusses with me. She tells me what she said and what you said. We have been seeing each other for about six months now and I am pretty familiar with her story, or stories. Similarly, with your responses, at least the general pattern. I know, for example, that my habit of referring to you as "the sandman" annoys you but let me assure you that I mean nothing unpleasant by it. It is simply a nickname. The refer-

### Who's Telling This Story, Anyway?

ence is to the old rhyme: "Sea-sand does the sandman bring / Sleep to end the day / He dusts the children's eyes with sand / And steals their dreams away."

You notice that here, too, there's a first person narrator involved in this form of second person. Even if the first person narrator is hidden behind the "you"—even if the words "I" or "me" never appear—he or she is there, close by. In this case, in this very funny story, "The Sandman" by Donald Barthelme, the first person narrator is a man who is writing a letter to his girlfriend's shrink.

The third example of second person is also usually a first person narrator who has slipped temporarily into second person; nineteenth-century novelists, for example, were fond of occasionally slipping into second person to address the reader directly. But this is usually not sustained beyond a sentence or two. For example, Dear reader, you might be wondering what happened; yes, I married him!

The fourth type of second person is very rare in fiction, although it is seen quite frequently in nonfiction, particularly in feature journalism as published in daily papers and monthly magazines. There are cases when it is used in fiction (as we'll see below), but it's a very unusual use of this point of view.

You are always in danger in the forest, where no people are. Step between the portals of the great pines where the shaggy branches tangle about you, trapping the unwary traveler in nets as if the vegetation itself were in plot with the wolves who live there, as though the wicked trees go fishing on behalf of their friends—step between the gateposts of the forest with the great trepidation and infinite precautions, for if you stray from the path for one instant, the wolves will eat you. They are grey as famine, they are as unkind as plague.

[from "The Company of Wolves" by Angela Carter]

Do you see how the writer is making you, the reader, into a character in the story? You are being instructed to step through the forest, and warned, directly, of the dangers to you if you should do so.

Second person point of view is not widely used. It can work, but it's a little gimmicky, and runs the danger of getting tiresome except in shorter pieces. Still, you can experiment with it, and see what you think for yourself.

### Third Person

Third person point of view is the most complex point of view. In it, the narrator is a disembodied intelligence who does *not* appear directly in the

piece as a character. Rather, he or she exists above the story or nonfiction piece, observing it from outside.

Third person point of view is actually a continuum of possible narrators, based on how much the third person narrator *knows*. Let's look at this continuum of *knowledge* as it pertains to point of view:

*Limited Third Person*

Omniscient

Direct Observer

Godlike

Fly on Wall

At one end is unlimited knowledge, an omniscient narrator. He or she sees all, knows all: knows what characters are thinking, what they are feeling, what happened in the past, what will happen in the future. This is a god-like being with unlimited powers of observation and knowledge of the world of the story or novel.

Anything to the right of this is a *limited third person* narrator. That is, the knowledge of the narrator has been limited in some way. A limited third person narrator is not omniscient—she or he does not have unlimited powers. He or she might only be able to see what one character is thinking, or feeling; or may only know what characters are thinking, not what they are feeling; or may only have knowledge of the past, but no knowledge of the future. There are all sorts of ways that a narrator's knowledge can be "limited."

At the far right side of the spectrum is the most *limited* knowledge. Called a "direct observer," this kind of third-person narrator is like a fly on the wall—he or she can see and hear what is going on, but that's it: no powers to read into characters' hearts or minds, no power to interpret thoughts or explain emotions, no power to explain history or predict the future.

Exactly where on this spectrum your third person narrator resides—if you choose this point of view—is completely up to you. And as you'll see, this makes for a lot of potential choices.

Let's look at some examples of these different kinds of third person narrators.

Elizabeth listened in silence, but was not convinced; their behavior at the assembly had not been calculated to please in general; and with more quickness of observation and less pliancy of temper than her sister, and with a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself, she was very little disposed to approve them.

They were in fact very fine ladies, not deficient in good humour when they were pleased, not in the power of being agreeable when they chose it, but proud and conceited. They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank, and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others. They were of a respectable family in the north of England; a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade.

