

UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW (POV)

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WHAT IS NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW?



Point of view (POV) describes whose head we're in when we read a book ... from whose perspective we discover what's going on – and the smells, sounds, sights and emotions involved.

There can be multiple viewpoints in a book, not all of which have to belong to a single character. And to complicate things, editors' and authors' opinions differ as to which approach works best, and what jars and why.

I'll review the most-oft-used POVs and explain why I think they're effective.

POV can be tricky and my aim is to keep the guidance as straightforward as possible, not because I think you should only do it this way or that way, but because most people (myself included) handle complexity best when they start with the foundations and build up and outwards.

WHY SHOULD YOU BOTHER NAILING POV?



Pro editors and experienced writers agree on one thing: it's worth the beginner author's time to understand POV so that they can make decisions about which to use, where, and why. Consider the following:

- ✓ **A better read:** The right POV in the right place enriches the reader's experience; the opposite will mean your book is not as immersive as it might have been. It might even confuse or frustrate your reader. I'm assuming you want your book to be the best it can be, so understanding how narrative POV works, and how to use viewpoint with intent, will help you in that endeavour.
- ✓ **A better price:** If you're working with a professional editor, whether a story-level editor (developmental, structural editing) or a sentence-level editor (line editing, copyediting, proofreading), there'll be less to fix if your POV doesn't jar.
- ✓ **A better fix:** Some beginner authors, for reasons of budget, choose not to work with a developmental editor. This is the shaping stage in which decisions about how POV will be handled are made. If you go straight to working with a line editor or copyeditor, and they encounter major POV problems, it's likely that their editing will have to be more invasive than either of you would have liked. Plus, the fix might not be as elegant as it would have been if any problems had been attended to before the sentence-level work began.

Says Julia Crouch:

‘Choose who is doing your telling very carefully. Work with their voices, character, secrets and lies, reliability or lack thereof, and the spaces between different points of view. You can weave a wonderfully rich pattern this way. This doesn’t mean that you have to write in the first person (“I”) – you can get right up close inside a character’s head by using third (“she”). A cool, detached, narrator can be helpful, too, but you have to be clear who and what they are, and why they are there.’

POV: WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?



There are multiple ways in which to narrate a novel. Some are more popular than others, and some easier to master. What you choose will shape not only the story you tell but also your readers' understanding of it. The options are as follows:

- ✓ First person
- ✓ Second person
- ✓ Third-person limited (also called third-person subjective)
- ✓ Third-person objective
- ✓ Third-person omniscient

FIRST-PERSON POV



First-person narrative POVs are the most intimate, the most immediate, but they're less flexible. The pronouns used are 'I' and 'we'. The reader is privy to an individual character's thoughts, emotions and experiences, all told through a distinctive voice. We can only see, hear, smell and feel what the character sees, hears, smells and feels. We are compelled to move through the story knowing only what they know, and at their pace.

However, used throughout an entire novel, from on character only, it can be problematic for the following reasons:

- ✓ Readers can access only one version of events, which can render the prose restrictive if it doesn't allow for the telling of other interpretations; we are forced to trust that the narrator's telling is reliable. Furthermore, if the unveiling of how, why and when is too slow, the story could begin to drag.
- ✓ Too much 'I' can be laborious to read and can result in a told, reported narrative rather than shown prose (see also the chapter on filter words)

Example: Not relying on 'I'

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* (p. 5), Harper Lee keeps 'I' to a minimum and yet the prose oozes with first person. Note in particular how the voice is rich and distinct, rather than the more neutral tone we'd expect from third-person objective narration.

Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the court-house sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter then; a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square. [...]

We lived on the main residential street in town – Atticus, Jem and I, plus Calpurnia our cook. Jem and I found our father satisfactory: he played with us, read to us, and treated us with courteous detachment. [...]

Because Lee doesn't append 'I' plus a verb to much of the prose, we are given a shown narrative that *we* can experience rather than being told how the narrator experienced the world being described. Compare it with the 'I'-heavy made-up example below and consider how the narrator's told experience keeps the reader at a distance.

I placed my hand on the rusty handle and tugged, but the old oak door refused to give way to me. I heard a rustling sound behind me and turned my head. I spotted movement in the inky shadows and felt the skin on the back of my neck prickle with terror as I realized I wasn't alone.

Let's rewrite this with a less invasive first-person narration in which the reader can experience the action as it unfolds.

