

The Unreliable Narrator

ABOUT a year ago I was drinking a beer with another writer I'll call Bob, and we were chatting about the challenges of writing a novel after so many years of writing short stories. Bob said he already had a story line for his novel and was mostly working on finding a good voice. He said he wanted to create one like Tobias Wolff's in *This Boy's Life*. He wanted it to be charming and funny, but also honest and vulnerable, and he was having a hard time getting it right. It struck me as naive that Bob thought he could appropriate these traits with voice alone, but I didn't say so, because Bob had gone to the Iowa Writers' Workshop and he's been published in the *Atlantic*. His work has even been selected for one of the Best American Short Stories anthologies. I thought I must be the naive one, so I let the conversation run to other topics.

Then last week Bob told me he'd ditched his novel, and some vengeful little voice inside me cried, "Aha!"

I imagined it was Bob's approach to voice that did him in. This seemed to be confirmed when he explained that he'd focused too hard on creating the marketing document his agent wanted. I'd been reading the agent interviews in this magazine, and the way Bob spoke about voice was suspiciously similar to the way the agents spoke about it. They often said a good voice was the most important element of a manuscript, but when asked what a good voice consisted of, they supplied answers such as, "It's different from the other stuff I'm reading," or, "It makes you miss your subway stop." It was clear that these agents knew when they'd found something good but that they had no idea how the writer went about creating it. I imagined that Bob's agent had told him something similarly useless, and that his attempts to follow her advice undermined the project.

But agents aren't the only ones throwing the word around. The writers I know are always talking about "finding your voice," and the phrase seems to imply more than just how your sentences sound—it means you know who you are as a writer. I once attended a reading by the novelist and short story writer Katherine Min, author of *Secondhand World* (Knopf, 2006), and afterward

FINDING A VOICE THAT TRULY SPEAKS



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someone asked if she ever found other authors creeping into her voice. She responded, "I wish!" If only it were as easy, she explained, as reading a little James Joyce before she worked. But no, she knew her own voice too well by then. She pretended to be disappointed by this, but it was clear that she was pretending. Her actual feelings about it seemed closer to satisfaction, even triumph. She knew she had found her voice, and that was much more valuable to her than being able to mimic Joyce.

But what was it she had found? What is "voice," exactly, and where does it come from? Most craft books and teachers say the same thing as the agents: It's how the writing sounds, what words are chosen, how sentences are arranged. Do you write *gotta* rather than *have to*? Do you write *pennaceous* rather than *feathery*? Do you insert colloquialisms such as *I guess* or *sort of*? Do you call robbers *holdupniks*, the second floor *upstairske*? Are your sentences short or long, punchy or meandering? Yoda-like (or full of parentheticals) is your syntax?

These factors certainly contribute to a writer's voice, but they're only the most obvious factors, and saying that's all there is to the issue seems, to me, simplistic. It's like saying action comes from chase scenes, or that love comes from shared interests. These things are often true, but we all know that there are subtler and more meaningful sources for both action and love. Could this also be the case with voice?

If not, if word choice and arrangement really are the only things that generate voice, then we should be able to reproduce a voice like Holden Caulfield's simply by reproducing his verbal tics. I think you'll agree, however, that no matter how many times you use the word *lousy* or *phony*, no matter how many times you insert *old* before another character's name, or add colloquialisms such as *boy!* or emphasize judgments with *it really does*, it can't be Holden Caulfield if the narrator

is explaining his fondness for school fund-raising:

Boy, I loved working with old Dempsey. What he'd do, he'd dress you in some lousy tuxedo and send you to the phoniest bastards at the concert, right up to their Cadillacs, and have you shoot the old bull as they came inside. When they took their seats you sort of asked for some money. It made me happy as hell to do it. It really did.