Mr. Bingley inherited property to the amount of nearly a hundred thousand pounds from his father, who had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it. Mr. Bingley intended it likewise, and sometimes made choice of his county; but as he was now provided with a good house and the liberty of a manor, it was doubtful to many of those who best knew the easiness of his temper, whether he might not spend the remainder of his days at Netherfield, and leave the next generation to purchase.

His sisters were very anxious for his having an estate of his own; but though he was now established only as a tenant, Miss Bingley was by no means unwilling to preside at his table—nor was Mrs. Hurst, who had married a man of more fashion than fortune, less disposed to consider his house as her home when it suited her.

[from *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen]

*Pride and Prejudice* is a wonderful example of omniscient third person point of view: we are put into the minds of various characters, and we are given judgments of them. Beautiful judgments. That is, notice that your omniscient narrator doesn't need to be unbiased and neutral. He or she can be a judgmental or cynical narrator, can have opinions and express them freely, even to the point of liking or disdaining individual characters, or the actions they engage in.

At the other end of the spectrum we have what is conventionally called the "direct observer." He or she has very, very limited access: this kind of narrator usually is able to see and hear, but is given no other access to the characters. No thoughts, let alone an interpretation of those thoughts, let alone judgment of those thoughts. Just what the proverbial fly on the wall could see and hear. Let's look again at "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway:

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across

the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.

It is not common to have narrators this limited. Most narrators, especially in short fiction, are closer to the middle of the continuum.

But here is another case where many of the books about writing don't serve you very well: as we explained above, there are all sorts of variations of limited third person narrators. Yet in most writing books, limited third person is said to be the case when the knowledge of the narrator is limited to the heart and mind of a single character. But there are many ways that a narrator's knowledge can be less than that possessed by some God-knows-all-sees-all omniscient narrator. Here are just a few:

1. It can be limited to just the thoughts of a character, but not the emotions.
2. It can see beyond those thoughts and actually perceive the emotions.
3. It can peek into the subconscious—things that the character(s) are not aware of—but not have any powers to relate past events.

Or any variation thereof. All limited third person means is that you have chosen to limit the knowledge of your narrator in some way.

Let's look at some examples of limited third person narrators.

Now is the time for drastic action. He contemplates taking Wayne's hand, then checks himself. He has never done anything in her presence to indicate that the sexuality he confessed to five years ago was a reality and not an invention. Even now, he and Wayne might as well be friends, college roommates. Then Wayne, his savior, with a single, sweeping gesture, reaches for his hand, and clasps it, in the midst of a joke he is telling about Saudi Arabians. By the time he is laughing, their hands are joined. Neil's throat contracts; his heart begins to beat violently. He notices his mother's eyes flicker, glance downward; she never breaks the stride of her sentence. The dinner goes on and every taboo nurtured since childhood falls quietly away.

[from "Territory" by David Leavitt]

Here we're limited to the heart and mind of a single character—the other characters are opaque to us, we cannot see through the surface of their external behavior. This is the most common type of limited third person narrator.

Here's another example of a third person limited narrator—but this one is interesting because the character that the narrator is limited to observing changes as the story progresses; the narrative insight into thoughts

and emotions is passed from one character to another, like a ball. See how it starts out third person omniscient, then turns into third person limited for one character after another:

None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops, which were of foaming white, and all of the men knew the colors of the sea. The horizon narrowed and widened and dipped and rose, and at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks.

Many a man ought to have a bath-tub larger than the boat which here rode upon the sea. These waves were most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall, and each froth-top was a problem in small boat navigation.

The cook squatted in the bottom and looked with both eyes at the six inches of gunwale which separated him from the ocean. His sleeves were rolled over his fat forearms, and the two flaps of his unbuttoned vest dangled as he bent to ball out the boat. Often he said: "Gawd! That was a narrow clip." As he remarked it he invariably gazed eastward over the broken sea.

The oiler, steering with one of the two oars in the board, sometimes raised himself suddenly to keep clear of water that swirled in over the stern. It was a thin little boat and it seemed often ready to snap.