The handle was rusty against my palms as I tugged but the old oak door refused to give. A rustling came from behind and I turned. A shape flitted in the inky shadows and the skin on the back of my neck prickled. I wasn't alone.

Example: Sustaining interest with other interpretations

In *The Word is Murder* (p. 208), author Anthony Horowitz is one of the characters! The viewpoint is first person (his). The author is like a floating camera; we see the protagonist – the detective (Hawthorne) who solves the crime – through Horowitz’s eyes as he accompanies him to interviews with suspects and on visits to crime scenes.

The author-character offers his own theories, even pursues his own lines of investigation, and interjects with stories about his life and career. This adds interest but, ultimately, it’s the detective who grounds the crime story, brings reliability to the narrative, and drives the novel forward; it’s through him that we access the procedural elements and the answer to whodunnit. Here’s an excerpt:

They’d used blue and white tape to create a cordon which began at the front door and blocked off the stairs. I wasn’t sure how they would deal with the neighbours on the upper and lower floors. As for me, although I hadn’t been questioned, a woman in a plastic suit had asked me to remove my shoes and taken them away. That puzzled me. ‘What do they need them for?’ I asked Hawthorne.

‘Latent footprints,’ he replied. ‘They need to eliminate you from the enquiry.’

Recommendation

First-person narratives introduce depth and explain motivations but can be difficult to sustain if not sufficiently interesting and there’s too much told narrative. Watch out for filter words if you think you’re over-telling.

Consider whether your whole novel needs to be in first person. Perhaps limiting this approach to specific characters in dedicated chapters would be more effective. If you decide to stick with first person throughout, think about voice and how your viewpoint character (and therefore the reader) will discover the how, when and why of the story at an engaging pace.

And, finally, if you're basing your whole novel in the first person, be cautious about using the present tense throughout. The past might give you more flexibility, particularly if you're writing action-heavy scenes where, in reality, the character wouldn't have time to give much thought to the consequences and motivations of their behaviour.

SECOND-PERSON POV



In second-person narrative POVs, the pronoun is ‘you’. This narration is intimate, but strangely so, as if the author is talking directly to the reader *as a character*. That intrusive element is both its strength and its weakness. It’s powerful because it places readers at the heart of the story, and yet we – the ‘you’ – know less than the narrator. That can create a sense of immediacy, but almost amnesiac dislocation. We have to discover what we think, see, know and do. And if we don’t identify with the ‘you’ – if we feel implicated rather than attached – we can be pulled out of the story rather than brought deeper into it.

Still, this controlling aspect of second person can have an advantage. Whereas first-person narrators tell you what *they* thought and did, second-person narrators tell us what *we* thought and did. This witnessing adds a level of reliability (even if we don’t like it). And readers aren’t daft. They know they’re not really the you-character, which means authors could use it as a tool to create surprise when the ‘you’ is unveiled later in the book.

If you want your readers to feel connected but controlled, second-person POV might be just the ticket, but it’s difficult to pull off and rare that authors of contemporary commercial fiction write an entire novel in it. More likely, you’ll see shorter-form use: dedicated chapters either in narrative form or written as diary entries, letters or other missives.

Example: Voyeuristic tension

In *I See You* (p. 176), Clare Mackintosh punctuates her primary third-person narrative (a police officer's) with a second-person viewpoint of an anonymous predator, though she keeps the narratives distinct by giving them their own chapters. The distinct transgressor voice explores the predator's twisted psyche intimately, and in a way that enables the reader to understand their motivations – what's making them think and behave so monstrously.

Now that you know what I do, you're intrigued, aren't you? You're wondering what information I've collected about you; what's listed on my ever-growing website. You're wondering if you'll be stopped, like this girl, by an attractive stranger. You're wondering if he'll ask you out for dinner. [...]

Life's a lottery.

He might have something entirely different in mind for you.

The chapters given over to the transgressor provide a rich sense of cat and mouse when juxtaposed with the more distanced police-procedural storyline. Note how the predator-narrator in the above example bends their perceptions into a warped reality – there are no maybes here; they've decided that this is the way things are and justify their actions accordingly.

Because Mackintosh uses the present tense for her second-person narrative, she's able to retain tight control over the unveiling. We're right in the now of the novel. It's deeply suspenseful, but emotionally demanding to read. However, this narrative style doesn't dominate the novel. The transgressor chapters are shorter, and readers are allowed breathing space as

they're pushed gently back into the less intimate third-person narrative of the protagonist.

