

For Marc, on POV

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 01 Aug 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4141>

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Aug 2003, 17:41

I believe that most writers who write about writing -- I mean people who are actually good at writing fiction and choose to write about the process -- agree that first person PoV is not only the hardest of the three "basic" points- of-view to handle, it's generally the weakest. In the hands of someone who can create a really individual voice, it's incredibly powerful. Otherwise, it tends to clunk.

First-person seems like it should be easy, because it seems like it will create in a more explicit way the kind of limitation a writer chooses by writing in the third person limited point of view: we only know what the character knows or perceives. But in fact, it complicates that issue. When you put things into the first person, you encounter some issues that the third-person writer can, if not ignore, at least finesse.

When is the story being told? And to whom? And why? Third-person narrative allows you to kind of ignore these questions (though Wolfe, to his credit, prefers to confront them head-on even in his third-person narratives), but the writer of the explicit first-person narrative must answer them, at least to the extent that she knows the answer -- she doesn't have to tell the reader. The answers to these questions conditions a whole variety of other things -- such as, for example, how much the narrator explains about what; whether the narrator will drop in remarks about "What I did not know then was ..." or stick to the linear narration of what he saw and knew and when he saw and knew it.

What I mean is, if "I'm" telling "you" a story, I have to take into account what "you" know -- so I have to know who "you" are. Furthermore, when "I" talk about something that "I" didn't understand when it happened, but "I" do now, it's often better narrative for "me" to tell you what "I" now know, instead of leaving the incident apparently mysterious and unmotivated. (Severian has the slightly irritating habit of never explaining the events that happened to him as they happen.)

The third-person writer doesn't have this problem. Precisely because she is not taking on the person of the character, reporting after the fact, she can hide behind the pretense that her narrative voice is following along inside the character's consciousness. There's not only no need to explain things the character won't understand till later, there's no excuse to do so.

Compounding this, the first-person writer to write every sentence (except dialog in other characters' mouths) as if it were the viewpoint character's dialog. In other words, for every sentence of the narrative, she not only has to ask "is this an effective sentence?" but also "Does this sentence sound as if Harry would actually say it?" She has to remain with the character's diction, syntax, and other speech habits -- including any tendencies the character has to repetition or omission.

H'mm. Some examples and I'll shut up.

Roger Zelazny handled first person with remarkable facility as, at times*, did Heinlein. Both of them pulled off the trick of making you feel as if there were someone sitting in the room telling you the story -- you sort of forget the paper artifact.

* Those two words are very important.

However, both writers used it too much, and in so doing, they blew it. One Zelazny first-person narrator sounds pretty much like another. Ditto Heinlein, in spades, vulnerable and redoubled.

I'm not a big fan of the Amber books, but if you go through the original series, they're almost a textbook on how to handle the first person. Corwin's narrative is always Corwin's; and -- from occasional brief side remarks -- you gradually learn where and when he's telling his story, and why. This is only fully explained at the very end, but it's built up from the first book.

A living writer who has pulled the trick of very well: "Robin Hobb," whose "Assassin" trilogy has an extraordinarily attractive first-person voice. The character isn't necessarily attractive, but the voice is; there's never a hesitation, never a doubt that it's Fitz talking to us.

Le Guin's use of first person in THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS works as well as anything she writes; she's a master. I'd point out, though, that it works to a very great extent because of the context in which she embeds it -- all the third-person "documents" sandwiched between the chapters from Henry Eye's point of view. Without those, I honestly think she couldn't have made the story work; and it's worth noting that the presence of the first-person narrator actually provides the rationale for their inclusion in what is otherwise a continuous monologue, a nice bit of narrative jiu-jitsu.

Enough.

Alice K. Turner — 02 Aug 2003, 11:56 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

For Dan'I, writing for Marc,

A very nice summary of the pros and cons of first-person. For the record, women writers (and I use "writers" loosely, including students and wanna-bes) gravitate to it far more than men do, especially in present tense. The terrible draw-back is that it allows them endless introspection with no action. In my classes, especially genre classes, I used a cheap throwaway that nevertheless has some truth. I would say that none of the women writers in the class should use first-person-present for at least a year, where as none of the men should use weapons (thereby making them think their way out of situations rather than blasting).

-alga

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 04 Aug 2003, 00:19 · follows Alice K. Turner

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year, where as none of the men should use weapons (thereby making them think their way out of situations rather than blasting).

Interesting.

Of the four short stories I've published in my adult life, three have female protagonists who do not use any weapons - though two of the three face fairly violent male antagonists. One has a male protagonist, who kills someone with a sword.

I'm going to have to watch this.