The correspondent, pulling at the other oar, watched the waves and wondered why he was there.

The injured captain, lying in the bow, was at this time buried in that profound dejection and indifference which comes, temporarily, at least, to even the bravest and most enduring when, willy nilly, the firm fails, the army loses, the ship goes down.

[from "The Open Boat" by Stephen Crane]

You can see how the narrator "travels" from one character to another, giving us information about each one in equal parts. There's another interesting limitation that the author has chosen: the third person narrator cannot give us any information about the world of the story other than what is happening on the boat. This is not a narrator who can tell us, "Not far away, on shore, a group of men was preparing a rescue mission." No, this narrator is physically rooted in a particular place and time, and so our knowledge of the world of the story is limited in that way.

Here's another way to think about this whole idea of knowledge as it pertains to third person narrators: think of it as standing in a house that borders a big open field. With an omniscient narrator, you are standing in front of a large clear window that allows you to view a scene that stretches for miles in every direction. With limited third person narrator, you have

a smaller window that gives you access to a smaller view of the world of the story. The more limited your narrator, the smaller your window, and the less you can see (and hear, feel, etc.). It's as simple as that.

As we said above, the most common way of limiting a third person narrator is by limiting his or her powers to seeing the inner life (thoughts, feelings) of just one character. But this is not the only way. A third person narrator could be limited in that he or she could read the thoughts of all the characters, but not their underlying emotions—or could state their emotions, but not analyze *why* they were feeling the way they did. Any combination of knowledge is possible: there are as many possible third person narrators out there as there are possible first person narrators.

### A Word about Attitude

It's also important to understand that a third person narrator doesn't have to be a bland, middle-of-the-road, so-called "objective" reporter of what goes on. He or she can have *attitude*. Judgment. Comment editorially on what is happening, approve or disapprove of what characters are like. "She was a rubbishy little creature and she knew it," is a wonderful line of third person narrative from E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. Likewise, "he, his hands behind him, appeared pinned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him," is a very funny observation of a character by one of Flannery O'Connor's third person narrators. Give your third person narrators *personality*. A Texas accent. Opinions about the world, about politics. Whatever you choose is fair game.

### Distance and Point of View

Now, it's important to understand that it's not just knowledge that affects your point of view. *Distance* is also a factor. In other words, a narrator, in addition to knowing more or less about the world of the story or novel or nonfiction piece, can be at greater or lesser distance from it.

A very popular point of view these days, especially in short stories, is close third person point of view. (It's also referred to as *third person intimate*.) This is when the narrator is so close to the action, to what's happening, that the narration can be indistinguishable from first person in many ways.

Let's first look at some examples of close third person narrators. Note that the relative closeness of a narrator is independent of the *knowledge* that narrator possesses. You can have a very limited third person narrator who is far from the story or novel, or you can have an omniscient narrator

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who is very close to the action of the story. Let's examine what we have below in terms of both knowledge and distance:

Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or to stand still and laugh at—nothing—at nothing, simply.

What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss!—as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe . . . ?

Oh, is there no way you can express it without being "drunk and disorderly"? How idiotic civilization is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?

[from "Bliss" by Katherine Mansfield]

This story has a close limited third person narrator—a narrator who happens to be limited (in knowledge) to the thoughts and feelings of just one character, but who is very, very close to that character—so close as to be practically identical to first person at certain times in the text. The last paragraph, for example, has no "she thought" attached to the text, yet these are clearly the thoughts of the character, that shows how deeply embedded we are in this character's mind.

Here's another example:

The dream was set in Shady Hill—she dreamed that she woke in her own bed. Donald was always gone. She was at once aware of the fact that the bomb had exploded. Mattress stuffing and a trickle of brown water were coming through a big hole in the ceiling. The sky was gray—lightless—although there were in the west a few threads of red light, like those charming vapor trails we see in the air after the sun has set. She didn't know if these were vapor trails or some part of that force that would destroy the narrow in her bones. The gray air seemed final. The sky would never shine with light again. From her window she could see a river, and now, as she watched, boats began to come upstream. At first, there were only two or three. Then there were tens, and then there were hundreds. There were outboards, excursion boats, yachts, schooners with auxiliary motors; there were even rowboats. The number of boats grew until the water was covered with them, and the noise of motors rose to a loud din. The jockeying for position in this retreat up the river became aggressive, then savage.