Example: Curiosity, reliability and the complicit reader

In this example from *Complicity* (p. 9), Iain Banks uses the second-person viewpoint in which a narrator reports on the actions and thoughts of an unnamed serial killer addressed as 'you'.

There is another faint crunching noise as the body spasms once and then goes limp. Blood spreads blackly from his mouth over the collar of his white shirt and starts to drip onto the pale marble of the steps. [...]

You go downstairs and walk through the kitchen, where the two women sit tied to their chairs; you leave via the same window you entered by, walking calmly through the small back garden into the mews where the motorbiked is parked.

You hear the first faint, distant screams just as you take the bike's key from your pocket. You feel suddenly elated.

You're glad you didn't have to hurt the women.

Think about how you feel as you read this. It's as if *you're* being addressed, as if *you're* complicit. At the very least, the prose arouses curiosity – who is this 'you', and how is it that the narrator knows so much about them?

Banks doesn't present the novel fully in second person; these sections fall between those of a first-person viewpoint character, journalist Cameron Colley. As such, readers are confronted by a juxtaposition of Cameron's version of events and what was witnessed by the narrator.

Recommendation

By all means experiment with second-person point of view but understand its implications. If you want to draw your reader into the heart of your story, it's a good choice. However, that connection can come at a price – a lack of control that could alienate your audience. Overdoing it, says James Peacock, 'can feel like a form of harassment from someone trying too hard to get into your head'.

For that reason, consider the purpose of this narrative style and the extent to which you employ it. It might be better constrained – limited to chapters inhabited by specific viewpoint characters.

If in doubt, rewrite your scene in an alternative narrative viewpoint so you can evaluate how this affects your perception of the story as a reader.

THIRD-PERSON LIMITED POV



Along with third-person objective, this viewpoint is the one that most writers find easiest to master at the beginning of their journey. Furthermore, readers are used to encountering it in contemporary fiction. The pronouns of choice are ‘she’, ‘he’, ‘it’ and ‘they’.

Third-person limited is so called because it’s a deeper viewpoint that limits readers to a single character’s experience – what they see, hear, feel and think. Readers get to sit in their skin and that provides an immersive experience. It’s as if we’re them.

Example: Intimacy and getting under the character’s skin

Here are some examples from Mick Herron, Harry Brett and Louise Penny that demonstrate an intimate third-person limited narrative:

For almost a minute that was that. Shirley could feel her watch ticking; could feel through the desk’s surface the computer struggling to return to life. Two pairs of feet tracked downstairs. Harper and Guy. She wondered where they were off to. (*Dead Lions*, p. 17)

His mum pushed past him, bringing a cloud of thick night air seasoned with salt and something he couldn’t place. A perfume perhaps, but not his mother’s normal scent. (*Time to Win*, p. 321)

The blurred figures at the far end of the long corridor seemed almost liquid, or smoke. There, but insubstantial. Fleeting. Fleeing.

As she wished she could.

This was it. The end of the journey. Not just that day's journey as she and her husband, Peter, had driven from their little Québec village to the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montréal, a place they knew well. Intimately. (*A Trick of the Light*, pp. 1–2)

The voices are distinctive. It's not just dialogue that conveys how the viewpoint characters speak and think; it's the narrative too.

However, it's called third-person *limited* for a reason. Strictly speaking, what that character can't see or know shouldn't be reported. In the above examples, we're left with questions – of destination in the first, of the origin of a smell in the second, and of the nature of the journey – because we don't know any more than the viewpoint characters.

Third-person limited is effective because an author doesn't want to give everything away at once. The limitations over what can be known, and therefore divulged, allow the writer to control the unveiling of information via the viewpoint character.

Recommendation

I recommend you stick to a single character's POV per chapter or section to avoid confusion or interruption. Mittelmark and Newman (p. 159) offer this wisdom:

‘Sometimes an author slips into a different point of view for the space of a single paragraph, or even a sentence. This is especially jarring when the

remaining novel is given from the point of view of a single character, whom we have come to regard as our second self. It gives the feeling of a fleeting and unexplained moment of telepathy, an uncomfortable intrusion of somebody else's thoughts. When the protagonist's point of view resumes, we move forward into the narrative warily, ready at any moment for a fresh assault on our minds.'

