**The Power of Point of View: How to Choose the Right One for Your Story**

Point of view is the single most crucial aspect of a story’s structure. It is called POV for short and POV determines who tells the story. A POV is made with one of four narrative modes.

**Single Versus Multiperspectivity**

Before we investigate narrative modes further, it is useful to keep in mind that novels and even short stories can be told with more than one point of view. Using multiple POV’s means that alternating chapters will reflect the experiences of different characters and can also then reflect different times/timelines.In ‘The Girl on the Train’ by Paula Hawkins, the story is told from the perspectives of three different women. In ‘Cloud Atlas’, with immense deftness that very few writers could emulate, David Mitchel juggles 6 narrators and 6 timelines with each narrator existing in a different era.

If you are a debut novelist, think twice before you adopt a multiperspectivity approach because really you will be writing multiple novels at the same time.

**An Easy Way of Conceptualising Narrative Mode**

Let’s keep things simple and imagine that we are writing with a single perspective. Now that is settled, you need to select your narrative mode. You can choose from - 1st Person, (omniscient ‘general’) 3rd Person, (limited ‘ Close’) 3rd Person, and 2nd Person. At the end of this, there is a little test and you can see if you can determine which extract matches which narrative mode.You may wonder what difference Narrative Mode makes to your story. Perhaps the easiest way of understanding the impact of narrative mode on a story is to ask yourself: ‘Who holds the camera?’ The story will reflect the view of whoever holds the camera. The way events unfold reflect what the person holding the camera sees, thinks and understands.

**1st person Narrative Mode**

Imagine you have three characters in a story - a wife, a husband, and an assasin. If you choose to write in first person, you’re going to give **one character the camera** and they will tell the story using ‘I’/’Me’/’My’/’Our’ pronouns. The view they show of the world reflects what they see.

Let’s give the wife the camera then the story will be angled by how she sees events unfolding through the lens of the camera.

*I feel anxious. My footsteps echo down the passage which is lined with photographs from our ‘happy’ wedding day. Mr and Mrs Harold James we are. My new husband left in a rage and in a hurry. He has been gone for hours. He is angry that I will not transfer my inheritance to our joint bank account. He thinks I’m a fool, but he will learn that I’m more than a pretty face. I expect he is drinking away his sorrows in the bar down the road.*

While the wife is alone at home, if the husband goes to see the assassin, then she will not see this and will not know it and your narrative, if captured from her POV, will not reflect this event. Possibly at a later date, somebody who witnessed the meeting between husband and assassin, may come to tell the wife. ‘Eleanor Olifant is Completely Fine’ by Gail Honeyman is a good example of a first person work of fiction. Memoirs are always written in first person because they reflect the real experiences of the author, for example, Elizabeth Gilbert’s ‘Eat, Pray, Love’.

**3d Person Narative Mode**

If you choose limited ‘close’ third person, then you’re also going to give one character the camera but you’ll use he/she/him/her as your pronouns. As with first person, if you give the wife the camera events will be limited to what she experiences and knows but you will use the 3rd person pronouns

*She feels anxious. Her footsteps echo down the passage and the walls are lined with photographs of their supposedly happy wedding. Mr and Mrs Harold James they are. Her husband left in a rage and in a hurry. He has been gone for hours. He is angry because she would not transfer her inheritance to their joint bank account. She believes he is in the local bar, drinking away his sorrows. She believes he thinks she is no more than a pretty face.*

JK Rowling chose limited 3rd person for her Harry Potter Series. So in a sense, Harry Potter holds the camera in this series.

**Who do you want to hold the camera?**

Now, let’s take the camera from the wife and give it to the assassin:

*Another of these greedy men came to see me today. I have no sympathy for him. He wants his wife bumped off. He wants her money. I have no sympathy for her either. I am a professional.*

Do you like the assassin? Do you want to write a whole novel from his perspective? Deciding who you give the camera to dramatically changes the tone of what you write and also how events unfold. When you are deciding to use first person or close third generally you would choose to give the camera to the character you identify as your main character - this would be the character you care about most because using close 3rd or first person creates an intimate account from the perspective of the character ‘holding the camera’.

**Omniscient 3rd Person**

In Omnicient or ‘general’ third person, the view is wider; it’s a bit like giving the camera to a photographer who is not one of the characters but can see all the characters, can follow the characters and has insight into what they are all thinking. In our story with the wife, the husband and the assassin an omniscient 3rd person view of the scene in question might look like this:

*It is widely known that men of no fortune often hone in on women of great means. And in this manner Harold James, who did not much like his new wife, found he liked her less every day since she had refused to share her money with him. Alicia James nee Getty, was pretty but not a fool and although she feared her husband’s strength, she had no intention of allowing him free reign with her money. And so it was that Harold found himself knocking on the door of Everready Roger, whose reputation was based on his perpetual willingness to remove unwanted citizens. Everready did not like people and he did like money and so he hever had a problem with killing for cash. Thus while Alicia imagined her husband to be drinking away his sorrows, the husband in question was in fact selecting from a calendar on the desk of Everready Rodger, a good date for her demise.*

In this scene now the view is more general, there is insight into the perspectives of all three characters and you are able to show what everyone is up to at the same time. When writing fiction, omniscient 3rd person is the most flexible choice.