[from "The Wrysons" by John Cheever]



This happens to be an omniscient narrator (you can't tell from this section, but the narrator can see into the hearts and minds of all the characters in the story) who is also very, very close: so close that we melt into the reality of Irene Wryson's dream just as if it was reality.

Now, what about this example?

Christina Goering's father was an American industrialist of German parentage and her mother was a New York lady of a very distinguished family. Christina spent the first half of her life in a very beautiful house (not more than an hour from the city) which she had inherited from her mother. It was in this house that she had been brought up as a child with her sister Sophie.

As a child Christina had been very much disliked by other children. She had never suffered particularly because of this, having led, even at a very early age, an active inner life that curtailed her observation of whatever went on around her, to such a degree that she never picked up the mannerisms then in vogue, and at the age of ten was called old-fashioned by other little girls. Even then she wore the look of certain fanatics who think of themselves as leaders without once having gained the respect of a single human being.

Christina was troubled horribly by ideas which never would have occurred to her companions, and at the same time took for granted a position in society which any other child would have found unbearable. Every now and then a schoolmate would take pity on her and try to spend some time with her, but far from being grateful for this, Christina would instead try her best to convert her new friend to the cult of whatever she believed in at the time. [. . .] She was in the habit of going through many mental struggles—generally of a religious nature—and she preferred to be with other people and organize games. These games, as a rule, were very moral, and often involved god. However, no one else enjoyed them and she was obliged to spend a great part of the day alone.

[from *Two Serious Ladies* by Jane Bowles]

This is a very distant third person omniscient: the narrator sees all, knows all, and is able to make value judgments about the characters. But the tone is very distant, despite this omniscience.

To see an example of a very distant, very limited third person narrator, go to p. 356 and look at "Hills Like White Elephants." In that, not only are we working with the most limited third person narrator possible, the narrator is also very far removed from the characters.

Finally, how about this one?

Robbie wanted to say, You're talking about something you've read, now. They'll be too ashamed to have Bernadette or the baby around; this is Que-

bec. But he was too tired to offer a new field of discussion. He was as tired as if they had been talking for hours. He said, "I suppose this Vermont place, this school or whatever it is, has got to be paid for."

"It certainly does." Nora looked tight and cold at this hint of stinginess. It was unnatural for her to be in the wrong, still less to remain on the defensive. She had taken the position now that even if Robbie were not responsible, he had somehow upset Bernadette. In some manner, he could be found guilty and made to admit it. She would find out about it later. Meanwhile, she felt morally bound to make him pay.

"Will it be expensive, do you think?"

She gave him a look, but he said nothing more.

[from "Bernadette" by Mavis Gallant]

You see how we get the thoughts and feelings of Robbie, and then we move to Nora and get her perspective. Our omniscient third person narrator has the ability to move about at will and give us information about what's going on in the hearts and minds of both characters. But we don't actually get very close to the characters. We're being kept at a distance, we're not as intimately involved as in some of the other examples.

### Shifts in Narrative Distance

The previous section might imply that you have to pick a distance and stick to it throughout a story. Nothing could be further from the truth. In good fiction, shifts in distance are common. They must also be carefully controlled. Often, at the beginning of a story, we find the narrative distance fairly large. Often, distance will decrease—sometimes collapsing to the point of nonexistence—in order to allow the author to more thoroughly investigate the heart or mind of a character. A skillful writer will know how to pan in and pan out, just like a skilled camera operator on a movie set.

It was too hot. She went inside the house and turned on the radio to drown out the quiet. She sat on the edge of her bed, barefoot, and listened for an hour and a half to a program called XVZ Sunday Jamboree, record after record of hard, fast, shrieking songs she sang along with, interspersed by exclamations from "Bobby King": "An' look here you girls at Napoleon's—Son and Charley want you to pay real close attention to this song coming up!"

