



Library podcast

POV (Part I): The Power of Perspective

[00:00:04] Welcome to the Seattle Writes podcast produced by the Seattle Public Library with support from the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Seattle Writes supports local writers through programs, workshops and write-ins and by providing space to work throughout the city. To see upcoming classes and additional information about Seattle Writes, visit our website at www.spl.org/SeattleWrites.

[00:00:38] I'm Andrea Gough, a librarian and co-ordinator of Seattle Writes. I'm here today with Peter Mountford, for the first in a two part series on Point of View: *Point of View, the Power of Perspective*. Peter Mountford is the author of the novels, *A Young Man's Guide to Late Capitalism*, winner of the 2012 Washington State Book Award in Fiction. And *The Dismal Science*, a New York Times editor's choice. His work has appeared in the Paris Review, Missouri Review, The Atlantic, The Sun, Granta and elsewhere. He's a popular writing coach, instructor in Seattle and is on faculty at Sierra Nevada College's MFA program. Peter has also taught with Seattle Writes, covering topics such as making a scene and experimenting with narrative time.

[00:01:22] Thank you so much for having me. I'm so glad to have a chance to talk about point of view to the SPL podcast listeners. It's one of those things I teach, point of view, often to students. And often they do find that they struggle at first to kind of understand how to implement a point of view strategy, or to use point of view with intention. And crucially, I also find that sometimes it seems like there's a lot of problems with a piece of writing. It will have pacing problems, character issues. The voice might seem slightly artificial. The emotional tone might be a little off, or information isn't getting through to the reader. And it seems like a ton of things that the writer needs to address. But actually, it's all just point of view. Like, if they just deal with the point of view, all of those other pieces will fall into line.

[00:02:21] And what ends up happening often is that people want to hide some information because that can be enticing to a reader. But they find that if they hide too much, it's sort of baffling to the reader instead. And again, that's really understanding who is talking and who is listening. It's sort of the interaction between the speaker and the listener, which is really about point of view. It's about who is telling the story and why. If I can back up before we start talking about taking apart the question of who tells the story. We should talk about the basics of point of view. This is the first of a two part series about point of view. And the first part is about the overview of the subject. The second episode is about something that I love, which is third person limited, which sounds awfully narrow for

a podcast episode. But let me tell you that that one is it's really everything when it comes to this subject. It's very complicated and very, very important for a contemporary writer. If you're going to write in third person, you really have to listen to that one. But first, it's important to understand the basics. We have, as you know, probably first person, second person and third person. First person is when the story is narrated by "I", or occasionally by a first person, plural narrator, "we", which we'll talk about next. But mostly it's in the first person is "I", narrator. And personality is key when you're using a first person narrator. Their voice has to come through and the sense of who they are.

[00:03:59] The challenge for a writer who chooses first person is that you're trapped in the mind of that character. There's very little you can do to sort of get away from that character's perception of the world. And that's why it ends up feeling like their voice is so important. Also, one of the side effects of being in first person is that scenes are harder to write. Dialogue is harder because it's sort of awkward for someone to be relating dialogue in the first person. You find that as you're verbally telling a story to somebody about, say, what happened over the weekend. You don't describe in great detail dialogue from your life. It's a sort of strange social thing. It's common in writing, but it's not so common for a first person narrator to describe lots and lots of dialogue. It's a slightly unnatural way of telling story. People instead use summarised scenes, often in first person, which is where instead of describing every line of dialogue and representing it in a way that you would see in a lot of novels, they sort of describe generally what's happening in a conversation or a scene. And it sounds a bit more conversational as a result. And the train of thought of the narrator is a really big part of the performance in first person, very often. And writers will often have a unreliable narrator as part of that narrator who is not necessarily to be trusted or has a fallible memory. And that's a big part of what you get out of that.

