quotations and excerpts to accompany

A Mind in Charge

Fictional Voice and a Writer's Confidence

S.F. North & East Bay Region SCBWI. November 12, 2022

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Voice employed well is the narrator manifested convincingly as a fully-formed mind in charge.

Neil Gaiman

"Most of us find our own voices only after we've sounded like a lot of other people."

Kurt Vonnegut

"The writing style which is most natural for you is bound to echo the speech you heard when a child. English was the novelist Joseph Conrad's third language, and much of what seems piquant in his use of English was no doubt colored by his first language, which was Polish. And lucky indeed is the writer who has grown up in Ireland, for the English spoken there is so amusing and musical. I myself grew up in Indianapolis, where common speech sounds like a band saw cutting galvanized tin, and employs a vocabulary as unornamental as a monkey wrench.... I myself find that I trust my own writing most, and others seem to trust it most, too, when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am. What alternatives do I have? The one most vehemently recommended by teachers has no doubt been pressed on you, as well: to write like cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago."

Billy Collins

What I don't like about the expression 'finding your voice' is that it's very mystifying .... It makes you feel — made me feel when I first heard it — that your voice is tied up with your authenticity, that your voice lies deep within you, at some root bottom of your soul, and that to find your voice … you have to gaze deeply into yourself.

The frustration and the anxiety is that maybe you won't find anything there. That you're on this terrible quest to nowhere. Let me reassure you that it's not that mysterious. Your voice has an external source. It is not lying within you. It is lying in other people's poetry. It is lying on the shelves of the library.

To find your voice, you need to read deeply. You need to look inside yourself, of course, for material, because poetry is something that honors subjectivity. It honors your interiority. It honors what's inside. But to find a way to express that, you have to look outside yourself. Read widely, read all the poetry you can get your hands on. And in your reading, you're searching … for poets that make you jealous. Professors of writing call this "literary influence." It's jealousy. And it's with every art, whether you play the saxophone, or do charcoal drawings.

You're looking to get influenced by people who make you furiously jealous. Read widely. Find poets that make you envious. And then copy them. Try to get like them.

… you read a great poem in a magazine somewhere, and you just can't stand the fact that you didn't write it. What do you do? … you can say, "Okay, I didn't write that poem, let me write a poem like that, that's sort of my version of that." And that's basically the way you grow…

After you find your voice, you realize there's really only one person to imitate, and that's yourself. You do it by combining different influences. I think the first part of it is you do slavish imitations, which are almost like travesties, you know. But gradually you come under the right influences, picking and choosing, and being selective, and then maybe your voice is the combination of 6 or 8 other voices that you have managed to blend in such a way that no one can recognize the sources.

You can take intimacy from Whitman, you can learn the dash from Emily Dickinson…you can pick a little bit from every writer and you combine them. This allows you to be authentic. That's one of the paradoxes of the writing life: that the way to originality is through imitation.

Billy Collins, speaking at a White House poetry workshop, transcribed from video by Austin Kleon. http://austinkleon.com/2015/12/10/how-to-find-your-voice/

Selections from 13 Ways of Looking at the Novel

By Jane Smiley, Anchor Books, New York: 2005.

A. The Voice of the Narrator (page 18)

Perhaps the most important thing about narrative is that it introduces the voice of the narrator. In every novel, some voice is telling the story. The narrator may or may not personalize his voice. He may try to let the story tell itself, as Kafka does in "The Metamorphosis"; he may come forward in what seems to be his own voice, and talk about the characters as if he and the reader were observing them together, as William Makepeace Thackeray does in *Vanity Fair*, or Kate Atkinson does in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. He may tell his own story in the first person, as Ishmael does in *Moby-Dick*. In every case, the reader must relate somehow to the voice of the narrator. In every case, the story is colored by the idiosyncrasies of the narrative voice, and how these idiosyncrasies strike the reader. Even the blandest, or most charming, or most skillful narrators have their detractors, because this aspect of the novel is irredeemably social, and draws constantly upon the reader's semiconscious likes and dislikes. Some narrators offend, some narrators appeal, but all narrators are present, the author but not the author, the protagonist but not the protagonist, an intermediary that the author and reader must deal with.

B: Readers form a relationship with the narrator (84-85)

Since the mere existence of the narrative voice implies a teller, a listener, and other beings who are told about and implies, therefore, relationships, every reader comes to every novel with plenty of experience that bears upon the reading of a novel. The qualities of the voice are automatically present—is it warm, friendly, knowledgeable, soothing, charming, intelligent, self-obsessed, droning, bombastic, mechanical, silly, beside the point, suspect? The reader perceives and reacts to these questions instantly, without thinking. If she likes the voice and feels comfortable with it, she may not actually think at any time, except to process the characters and events of the narrative, but such processing isn't exactly cogitating. A novel that is a comfortable fit with the reader, whose characters and narrative voice the reader is drawn to and enjoys … arouses a sense of friendliness.