And Connie paid close attention herself, bathed in a glow of slow-pulsed joy that seemed to rise mysteriously out of the music itself and lay languidly about the airless little room, breathed in and breathed out with each gentle rise and fall of her chest.

In this scene, from "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" by Joyce Carol Oates (pp. 72–86) you can see how the distance starts out very close ("It was too hot" puts us directly in Connie's mind) but then the distance lengthens, and we pull back a bit to get information about her going inside the house and listening to the radio. Then the distance closes in again, putting us right in the heart of Connie, what she's thinking and feeling. This is one of the advantages of third person intimate: you can have all the advantages of first person (being intimate) and still pull back and get more of a perspective on the larger world.

But it's important to note that sudden shifts in distance can be disconcerting for your readers. If you've been referring to the character as "Doris" and she suddenly becomes "Mrs. Mannerling," that is an obvious sudden shift that will jolt the reader. John Gardner in his book *The Art of Fiction* calls this sudden change a problem in "psychic distance":

Careless shifts in psychic distance can also be distracting. By psychic distance we mean the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story. Compare the following examples, the first meant to establish great psychic distance, the next meant to establish slightly less, and so on until in the last example, psychic distance, theoretically at least, is nil.

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul . . .

The point isn't that narrative distance needs to stay constant, but that shifts in distance need to be carefully managed so as not to jolt the reader out of what Gardner calls "the dream of the story."

### Choosing a Point of View for Your Creative Work

Now: what form of point of view do you choose? You might hope there is some objective, quantifiable way of choosing a point of view, but unfortunately it doesn't work that way. Often, the choice of a point of view is a completely intuitive one; the writer may not know why he or she chose first person, or third person limited, only feels that the choice is the right one for a particular story.

Still, there are some conventionally accepted pros and cons of each kind of point of view. Let's look at some of them, and see how they hold up under analysis.

### Who's Telling This Story, Anyway?

**A FIRST PERSON POINT OF VIEW:** The conventionally stated advantage of this is that it provides immediacy; involves the reader, pulls him or her in, is helpful in getting sympathy for the main character (who happens to be the narrator).

**The disadvantage:** very limited scope. You only have the eyes, ears, and brains of that character. Everything is filtered through him or her.

**<sup>5</sup> Another disadvantage:** Is it possible to be too close to a story? We're going to be talking about unreliable narrators later, in Chapter 7, but I want to point out that, especially when you are writing about a very emotionally charged situation, putting it in first person can work against you. You can risk losing your reader. Victim stories fall into this category. Sometimes, if you are trying to garner sympathy or understanding for a character, the last thing you want to do is put it in first person. The narrator can be seen as self-serving, pitying, or whining. You risk it becoming maudlin. Nothing will eliminate sympathy faster than having to listen to a character whine—even if he or she really has been victimized in some horrifying way.

**With an OMNISCIENT NARRATOR,** the advantages of course are that you have the "big window" onto the terrain of the story or nonfiction piece: your readers can see all, do all, go back to the beginning of time, take time out to give a lecture on nautical knots (*The Shipping News*) or the correct way to skin a whale (*Moby-Dick*) or whatever else you choose.

The conventionally accepted disadvantage of an omniscient narrator: it can be too much, can contain too much information, can distract the reader from what really matters in the story or nonfiction piece.

**LIMITED THIRD:** A very popular choice, especially in the last few decades. The conventional wisdom is that it focuses the reader's attention on what matters, narrows down the scope of the story to make it manageable. And, of course, using shifts in narrative distance, you can easily get into the heart and mind of a character, just like first person, yet you have the advantage of pulling back, panning the camera, if you will, to show us more of the world of the story or nonfiction piece.

Again, keep in mind that the amount of knowledge you give the narrator (either unlimited, as in omniscient, or very limited, as in direct observer or first person) is separate from the distance that narrator can invoke in the tone. Just because very close third person narrators are generally linked to those that are limited in knowledge doesn't mean that you have to follow that route. You can choose a limited third person narrator who is distant from the events of the story, or an omniscient narrator who is extremely close to the events. It's up to you.

Interestingly enough, an off-heard piece of advice in creative writing workshops is "change the point of view," as if changing the point of view is a panacea for all sorts of problems.

