



CLOSE-UP:



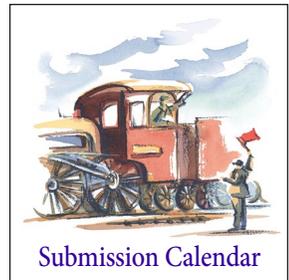
Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

HA JIN, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Many stories in Ocean of Words are in first person. In the Pond and Waiting are both third-person narratives. How do you decide on point of view?

This is important. Isaac Bashevis Singer once said in an interview that a writer should depend on the third-person narrative. He has a good point, because the third person is where you can bring out all you have as a writer. When I finished the stories in *Ocean of Words*, I put them together and realized that many of the stories were written in the first person. Some of the voices were similar, although they belonged to different narrators. I had to dismantle some of the stories in order to keep the book vocally diverse. In fact, the title story, “Ocean of Words,” was originally written in first person. I changed it to third person.

Gradually, I’ve come to realize that the third person is vital. That doesn’t mean I won’t write in the first person. I sometimes have to. But it’s limited compared to the third person. That’s why those



two novels are written in third person. Omniscience gives you different views of the same thing, as if the novel is a house and you can enter different rooms and see various views. If you write in first person, you have to let the reader know how the narrator has gained access to the information. The narrator has to be a witness to the experience. That limits you in many ways, including language, because the language has to fit the personality of the narrator. There are other kinds of limitations, as well. The first-person voice, really, cannot be as rich as the third person. But there are different kinds of first-person voices. For instance, it can be a communal voice, like the one in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." Third person may be the most important tool a writer has. To speak as yourself, sentence by sentence, and not in the voice of a character, is interesting. Paragraph by paragraph, it works well. That is one way to show your strength as a writer. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, interviewed by
Sarah Anne Johnson:

A Home at the End of the World is told in first-person chapters from each of the main characters, which adds a lot of depth and dimension to the overall narrative. How did you arrive at this multiple point of view, and what did you discover about it as you wrote?

The multiple voices in *Home at the End of the World* evolved with the writing. It was initially meant to be told only by Bobby, but he didn't feel like a sufficiently aware or articulate witness to carry an entire book. So I decided to alternate chapters between Bobby's narration and Jonathan's. That, however, felt claustrophobic and a little precious—here were these two guys going on about how much they loved each other. I added Alice's voice because she could see their relationship from a certain distance, and once I'd done that I went voice crazy for a while, gave everybody a voice. There are discarded chapters told by Ned, Burt, Isabel, Eric, and just about everyone except the mailman. I realized that was too much, and settled on four: Bobby, Jonathan, Alice, and Claire. ■



Photo: Shankbone

ANTONYA NELSON, interviewed by
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Much of your fiction is written in third person. Of the first-person stories, many are told from a male point of view.

Even in third person, I feel close to a male point of view. Most of the time, the narrator in my first-person-male stories is in a state of confusion about his relationship with a woman. It's not often that I write in the first person, but inhabiting the third-person point of view of a man doesn't seem to me strikingly difficult. People occasionally will say, "That must be quite a challenge, to write from the other gender's point of view." I think there are larger challenges that have to do with class or age. It's not difficult to write about a character who shares your same age or class. Empathy is not as complicated when you have some aspects in common with your character; it's not complicated to know someone who's like you in many ways but different in one. This is true especially if you are a reader. Reading makes you accustomed to inhabiting other lives and sensibilities. **If you try to inhabit a person who's different in every single way—who's not your age, class, nationality, gender—writing from that character's point of view is much more difficult.**

I'm curious about what makes people do what they do. I think about and study people. I think I make people uneasy sometimes because of this. I find myself thinking about this fairly obsessively, and I can't stop until I've found an answer. It doesn't matter whether it's the correct answer for that person. For me, it has to be an answer that seems to be true; it has to make sense to me.

Your story "Unified Front" comes to mind. The event you write about—the theft of a twin baby—came from a news report. Did you follow that incident closely?

Actually, I needed only one article for that story, because what happened in fact became less interesting to me than what I imagined. The woman who kidnapped the twin was nuts, and I'm not interested in writing about characters of that nature. I was much more interested in creating a person who had lived through many years of desperate desire for a child. There are fewer ways to identify with insanity than there are to identify with desire. By the same token, I didn't want to write from her point of view, which seemed to me, since she didn't have a decision to make, fairly straightforward. I situated her at the point of making her decision. Her husband's

decision to go along with the kidnapping was a moral quandary that I could tackle. I needed to find a way to place myself in the story. That is, I would never steal a baby, but I certainly could understand someone's desire to do so. That seems to me precisely the husband's position. I had to make this his story. The story didn't necessarily have to be told from the point of view of her husband or a man at all; it simply had to be somebody who is loyal to the person who is making the decision. That probably reflects the entangling nature of family. In the end, gender doesn't matter as much as the engagement one character has to the other who is under stress.

Much of the tension in your fiction comes from what the characters and reader never know or are able to learn.