…

Every novel, every narrator can't help offering the promise of a relationship.

C. On the evolution of the novel as an art form via "narrative voice" (129)

Cervantes [*Don Quixote*] showed not only that a long narrative of an innocent man traveling about the countryside had virtually unlimited plot possibilities, but also that a narrative voice talking about such adventures in a chatty way was both agreeable and reassuring. Madame de La Fayette [author of *The Princess of Clèves*, the first historical novel in French, considered to be a turning point in portraying the psychology of characters realistically] showed not only that all three participants in a love triangle could be equally sympathetic, but also that a narrator could efface herself sufficiently to seem to enter transparently into the thoughts of each of the participants, thereby raising the story above the level of gossipy speculation into the realm of philosophy. When Daniel Defoe [one of the first, if not the first, to use first-person narration in fictional prose] wrote in the different voices of Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders, H.F., Roxana, and the others, he showed that an author could do two things at one time – observe his protagonist and embody him – giving the reader a rich empathetic experience while maintaining control of the themes that the life of the protagonist represented.

Fiction Readings

I

Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did; nor could the valet of any new made lord be more delighted with the place he held in society. He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion.

Persuasion by Jane Austen. First published 1818. Barnes & Noble Books, New York: 1999. Page 6.

II

There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it. His parents called him Eustace Clarence and his masters called him Scrubb. I can't tell you how his friends spoke to him, for he had none. He didn't call his Father and Mother "Father" and "Mother," but Harold and Alberta. They were very up-to-date and advanced people. They were vegetarians, non-smokers and teetotalers and wore a special kind of underclothes. In their house there was very little furniture and very few clothes on beds and the windows were always open.

Eustace Clarence liked animals, especially beetles, if they were dead and pinned on a card. He liked books if they were books of information and had pictures of grain elevators or of fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools.

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader by C.S. Lewis. First published 1952. HarperCollins, New York: 1994. Page 1.

III

Red. Black. White. That's all I remember. It was a blur, like a dream sequence in the sort of movie that comes with subtitles.

Red. Blood, spreading like spilled ink.

Black. His hair and skin, and the tar beneath him. He was kind of sprawled out, and it seemed almost right for him to be down there, like he blended in.

White. I couldn't make sense of it at first. It wasn't clean white, like snow. More of a wispy, dirty white, like clouds on an average winter day. I found out later he had a carton of milk in his hand. It got a bullet right through it, started leaking like a drain and puddling up on the pavement.

The spilled milk seemed wronger than the blood, somehow. I keep thinking that.

How It Went Down by Kekla Magoon. Henry Holt and Company, New York: 2014. Page 3.

IV

So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment.

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. … They passed judgment.

…

"What she doin' coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? – Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?—Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?—What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal? –Where she left that young lad of a boy she went off here wid?—Thought she was going to marry?—Where he left her?—What he done wid all her money? –Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs—why she don't stay in her class?—"

…

The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level someday.

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston. First published 1937. Harper & Row, New York: 1990. Pages 1-2.

V

As I've been alluding to, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I've been performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style vacation destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski trip variety? The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision—to make distraction my vacation. Needless to say, I vacation in increments. In colors.

Still, it's possible that you might be asking, why does he even need a vacation? What does he need distraction *from*?

Which brings me to my point.

It's the leftover humans.

The survivors.

They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colors to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling among the jigsaw puzzle of realization, despair, and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs.

Which in turn brings me to the subject I am telling you about tonight, or today, or whatever the hour and color. It's the story of one of those perpetual survivors – an expert at being left behind.

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak. Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 2005. Pages 4-5.

Probing Questions about a Story's Narrative Consciousness (NC)

1. What is their visibility as a narrator to the reader? Opaque, transparent, translucent?
2. When are they visible to the reader? Are the timing and frequency used to good effect?
3. What abilities of the NC are exploited for narrative effect? What limitations of the NC are exploited for narrative effect?
4. What is the NC's personalty? Psychology? Diagnosis, please.
5. Do we detect clues re: age, gender, class, backstory, desires?
6. Are they intelligent? Sophisticated? Highly literate? The utter opposite? How is that shown? Does it help or hinder?
7. Are they insightful, or obtuse? How is it shown?
8. What is their prevailing theory of humanity? Is there a theory about individuals? About groups and societies?
9. What do they believe about what's moral, what's fair play, what "good" or "winning" means?
10. What past experiences have colored them greatly? Are there traumas? Secrets? A particular kind of upbringing?
11. What does the NC take for granted? Usually notice? Overlook?
12. How does the NC view the protagonist? If judgmentally, what is the verdict? Does it change? How about other characters?
13. What are the terms of the NC's engagement with the reader? How does the NC communicate with the reader (and not communicate)? Is anything deliberately obscured?
14. Do they have an arc? How are they changed by the process of orchestrating and presenting the story?