I admit there's something Caulfield-esque about the passage, because word choice and arrangement do matter. But it's at best a parody, and I don't think anyone could seriously imagine this sort of material continuing for long without some deeper sarcasm or despair opening up beneath it. A straightforward and positive evaluation of anything this mundane would seem a departure from Caulfield's voice whether it included the verbal tics or not, because what makes his voice *his* is the way his complaints reveal a compassion he's not quite aware of, the way his desperation and loneliness tumble through his criticisms, the way the subtext and irony in his explanations indicate his fragile emotional state. Early in *Catcher in the Rye*, for example, he visits a teacher who has flunked him, wanting to put the teacher's mind at ease, and here's how he gets there:

As soon as I got my breath back I ran across Route 204. It was icy as hell and I damn near fell down. I don't even know what I was running for—I guess I just felt like it. After I got across the road, I felt like I was sort of disappearing. It was that kind of a crazy afternoon, terrifically cold, and no sun out or anything, and you felt like you were disappearing every time you crossed a road.

This is the voice of the real Holden Caulfield, because J. D. Salinger lets us see the despair that Caulfield is trying so casually to dismiss. He says he runs

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because he feels like it, but the vagueness of this explanation invites suspicion. His running seems to indicate a confusion and urgency he won't admit to, a longing for company, even if it's that of an old man he has disappointed. This is confirmed when he talks about feeling as if he's disappearing. He blames the feeling on the weather and the road-crossing, but we've all crossed roads on overcast days without feeling that way. Caulfield is obviously lonely and depressed here, but he maintains his cool, casual attitude, and the disparity is what makes his voice ring.

But hold on. Loneliness? Confusion? Longing? Are we still dealing with voice? Haven't we lapsed into content issues, such as characterization, point of view, even theme?

Yes, we have indeed lapsed into other craft issues. But didn't my friend Bob lapse into those same issues when he brought up the qualities he admired in Tobias Wolff's voice? What's more, aren't those very qualities surprisingly accurate in describing Holden Caulfield's personality—charm, humor, honesty, vulnerability? In fact, isn't it those qualities and not the verbal tics that make Caulfield so engaging? If so, then isn't it possible that these other craft issues are the deeper, subtler, more meaningful sources of voice?

It certainly seems so when we look at *This Boy's Life*. Wolff also achieves a compelling voice, even though his has none of the verbal idiosyncrasies of Salinger's Caulfield. What it does have is the same deft characterization, full of subtext and irony and contradiction. One example is Wolff's description of watching *The Mickey Mouse Club* with his hoodlum friends:

As soon as she appeared on the show—Hi, I'm Annette!—Taylor would start moaning and Silver would lick the screen with his tongue. "Come here baby," he'd say, "I've got six inches of piping hot flesh just for you."

We all said things like that—It was a formality—then we shut up and

watched the show. Our absorption was complete. We softened. We surrendered. We joined the club. Taylor forgot himself and sucked his thumb, and Silver and I let him get away with it. We watched the Mousketeers get all excited about wholesome projects and have wimpy adventures and talk about their feelings, and we didn't laugh at them.... We watched every minute of it, our eyes glistening in the blue light, and we went on staring at the television after they had sung the anthem and faded away into commercials for toothpaste and candy. Then, blinking and awkward, we would rouse ourselves and talk dirty about Annette.

This is a nice piece of writing, and it's easy to imagine an agent—or any other reader—missing a subway stop over it. But there are no acrobatics of language. Apart from the dialogue there are no colloquialisms, with the exception, perhaps, of *all excited*, which is not repeated elsewhere and so is probably meant more as a denigration than a verbal tic. There is no diction that becomes emblematic, as does Caulfield's *lousy* and *phony*. The word choice is ordinary without being suspiciously ordinary, the sentence structures simple, subdued, even bland. So, in light of all this, how do we account for a voice so compelling that my friend Bob chose it as the prototype for his novel?

ROBERT Olen Butler says that as you develop an ear for writing, you'll hear your own work thrum when it's right and twang when it's wrong. I hear those twangs quite a bit in my early drafts. I'm usually very conscientious about my word choice at this stage, and I gaze suspiciously at every sentence that begins subject-verb. My characters say and do things I don't entirely understand, and they often seem too dense, too mean, too irrelevant. Hearing these twangs means there's a lot going wrong, but if you can hear where it's wrong, it must

mean you have some impression of what makes it right. Hearing my own twangs must mean that I have, to some small degree, found my voice. I might not be able to maintain it as well or as consistently as Katherine Min, but I can recognize when I have it, and I can recognize when I don't. And after encountering numerous examples of both, I've found one factor that seems to make all the difference.