**2nd person Narrative Mode**

This is an experimental narrative mode and seldom used. As such it can come across as gimmicky unless expertly used. In this mode, you give the camera to the reader and you cast the reader as the character using ‘you’. For example, let’s make the reader the assassin:

*Another of these greedy men came to see you today. You have no sympathy for him. He wants his wife bumped off. He wants her money. You have no sympathy for her either. You are a professional.*

**Playing With POVs and Modes**

In the wonderful world of writing stories, the power of point of view cannot be underestimated. Selecting the right point of view for your story lays the foundation for a captivating narrative, ensuring readers are fully absorbed by your characters and immersed in the world you've crafted. By understanding the role of point of view and exploring different narrative modes you will enhance your power to create good stories.

You may have recently read a novel in first person with multiple povs, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you should write your novel or story in that way. Play around with different narrative modes before you settle on one. And if you are writing your first novel, think twice before you take on the challenge of multiple points of view. This isn’t going to be the only novel you ever write. My recommendation for a debut writer is to keep structure simple and stick to one point of view. However, remember that a general 3rd person will give you the scope to explore the experiences of many characters in your story.

**A Little Test**

Here’s a little test - see if you can correctly identify which narrative mode matches each of these paragraphs:

*EXTRACT 1*

*There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog. The points of the fork must have gone all the way through the dog and into the ground because the fork had not fallen over. I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this. I went through Mrs Shears' gate, closing it behind me. I walked onto her lawn and knelt beside the dog. I put my hand on the muzzle of the dog. It was still warm.* - Mark Haddon ‘The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime’

EXTRACT 2

*In the shop window you have promptly identified the cover with the title you were looking for. Following this visual trail, you have forced your way through the shop pas the thick barricade of Books You Haven't Read, which were frowning at you from the tables and shelves, trying to cow you. But you know you must never allow yourself to be awed, that among them there extend for acres and acres the Books You Needn't Read, the Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading, Books Read Even Before You Open Them Since They Belong To The Category Of Books Read Before Being Written. And thus you pass the outer girdle of ramparts, but then you are attacked by the infantry of the Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered. With a rapid maneuver you bypass them and move into the phalanxes of the Books You Mean To Read But There Are Others You Must Read First, the Books Too Expensive Now And You'll Wait Till They're Remaindered, the Books ditto When They Come Out In Paperback, Books You Can Borrow From Somebody, Books That Everybody's Read So It's As If You Had Read Them, Too.* - Italo Calvino ‘If On A Winter’s Night A Traveler’

EXTRACT 3

*He is at pains not to be late with the rent because he is in the flat under false pretences. When he signed the lease and paid A. & B. Levy the deposit, he gave his occupation not as 'Student' but as 'Library Assistant,' with the university library as his work address.*

*It is not a lie, not entirely. From Monday to Friday it is his job to man the reading room during evening hours. It is a job that the regular librarians, women for the most part, prefer not to do because the campus, up on the mountainside, is too bleak and lonely at night. Even he feels a chill down his spine as he unlocks the back door and gropes his way down a pitch-dark corridor to the mains switch. It would be all too easy for some evildoer to hide in the stacks when the staff go home at five o'clock, then rifle the empty offices and wait in the dark to waylay him, the night assistant, for his keys. - JM COETZEE ‘Youth’*

*EXTRACT 4*

*Mr. Bingley had soon made himself acquainted with all the principal people in the room; he was lively and unreserved, danced every dance, was angry that the ball closed so early, and talked of giving one himself at Netherfield. Such amiable qualities must speak for themselves. What a contrast between him and his friend! Mr. Darcy danced only once with Mrs. Hurst and once with Miss Bingley, declined being introduced to any other lady, and spent the rest of the evening in walking about the room, speaking occasionally to one of his own party. His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and everybody hoped that he would never come there again. Amongst the most violent against him was Mrs. Bennet, whose dislike of his general behaviour was sharpened into particular resentment by his having slighted one of her daughters.*

*Elizabeth Bennet had been obliged, by the scarcity of gentlemen, to sit down for two dances; and during part of that time, Mr. Darcy had been standing near enough for her to overhear a conversation between him and Mr. Bingley, who came from the dance for a few minutes, to press his friend to join in.* - JANE AUSTIN ‘Pride and Prejudice’

A.First person

B. (general) third person

C. (limited) third person

D. Second person