That's worth heeding. It means the reader's trust has been lost, that they've been pulled out of the story rather than drawn further into it.

Trickier still is narrative ping pong, where within one section we bounce back and forth between the POVs of Character X and Character Y.

Here's a made-up example that demonstrates how things can go wrong.

Jan ran down the road, her lungs screaming for air. She snatched a glance over her shoulder, hoping to Christ Melody was behind.

'You okay, Jan?' said Melody. She'd barely got the words out – her throat was on fire. All she wanted to do was stop, breathe, devour that bottle of water in her backpack bouncing hard against her spine.

'We're here,' Jan said. Thank God. Tears of relief stung her eyes. She'd been worried Mel wouldn't keep up. Guilt niggled. Would she have gone back for her? She wasn't sure.

The problem with this kind of setup is that it 'alienates the reader from both perspectives. She is unable to identify with either

because there's no telling when it will be yanked away' (Mittelmark and Newman, p. 161).

In other words, the reader has been prevented from immersing themselves in the character's version of the story. When you stay in the head of one character per chapter or section, you make your writing life and your reader's journey easier.

THIRD-PERSON OBJECTIVE POV



If third-person limited provides intimacy – allowing us to explore a character’s emotions and hear their voice – third-person objective offers a more neutral flexibility when we need some distance to look around and beyond objectively.

Like its limited sister, writers find this easiest to master and readers are used to encountering it. The pronouns too are ‘she’, ‘he’, ‘it’ and ‘they’.

It’s a useful viewpoint for the author who wants to convey descriptive information – height, weight, facial expression, environment. If you’re using this POV, practice your observation skills so that you understand how people move from place to place, what they wear, where they live, how they gesture, so that you can show what might be going on in their heads through *what can be observed*.

The same can be said of the objects in your novel. How does light play on water or a brick building at various times of the day? What sounds might be audible in your environment? How do the seasons affect the flora and fauna?

Third-person objective viewpoints are powerful because they force a writer to show rather than tell what’s being seen. That’s because we don’t have access to the internal thoughts of a character.

Example: A more distant and descriptive narrative

Here's an example from David Baldacci's *The Fix* (p. 3) that demonstrates third-person narration as observable description.

Amos Decker trudged along alone. He was six-five and built like the football player he had once been. He'd been on a diet for several months now and had dropped a chunk of weight, but he could stand to lose quite a bit more. He was dressed in khaki pants stained at the cuff and a long, rumpled Ohio State Buckeyes pullover that concealed both his belly and the Glock 41 Gen4 pistol riding in a belt holster on his waistband.

Example: Shown-not-told narratives in action

Here are some excerpts from Stephen King's *The Stand* that demonstrate a close attention to the way things and people behave when observed.

The Chevy jumped like an old dog that had been kicked and plowed away the hi-test pump. It snapped off and rolled away, spilling a few dribbles of gas. The nozzle came unhooked and lay glittering under the fluorescents. (p. 8)

"Clock went red," the man on the floor grunted, and then began to cough, racking chainlike explosions that send heavy mucus spraying from his mouth in long and ropy splatters. Hap leaned backward, grimacing desperately. (p. 11)

She walked softly up behind him and laid both hands on his shoulders.

Jess, who had been holding his rocks in his left hand and plunking them into Mother Atlantic with his right, let out a scream and lurched to hit feet. Pebbles scattered everywhere, and he almost knocked Frannie off the side and into the water. He almost went in himself, head first. (p. 16)

Objectivity allows the writer to explore in detail what would be unnatural for a character to report directly. Remember, we're not accessing thoughts, opinions and emotions with an objective POV, just the stuff that any onlooker could see, hear or smell.

Objective is the key word here. Third-person objective viewpoints should focus on what could be known by a narrator witnessing that scene. When information is reported that moves beyond a floating camera that's tracking the immediate environs and into a space where the narrator knows more than could possibly be witnessed by the character or the onlooker, omniscience is in play (more on that below).

In some genres – crime fiction for example – this can be useful because the reader will be forced to reach their own conclusions as to the reasons for, or motivations behind, a particular event or behaviour. In other words, it's mysterious.

However, it can be distancing if overused and as a result contemporary commercial fiction writers rarely write entire novels from an objective POV because it's reportage and we can't get into the characters' heads. It's harder to understand what motivates them unless they express it through dialogue. A blend of limited and objective is a more likely choice.