That factor is unreliable narration, building a disparity between what my characters believe and what is actually the case. That was why my writing twanged, for instance, in early stages of a story called "The Evacuation," which appeared two years ago in the *Greensboro Review*. At first I believed my protagonist, Neil, was estranged from his banker father because of his Buddhism, and so did Neil. Later I realized that the real issue between them was Neil's envy and sense of betrayal about his father's second marriage, but I kept Neil from realizing it. He still thought it was the Buddhism. After that, the writing thrummed.

This seems to be the case for Wolff as well. The passage about watching *The Mickey Mouse Club* is funny and charming not because of the way the writing "sounds," but because of the vigor with which these boys pursue their pretenses, and because Wolff forces them to retain those pretenses even after he undercuts them. It's honest and vulnerable not because of the diction or syntax, but because it depicts the boys' evident sleaziness, then opens up a disparity between that and their real attitudes, which embarrass them. In other words, the voice comes largely from unreliable narration, just as it does in *Catcher in the Rye*.

These examples are first-person stories, but narration can be unreliable in any point of view, as long as it's limited. When the narrative vantage point is confined to one character's consciousness, the narration is likewise confined to that character's interpretations. For example, in Wolff's third-person story "The Life of the Body," from *The Night*

in *Question* (Knopf, 1996), Wiley, a reserved college professor, has started to stalk an acquaintance after a peculiar bout of loneliness. When she tells him, "Don't you ever call me at work again," Wolff delivers this line: "Wiley liked the sound of that; it meant she assumed a future for them." The reader can see clearly that Wiley's judgment here is unsound, which makes the narration unreliable even in the third person.

No matter what the story's point of view, this dynamic necessarily involves the craft issues of characterization, point of view, and theme. To achieve it, you have to know not only who your characters are but also who they pretend to be, not only what they care about but also what they say they care about, not only what ideas they live by but also how those ideas are false. You have to figure out why your characters are blind, and how they've managed to maintain their blindness. And you have to signal these disparities to the reader without revealing

them to the character, or straining credibility by making the characters *too* blind. This creates other dynamics that are necessary in good storytelling, for example, character limitation and unrecognized truth, and moving between the former and the latter helps shape a story's meaning, or theme.

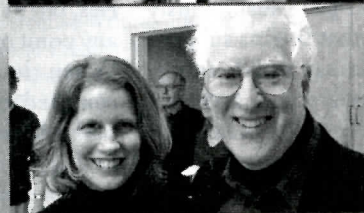
This isn't an easy task. In fact, it's not a task at all—it's a process, and that's why most of us have to write so many revisions to get anything right. But one of the things that goes right as the process advances—at least for me—is the voice. Understanding my characters' secrets, illusions, and pretenses lets me see clearly how they'll act, what they'll say, how the action of the story challenges them. And once I have this clarity of vision, the words and sentence structures come naturally, without thought. These are the times when my voice is strongest, and most fully my own.

That doesn't necessarily mean unre-

liable narration will work for you. My voice isn't yours, and it certainly isn't Salinger's or Wolff's. I wish. A narrator doesn't even have to be charming or funny or honest or vulnerable to have a voice. There are any number of other voices, from the erudite fury of John Kennedy O'Toole to the wonder and delight of Annie Dillard, the playful compassion of Kurt Vonnegut to the poetic gravity of Toni Morrison, the austerity of Cormac McCarthy to the vibrancy and bravado of Junot Díaz. But what all these writers share is a certain thrum—a clarity of purpose that lends their voices confidence and ease. This clarity of purpose comes from a precise understanding of what they want to say, an intimate knowledge of their characters and themes. Whether they arrive at this knowledge through unreliable narration or through other means, the diction and syntax is a reflection of each writer's ultimate purpose—a product of voice, not a cause of it. ∞

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