Sometimes when this advice is given (to change the point of view from first person to third person, say, or vice versa), it has to do with the narrative *distance*: readers feel uncomfortable with the distance that the narrator has from the events in the story (either too close or too distant), and think that changing the point of view will fix that. But as we've seen, distance is independent of knowledge. Even first person point of view can be distant if the character is alienated from himself or herself. Here's an example to prove this point:

I sat down in the waiting area across the hall. In forty-five minutes the nurse came out and said to me, "Michelle is comfortable now."

"Is she dead?"

"Of course not."

"I kind of wish she was."

She looked frightened. "I don't know what you mean."

I went in through the curtain to see Michelle. She smelled bad.

"How are you feeling?"

"I feel fine."

"What did they stick up you?"

"What?" she said. "What?"

The nurse said, "Hey. Out of here. Out of here."

She went through the curtain and came back with a big black guy wearing a starched white shirt and one of those phony gold badges. "I don't think this man needs to be in the building," she said to him, and then she said to me, "Would you like to wait outside, sir?"

"Yeah yeah yeah," I said, and all the way down the big stairs and out the front I said "Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah."

It was raining outdoors and most of the Catholics were squashed up under an awning next door with their signs held overhead against the weather. They splashed holy water on my cheek and on the back of my neck, and I didn't feel a thing. Not for many years.

In this passage, from "Dirty Wedding" by Denis Johnson, we have a first person narrator who is so distanced from his own thoughts and emotions that he's put up a shield against allowing any feelings to seep into his consciousness. We're kept at a distance because he keeps himself at a distance. Likewise, as we saw above, you can have omniscient third person narrators with a collapsed distance: we're embedded in the hearts and minds of the characters, as closely as if the point of view were first person.

### Point of View and Creative Nonfiction

All these various points of view and conventions go for creative nonfiction writing as well as fictional prose. You can have first, second, or third

person narrators; and your third person narrators can vary along the two spectrums of knowledge and distance.

Here's an example of a first person nonfiction piece:

I am a man who tilts. When I am sitting, my head slants to the right; when walking, the upper part of my body reaches forward to catch a sneak preview of the street. One way or another, I seem to be off-center—or "uncentered," to use the jargon of holism. My lousy posture, a tendency to slump or put myself into lazy, contorted misalignments, undoubtedly contributes to lower back pain. For a while, I correct my bad habits, do morning exercises, sit straight, breathe deeply, but always an inner demon that insists on approaching the world askew resists perpendicularity.

"Portrait of My Body" by Phillip Lopate is clearly about the narrator. Indeed, it could hardly be more personal. The narrator (who is synonymous with the author in this case) broods at length about the various aspects of his physical body, both positive and negative attributes. It's a wonderful example of first person *involved*.

Here's an example of a nonfiction piece with a first person *observer*:

There is only one known portrait of Robert Carter III. He posed for it sometime around 1749 in Thomas Hudson's London studio, and when one looks at the result two and a half centuries later, it is easy enough to imagine what the painter was thinking. Probably Carter was just another country gentleman—this one a little young, with that flat American accent making him seem more like a Scot or an Ulsterman—and Hudson knew that type, knew its vanities. And so Carter appears to us in a billowing gold suit and green cape, brown hair neatly tied back, smirking, a mask dangling from the tapered fingers of his left hand. He looks as if he is on his way to a ball, a lifetime of balls, except for a pair of huge dark eyes that suggest something else, something open and unfinished, something that resisted being posed as the young patriarch on the rise . . .

In this essay, "The Anti-Jefferson" by Andrew Levy, we have a nonfiction piece that is purportedly about a man who freed his slaves in apparent contradiction to his own fiduciary interests, but it is actually told by a first person narrator who imposes himself and his opinions and interests throughout the piece. (At another point, the author/narrator writes: "By the time I saw that portrait, on a postcard reproduction that the Virginia Historical Society no longer sells, it was the summer of 1998 and I was six months deep into the what and the why, the eyes, and the mask.")