Recommendation

Use third-person objective POV to create suspense, to make your reader wonder, and ask their own questions, and to provide scene-setting information, but **blend** with a limited viewpoint for deeper emotional engagement.

In the first paragraph of the example below, Baldacci (*The Fix*, p. 3) uses third-person objective to give us background facts. In the second, he switches to limited to explain the character's feelings. It's a lovely fusion:

His size fourteen shoes hit the pavement with noisy splats. His hair was, to put it kindly, dishevelled. Decker worked at the FBI on a joint task force. He was on his way to a meeting at the Hoover Building.

He was not looking forward to it. He sensed that a change was coming, and Decker did not like change. He'd experienced enough of it in the last two years to last him a lifetime. He had just settled into a new routine with the FBI and he wanted to keep it that way.

THIRD-PERSON OMNISCIENT POV



This viewpoint is probably the trickiest to master. Omniscient means *all-knowing*. It's the most flexible because it gives the reader potential access to every character's external and internal experiences. It also has the potential to be the least intimate if not handled well.

Imagine a futuristic news helicopter. Inside, our roving reporter shifts her camera from one person to another, and one setting to another. She's also got some serious kit, stuff that enables her to tap everyone's phones, TVs and computers. But that's not all; the characters' brains are bugged too; our reporter knows what they're thinking. She can see, hear and smell it all! Says Sophie Playle:

'The narrator knows everything, and isn't limited to the viewpoint of any single character. An omniscient narrator could be a character in the story (like a god or an enlightened person), or they could be an observing nonentity. Completely omniscient viewpoints are difficult to pull off well because the narrator needs to have reasons for imparting the knowledge they choose to impart in the order they choose to do so, otherwise the story will feel contrived [...] Omniscient narration and third person objective narration have similarities, but the key is looking for when the narrator knows more than it could objectively observe.

Example: Deeper knowledge than third-person narration

If you've read anything by Neil Gaiman, you'll see a blatant external narrator in evidence with a depth of knowledge that defies the rules of a third-person viewpoint. Here's an example from *Neverwhere* (p. 10).

He continued, slowly, by a process of osmosis and white knowledge (which is like white noise, only more informative), to comprehend the city, a process which accelerated when he realized that the actual City of London itself was no bigger than a square mile [...]

Two thousand years before, London had been a little Celtic village on the north shore of the Thames which the Romans had encountered and settled in. London had grown, slowly, until, roughly a thousand years later, it met the tiny Royal City of Westminster [...]

London grew into something huge and contradictory. It was a good place, and a fine city, but there is a price to be paid for all good places, and a price that all good places have to pay.

After a while, Richard found himself taking London for granted.

The first ten words might appear to be a third-person viewpoint ('He' refers to Richard, the protagonist), but that's not the case. What follows is a distinct narrative other, a voice that explains 'white knowledge'. In the second and third paragraphs, the all-knowing narrator offers historical information. Then in the final paragraph, we're told more about Richard. The viewpoint was never third-person objective. It was omniscient all along.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, 'the man' takes centre stage in most of the sections such that we see what he sees and feel what he feels. It's almost as if he's the narrator, and once more we could be forgiven for thinking the viewpoint third person. But there's more going on here.

In the following extracts, notice the shift beyond what it's possible for the man to see, think or know.

He woke in the morning and turned over in the blanket and looked down the road through the trees the way they'd come in time to see the marchers four abreast. Dressed in clothing of every description, all wearing red scarves at their necks. Red or orange, as close to red as they could find. He put his hand on the boy's head. Shh, he said. (pp. 95–6)

He wallowed into the ground and lay watching across his forearm. An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. [...] The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasselled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry. The boy lay with his face in his arms, terrified. (p. 96)

In the first extract, only an all-knowing alternative narrator could be privy to the intent behind the marchers' colour choice of scarves. In the second, the man watches the army, but it's only an omniscient narrator who can know where their blades were forged and how the boy is feeling. Maybe that narrator is McCarthy; maybe it's someone else. But it's not the man.

Example: World-building backstory in a flash

Some genres – science fiction and fantasy for example – lend themselves well to omniscient narrators because they can provide critical world-building backstory quickly. Terry Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters* provides a fine example (pp. 1–2).