[00:05:44] Some authors in recent books have been doing an interesting form of first person, including Andrew Sean Greer's *Less*, a novel, which won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize. And his close friend, Daniel Handler, who writes under the pseudonym Lemony Snicket. All of the Lemony Snicket books and the book *Less* are narrated in the first person by a character who is sort of not inside the story very much. And part of the interesting mystery of the story is the reader is trying to figure out who the narrator is. It's in the case of Lemony Snicket, he's sort of tangential to the lives of the primary characters, Baudelairs. But he seems to have a tremendous amount of knowledge about the characters, even though he's not one of them. And it's very similar with *Less*, where the unnamed narrator seems to know an enormous amount about the main character. And and yet he and you sort of wonder why and how he came to know all of this about him. So it's in first person, but the first person narrator somewhat kind of absent from the story. And you see that also in the ZZ Packer's story, a short story, *Brownies* in which the main character is barely present in the story and finally emerges. It's not exactly a mystery who she is, but she's certainly not that present. It's also common in a lesser way in books like *The Great Gatsby* and *On the Road*, where the first person narrator is important to the story but is not the protagonist of the story.

[00:07:23] Mostly, though, when you read first person, you see the point of view character is the main character. And the reader is attached to that character and it's following them through the story. Second person is sort of like first person. It's a tricky form of writing that is often misunderstood. It's

not, for example, an epistolary story, and epistolary story is when you have a first person narrator who's writing letters or e-mails. And that is the content of the book or the story. What we are reading is communication between people. And so there is often a you in an epistolary story, but it is not second person. Second person is when the main character, the protagonist is you, which sounds pretty weird and it can be and is often thought of as kind of annoying. I find it entertaining, and I don't seem bothered by it as much as other people are, but a lot of people find it really troubling. It works well as a result in short stories, and is pretty rare in novels. Although there are certainly some examples in what it ends up looking like on the pages. Something like you killed this man and now you need to dispose of his body. Where are you going to go? And the reader reading it sometimes says, wait a second. No, I didn't. And it creates a little confusion.

And it's also in some ways done in memoir and non-fiction. Sort of briefly, people do it as a way. It's a nice sort of trick for when the point of view character in a memoir. Obviously, the narrator is having an emotionally challenging situation and they want to get some emotional distance from what they're experiencing. And so what they'll do is they'll sort of push the material onto the reader, saying, let's say you come home early from your work travel, and let's say you enter your house and find your husband snoring in your marital bed beside a woman who looks a lot like Virginia Woolf. And it's a sort of a way of kind of putting the material away from the narrator. And it highlights actually the emotional intensity of it, because it seems like they are unable to hold onto the material because it is so painful.

It's also very, very common in travel writing, actually. And it's a very common way of writing sort of non-fiction travel pieces where you're giving advice. For example, you might say when you depart the boat at the harbour, head up the hill to the blood sausage shop or whatever. And that's a form of kind of instructional writing, which is, in fact, used in a number of short stories, including Tiphonie Yanique's, *How to Escape from a Leper Colony*. And Jennine Capo Crucet's short story, *How to Leave Hialeah*, which are both sort of instructional stories in a sense, they take the form of an instruction, although they are, in fact works of fiction. And also all of the stories in Lorrie Moore's first collection of stories, which is called *Self-Help*. That includes also a wonderful story called *How to Become a Writer*, which is hilarious.

[00:10:49] So that's second person. And it does operate in some ways like first person, but it has a very different emotional register and has that wonderful technique of the instructional story as part of it. First person, plural, which I sort of mentioned earlier, is an interesting form and is also pretty rare. And it's a kind of cover, I think, for first person, singular at many times. It's when a character wants to hide in the group, and or it's about a community. So the author is trying to represent a community. And they use "we" as a way of representing that. But the narrator of these stories, to be clear, is "we". A great example of this is Kristiana Kahakauwila's story, *This is Paradise*, which is alternating first person, plural narrators in Hawaii. There are different groups of women at the same beach, and they each have sort of sections of the story in which they narrate their perception of what is happening at this beach. And it's, of course, very hard with novels to do this. But there are books that do it, including *Then We Came to the End* by Joshua Ferris and *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides. *The Virgin Suicides* was originally a very good short story, actually.