Here's a nonfiction example of second person point of view:

I know you are tired. I am tired too. Will you walk along the edge of the desert with me? I would like to show you what lies before us.

All my life I have wanted to trick blood from a rock. I have dreamed about raising the devil and cutting him in half. I have thought too about never being afraid of anything at all. This is where you come to do those things.

I know what they tell you about the desert but you mustn't believe them. This is no deathbed. Dig down, the earth is moist. Boulders have turned to dust here, the dust feels like graphite. You can hear a man breathe at a distance of twenty yards. You can see out there to the edge where the desert stops and the mountains begin. You think it is perhaps ten miles. It is more than a hundred. Just before the sun sets all the colors will change. Green will turn to blue, red to gold.

[from *Desert Notes* by Barry Lopez]

Finally, here's an example of a third person narrator in a creative non-fiction piece: "It was a time of hope, that was the thing," an excerpt from *The White Blackbird*, a life of the painter Margaret Sargent by her granddaughter, Honor Moore:

"There were five, six, or seven remotely happy years," Margie said of her parents' marriage. "It was a terribly abnormal, strained, difficult, tenuous relationship," said young Shaw. And Harry, his twin: "I never knew any happiness between them, ever."

At the end of her life, Marjorie did not believe Margaret had ever loved her, and when she described Isabel Pell, the woman whose visits to Prides supplanted hers, she used the word "wicked." Margaret would never have admitted she treated Marjorie callously, would have described herself as "devoted"—"incredulous" at her friend's indignation. In 1926, leaving out the tension in their friendship, she did a watercolor called *The Quilt*—Marjorie asleep, beautiful and dreamily rendered in pale washes; both hands resting carefully on her chest, the quilt covering her a splash of vividly painted squares, an opening path.

### Common Point of View Problems

One of the most common ways to break with point of view conventions is to be telling the story from one point of view, and then suddenly shift to another. For instance, if we're following the action of a story from the point of view of one of the characters and suddenly we get what one of the other characters is thinking or feeling, that can be very disconcerting. In general, once you establish your point of view, you're going to want to stick with it. The point isn't to follow some esoteric rule, but to avoid jolting your readers out of the story. When such a jolt occurs, some would argue that there is a point of view error that needs to be fixed. But while this might be the case some, or even most, of the time, you can read sto-

ries—good stories—in which the point of view shifts, say from one kind of limited third person to another kind of limited third person. In such cases, we assume that the author felt it important enough to risk jolting the reader to get some additional information into the text. Does it work? Does the author get away with it? Only the reader can say.

Here's an example of a shift in point of view that might be considered an error:

Claire sat on the bus, wringing her hands and trying not to cry. This was going to be her first time away from home, and she was already homesick. Already the lure of camp from reading those brochures was fading. She moved slightly in her seat to allow room for a young man about her own age who was carrying what looked to be a heavy satchel. He looked at Claire and felt pity, so he took out of his pocket a piece of chocolate and offered it to her.

Do you see how we suddenly shift from a third person point of view limited to Claire to one that includes insight into what the young man is feeling? Whether this is an error or something that adds to the story is only something that readers of the complete story can decide. The point of view police will always decry this sort of shift, but the fact remains that many fine stories embody shifts of this kind. It's entirely about what you can get away with.

Of course, if we are suddenly getting information, or access to a conversation, or reading a letter or overhearing a phone call that your narrator has no way of knowing about, that's a pretty obvious error. You must either cut it, or figure out some way of getting that information filtered through your narrator. For example, she can overhear a telephone conversation, or he can be told about an argument, or she can read someone else's letter.

More subtle errors: all of a sudden, the narrator will make a value judgment, or a leap of logic, that is markedly different from what he or she was capable of before, *for no plausible reason*. CAUTION: I'm not saying a character has to be consistent, that's something else altogether. Your character can act in different ways at different times for myriad reasons. Your character can grow. Change. Regress. But if there's an implausible leap of knowledge or insight or wisdom by a previously limited point of view character, that could be a point of view problem.

Keep in mind that this is just an introduction to point of view, which is a marvelously complex topic. We'll continue on in Chapter 7 when we talk about point of view and *reliability*.