Through the fathomless deeps of space swims the star turtle Great A'Tuin, bearing on its back the four giant elephants who carry on their shoulders the mass of the Discworld. A tiny sun and moon spin around them, on a complicated orbit to induce seasons, so probably nowhere else in the multiverse is it sometimes necessary for an elephant to cock a leg to allow the sun to go past.

Exactly why this should be may never be known. Possibly, the Creator of the universe got bored with all the usual business of axial inclination, albedos and rotational velocities, and decided to have a bit of fun for once.

Example: Social and political commentary

Omniscient viewpoint comes into its own when authors want to pepper their prose with political and social commentary that's distanced from the belief systems and experiences of their novel's characters.

Let's start with an example from Thackeray's classic, *Vanity Fair* (p. 6):

Honest Jemima had all the bills, and the washing, and the mending, and the puddings, and the plate and crockery, and the servants to superintend. But why

... speak about her? It is probable that we shall not hear of her again from this moment to the end of time [...]

But as we are to see a great deal of Amelia, there is no harm in saying, at the outset of our acquaintance, that she was a dear little creature; and a great mercy it is, both in life and in novels, which (and the latter especially) abound in villains of the most somber sort, that we are to have for a constant companion so guileless and good-natured a person. As she is not a heroine, there is no need to describe her in person; indeed I am afraid that her nose was rather short than otherwise, and her cheeks a great deal too round and red for a heroine; but her face blushed with a rosy health, and her lips with the freshest of smiles, and she had a pair of eyes which sparkled with the brightest and honestest good-humour, except indeed when they filled with tears, and that was a great deal too often; for the silly thing would cry over a dead canary-bird; or over a mouse, that the cat haply had seized upon; or over the end of a novel, were it ever so stupid.

Thackeray uses an omniscient POV to tell us everything his omniscient narrator (or more likely *he*) thinks about his characters, and the rules and norms of the society within which they live. Omniscience allows him to speak directly to the reader, thereby temporarily bypassing the voices of the players, whether those be reliable or not. And with it we are given not historical drama but timeless satire.

Example: Multiple introductions

Omniscience can be used to introduce us to a cast of characters – who they are, and what they are doing and thinking. Here's an example from Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (p. 671).

Dickens uses a seamless omniscient viewpoint to show us the internal and external experiences of Bradley Headstone, his pupils and Miss Peecher.

The scholars saw little or no change in their master's face, for it always wore its slowly-labouring expression. [...] As he paused with his piece of chalk at the blackboard before writing on it, he was thinking of the spot, and whether the water was not deeper, and the fall straighter, a little higher up, or a little lower down.

[...] It was evening, and Bradley was walking in the garden, observed from behind a blind by gentle little Miss Peecher, who contemplated offering him a loan of her smelling salts for headache, when Mary Anne, in faithful attendance, held up her arm.

For a more contemporary example, we can turn to Mick Herron, author of the Jackson Lamb thrillers, a series about MI5 officers who've screwed up and been sent to Slough House to shuffle paper.

Herron doesn't use a god as the lens through which we see. He uses a cat. He imagines our feline friend sneaking 'like a rumour' (p. 9) into Slough House and checking out the various rooms' occupants. Of course, a cat doesn't think or behave with intention like a human. The cat can't possibly know any of the things that we're told during its wanderings. Instead, Herron uses it as a cheeky tool to introduce the cast, the environs, and the atmosphere of Slough House.

Dead Lions is Book 2 of the series. Herron wants to introduce us to a cast of characters, most of whom appeared in Book 1. However, he respects the fact that not all his readers will have

read the first book, and that those who have might have forgotten who these people are and why they're important.

The omniscient POV allows him to do the introductions quickly and cleanly, and democratically. None of the characters are explored in depth. Rather, Herron gives us a snapshot of what he wants us to know about them, what makes them tick.

Louisa would have gone onto her knees, gathered the cat in her arms and held it to her quite impressive breasts – and here we're wandering into Min's area of opinion: [...] breasts that are just right; while Min himself, if he could get his mind off Louisa's tits long enough, would have taken a rough manly grasp of the cat's scruff; (p. 11)

And while our cat would have crossed this threshold as unobtrusively as it had all the others, that wouldn't have been unobtrusive enough. River Cartwright, who is young, fair-haired, pale-skinned, with a small mole on his upper lip, would immediately have ceased what he was doing – paperwork or screenwork; something involving thought rather than action, which perhaps accounts for the air of frustration that taints the air in here [...] (p. 12)

And here's an example from Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (p. 8). In the second paragraph, the omniscient narrator blatantly interrupts the story to give us some character description.