[00:12:15] And it is from the perspective of the neighborhood boys from a town. And they are all transfixed by these beautiful sisters. And so the whole book is narrated from the perspective of the boys who are longing for these sisters, who then kill themselves one at a time over the course of the book.

[00:12:37] And then we came to end. The book I mentioned earlier is from the perspective of a group of people who work in an office. But that is, again, one of those stories in which you feel that there is, in fact, a single person among the group who is kind of central and they're kind of hiding in the group in a sense. You sense that there's one character who really represents the "we". And that is the most my, one of my favorite examples of first person plural is, is kind of it plays with that very thing of there being an "I" hiding within the "we".

And that is Karen Russell's short story, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls* who were raised by wolves, which I think is available on the Internet. And it's just an incredible short story. It is about a school in a sense. It's about a school that's run by nuns. St. Lucy's home for girls who are raised by wolves. And they are human girls whose parents were werewolves. And they had been raised in very wolfish ways. And they are coming to this school to try to become "normal girls". And the story is structured into four or five sections as the girls progressed through these phases from being very much like wolves to less like wolves and so on until they're fully human by the final stage of this education they go through.

[00:14:06] And the first section, when they're very much wolves and are part of the pack, is entirely in first person plural. There is no sense of an "I". There's only a sense of the group. And as they become more human, in a sense, grow up. They also individuate and they become more solitary. And finally, the first person "I" emerges, the first person singular. And so, in a sense, has that shift transforms in the story. That is a part of the plot of the story. And it is really what is so heartbreaking about the story is the development of an individual's sense of self and the loss of the communal. And it's a really beautiful story, really, about growing up, as far as I can tell. But that's a gorgeous story. So that's first person, singular, second person and first person, plural.

[00:15:01] Then we come to third person and third person is what most writing is. And it is very complicated. And there's a lot of variety within third person. I'm not aware of any stories that do third person, plural. I have never heard of it, a narrator who is they. Omniscient, third person is rare today, but it is done occasionally.

[00:15:31] The next episode of this podcast will focus, as I said, on third person limited, which is a very special and complex and important subject. But third person omniscient is worth discussing and looking at. It's very interesting and very hard to do. And the reason it's less done now than it was before is that it can be kind of distancing for the reader.

[00:15:57] So when you have an omniscient narrator, the narrative voice is well outside and above what is occurring in the story. The narrator is, as the name for it suggests, able to know everything.

They have a kind of godlike knowledge. They can understand what any of the characters are thinking. They can go into anyone's head at any time. They can tell the reader what will happen many years in the future, for many years in the past. They have all of the knowledge that they might want. It can feel kind of Victorian or antique to a contemporary reader. And it's certainly very aloof. The problem with it, as I mentioned for the modern reader, is that it tends to put quite a bit of distance between the reader and the minds of the characters what's happening in their lives. So the work of feeling for the character is more difficult because you're not that much inside their experience. That said, Celeste Ng's, *Everything I Never Told You* is omniscient. And many of the stories by Alice Monroe are omniscient. And others have done it as well, very effectively in a contemporary writing. In a somewhat unusual and similar thing, *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold is narrated by a first person omniscient narrator because the main character is dead and is in the afterlife and therefore is able to sort of traverse time and space and read people's minds as she sees fit. But really, since the time of Virginia Woolf for most modern writing, people have tended to prefer a limited third, limited to one person's mind. And you can't jump from mind to mind very easily. And that creates a little bit more intimacy between the narrator and the character and the reader. You get closer to the character literally. But often in an omniscient point of view, you have a narrator who has a kind of personality that does not correspond to any of the character's personalities.

[00:18:06] In the olden times, it was basically the author's personality is what you were seeing. It seemed like there was even sometimes an "I", and the "I" in those stories was presumably the author who has an opinion that is different from any of the opinions of any of the characters. And so it can feel a little strange, almost like metafiction, where the author is commenting on what's happening in a kind of critical way.

[00:18:36] Jane Austen, for example, is usually using omniscience, but with she tends to favor one of her point of view characters, her main character. She has her protagonist perspective, which gives favored. But the narrator is still capable of going into anyone's mind as she sees fit. In her first book, *Northanger Abbey*, which was published after all of the rest of her books are published, even those written first. It tends to favor the protagonist, Catherine. And Austen is a tricky narrator. The book's narrative is complicated by the fact that it's a satire. The narrator often tells us information about the characters in order to make fun of them. Some of the inner thoughts we receive from characters are not so much actual thoughts as they are Austen's witty interpretive spin on them. At some point, the narrator actually says, "Imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms", which is obviously not what Jane Austen thought. But it's sort of reflective of the bias of various characters, and the grumpy narrator. E.M. Forster, was a writer in the 20th century who tried to champion an omniscient narrative style even while it was falling out of favor. And his writing reflects a kind of contemporary and bold use of omniscience.

[00:20:08] And I'll read a passage from *Howards End*, which is pretty mind bending and wild, and you can feel forced here as a narrator, having opinions. The author has opinions which are part of the story specifically about where you should listen to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and other things. Here he goes from Chapter five of *Howards End*.

[00:20:37] It will generally be admitted that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man. All sorts and conditions are satisfied by it. Whether you were like Mrs. Munt, and tap surreptitiously when the tunes come--of course, not so as to disturb the others--or like Helen, who can see heroes and shipwrecks in the music's flood; or like Margaret, who can only see the music; or like Tibby, who is profoundly versed in counterpoint, and holds the full score open on his knee; or like their cousin, Fraulein Moseach, who remembers all the time that Beethoven is echt Deutch; or like Fraulein Moseach's young man who can remember nothing but Fraulein Moseach: in any case, the passion of your life becomes more vivid, and you are bound to admit that such a noise is cheap at two shillings. It is cheap, even if you hear it in the Queen's Hall, dreariest music-room in London, though not as dreary as the Free Trade Hall, Manchester; and even if you sit on the extreme left of that hall, so that the brass bumps at you before the rest of the orchestra arrives, it is still cheap.

[00:21:54] So you can hear there that is E.M. Forester giving his reader recommendations on where they should hear Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. And in fact, when you go to hear it, where you should sit in the theatre. It is so bizarre to a contemporary reader.

[00:22:10] But it is the kind of these you can hear him also going into all the characters minds and explaining how they feel in this circumstance. And you can also see how it would be kind of confusing for a reader to keep track of who are all these people and what is the opinion that I'm reading. Is this the opinion of one of the characters, or is this E.M. Forester's opinion or is it someone else's? It's a little overwhelming at times for the reader. It's interesting and he is a wonderful writer, so he's able to pull it off.

[00:22:41] But it's not something that I would ever attempt personally, because I would be afraid to try it. Mostly when I write, I write third limited or first person singular. And I sort of. Because I'm sort of terrified of trying out some of these other things. I have done some third person limited and shifting, which I'll talk a bit about in the next podcast. But that that's not the same as omniscient. That's a different thing altogether. So for a writing challenge, if you want to try out something, I would try out writing in an omniscient voice where you, the narrator, are a presence in the story, although you may not use the letter "I" to describe yourself. You were there with your opinions and you are hopping between people's heads and saying whatever you want to say and trying to honor all of the characters at once. It's extremely hard to do. But a fun challenge is to do that and then try writing the same situation of the same scene from one of the character's point of view as in first person or in third person limited. And you can even try if you want to try to write that same scene in first person, plural, with a "we" narrator. that you'll find, I think that as you do this, the piece of writing itself changes in fundamental ways that it feels like a completely different piece of writing and has a completely different story, even. Even if what's happening is approximately the same. So thank you so much for listening to this sort of overview on point of view. And I'm excited to start talking about third person limited and narrative distance in the next podcast. Thank you.

[00:24:30] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.