So Mr. Ross went first, in his filthy T-shirt and his crusted blue jeans, and Croup and Vandemar walked behind him, in their elegant black suits.

There are four simple ways for the observant to tell Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar apart: first of all, Mr.

Vandemar is two and a half heads taller than Mr. Croup; [...] fourth, Mr. Croup likes words, while Mr. Vandemar is always hungry. Also, they look nothing at all alike.

A rustle in the tunnel darkness; Mr. Vandemar's knife was in his hand, and it was quivering gently almost thirty feet away.

Example: Freedom to roam quickly

Let's return to Herron. Through the imaginary cat, we're given the freedom to roam without intrusion. No single character's feelings or experiences dominate over the others. It's a form of speedy literary democracy.

That roving feline shows us not only key details about each character, but also how they perceive each other. That's difficult to do with first-person and third-person narration without offering lengthy and interruptive explanations of how the information was acquired.

But when our cat pokes its head round the door, it'll find only Ho. The office is his alone, and Ho prefers this, for he mostly dislikes other people, though the fact that other people dislike him back has never occurred to him. And while Louisa Guy has been known to speculate that Ho occupies a place somewhere on the right of the autism spectrum, Min Harper has habitually responded that he's also way out there on the git index. [...] (p. 10)

It's a lucky escape for our cat [...] for on this particular morning the nigh-on unthinkable has happened, and Jackson Lamb is not dozing at his desk, or prowling the kitchen area outside his office,

scavenging his underlings' food; nor is he wafting up and down the staircase with the creepily silent tread he adopts at will. He's not banging on his floor, which is River Cartwright's ceiling, for the pleasure of timing how long it takes Cartwright to arrive [...] (p. 13)

Example: Tension

The omniscient can convey a sense of tension that sets up the next scene. Back to Herron. The main man, Jackson Lamb, head of ops, is not in residence. And that's unusual. Rather than hopping from one internal monologue to another, or cluttering the text with dull dialogue in which the various characters express their confusion about their boss's absence, the omniscient narrator tells us in only eighteen words ('Simply put ...') that everyone knows he's absent, and no one knows why.

[...] and he's not ignoring Catherine Standish while she delivers another pointless report he's forgotten commissioning. Simply put, he's not here.

And no one in Slough House has the faintest idea where he is. (p. 13)

The narration throughout this section is distant, devoid of emotion. It's literally a cat's-eye view.

What omniscient is not

An omniscient viewpoint can be powerful but it needs to be controlled and used with purpose. If we're accessing one character's thoughts and experiences, and we jump to another character's viewpoint, it can jar the reader.

Imagine you're listening to your best friend tell you about a difficult experience. Even though it didn't happen to you, her description of the event helps you to imagine the challenges she faced, the emotions she grappled with. You're thoroughly immersed and emotionally connected. Then someone else barges up to you both and tells you what it was like for them. Your friend butts back in to wrestle the telling back to her.

Would the interruption annoy and frustrate you? Would you feel like your efforts to invest in your friend's story were being thwarted?

The impact is the same when it occurs in a book's narrative (though not the dialogue, of course). That viewpoint ping pong is *not* omniscient POV. It's third-person limited gone awry.

Recommendation

I'd recommend caution. The beauty of fiction often lies in the unveiling, in the immersion. Overuse of an omniscient narrator can block this.

The all-seeing eye can be a powerful tool – as demonstrated by the examples above – but less experienced authors, particularly those writing commercial fiction such as thrillers and mysteries, risk accidental head-hopping, which will destroy the tension and distance the reader from the characters.

SUMMING UP



Choose POV with intention, and recognize the benefits and limitations of each style.

There's nothing wrong with experimenting, and you need not stick to one viewpoint style within a novel, as demonstrated by Mackintosh and Banks. Switches like these can add interest and tension, heighten conflict, and help readers build varying levels of intimacy with different characters.

Do, however, be consistent. Recall how Banks separates his first- and second-person narrations into distinct chapters and sections, and how the choice of narrative style is applied consistently to the viewpoint characters. Doing otherwise will lead to reader confusion.

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