Omniscience is not a very interesting position. If you already know what everybody is thinking, where would the tension be? **Most of our conflict in life resides in not knowing. I think that is why a single point of view or a limited point of view can create tension and cause the reader to have some stake in watching the character do the right or wrong thing. ■**

ANN PATCHETT, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

You've said that you were surprised that John Nickel became the narrator of Taft. When and how did this happen?

I rewrote the first twenty pages of that book twenty times. First, Carl and Fay's mother was the narrator. She wasn't even a character by the end of the book. Fay was the narrator for a long time. Then Carl was the narrator. But they were all too shiftless. They couldn't sustain the narrative. I went through the characters and came to John. It was like the characters threw a ball around, and I watched to see who was most capable of catching it and taking over. I found John to be the most honest and strongest of the characters. People always say it's a big deal to write a book in the first-person voice of a black man, and I think that's ridiculous. Would it be anything more than if he was just a black male character in the book? ■

CHARLES BAXTER, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

You've dealt with unreliable characters in "Gryphon" and in The Feast of Love. What are your views on the unreliable narrator?

Far, far too much has been made of the unreliable character. Some readers

have said, “There’s nobody we can depend on. Everything is just a point of view.” Well, it’s true that everybody has a point of view, but this doesn’t mean that everybody is unreliable. It simply means you have to take a point of view into account. The famous case of the unreliable narrator is Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, where the narrator is, it becomes clear, obtuse. But I think an obsession with unreliable narrators suggests that there is no true value and no account on which we can depend. **You have to believe that this character’s way of seeing things is reliable enough to want to go on the ride she’s going on. That’s the pleasure of reading.** If you have a first-person narrator, of course she will miss or misinterpret some things. That doesn’t mean that she is unreliable. Deconstruction has encouraged people to practice a universal skepticism that is, finally, anti-narrative. Claims of total unreliability are themselves unreliable. If you say you can rely on no one, what kind of life will you have? That turns into a practical rather than a metaphysical position. This decision can lead to a life of incredible solitude. ■

PERRI KLASS, interviewed by Charlotte Templin:

Does it complicate the writing process to use many perspectives?

It does complicate it. I mean, there are times when I’m reading a novel and the author has done that, and I’m irritated by it because sometimes it’s nice to be able to sink into the perspective of your narrator and not feel that you have to switch roles; but, on the other hand, I wanted the reader to know more than my main character knew, and I wanted the reader to be watching her, knowing a little more than she knew. ■

RUSSELL BANKS, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

In writing this in first person you have the narrator talking directly to the reader, and in one place you actually do something beyond, which was to explicitly credit the reader with a certain kind of intelligence and kindness—that’s a step beyond, isn’t it?

It’s not quite metafiction. I don’t want it to be all that self-conscious or artificial, but it really grows out of my having invented myself as a listener so that I could hear her voice. That was the first step in writing this. It’s the first step in any piece of writing, really. Instead of saying who’s my audience, I say who am I in relation to this character, and when it’s first-person

direct address like that it's really important, because we all say different things depending on who we are talking to—this happens to be a woman, late middle age, intelligent, educated, composed, evasive, defended in some ways. Who is she talking to? And I just said, “Well, she is talking to me. She is talking to a man of a certain age, who is educated, intelligent, inclined to be sympathetic to some of her political positions and not so sympathetic to others, but understanding nonetheless, and we are sitting on her front porch. Or we are sitting across a table in a bar.”

It would not be in your mind to be the person, the character?

No, because I am not a ventriloquist. I am not using her to say something for me. Same thing with *Rule of the Bone*. I said, “When does a fourteen-year-old kid tell the truth, really tell the truth?” And then I remembered **when I was a kid the only time I told the truth was with my brother, who was close in age to me, late at night, lying in bed, looking at the ceiling in the dark. And he would tell me the truth then.** So I just imagined myself as Bone’s pal or brother or trusted friend, in the cot next to him, both of us looking at the ceiling and him telling me the truth. And the same thing with Owen Brown [in *Cloudsplitter*], I just imagined myself as the recipient of those letters, as the assistant of the historian who was writing the biography of his father, John Brown. That really tunes me in, my ear, into the voice of the narrator. And with a woman narrator and a woman of a certain age and character, there is lots of stuff she would never tell and doesn’t. Lots of stuff she withholds. A few things she even lies about.

And as she regularly reminds us, the listener [the reader], that she is not going to tell.

Right. It’s hard work for her, and you have to kind of earn her trust in some way, and she has to also get her nerve up to tell things. Some of it is very painful, of course. And some of it invokes a lot of guilt for her to deal with. So it’s a complex telling, and it requires a certain amount of trust on the part of the reader, and patience too. ■

ANN PATCHETT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Let’s talk about Taft. How did you arrive on John Nickel, a black bartender in Memphis, Tennessee, as the narrator for this novel?

I was in a bar in Memphis flirting with a drummer. I just started thinking about this person. He was an incredibly compelling guy, a great musician,

and I sat in the bar all night and listened to him, and I was wondering about his story, where he was from. So I started making up a story about this guy. I'd been trying to write a book about some people in East Tennessee who were snake handlers, and it just wasn't working. When I saw this guy, I suddenly realized that all the people from East Tennessee would come to West Tennessee and they would have to be in his world. East Tennessee seems like Bangladesh, it's so far away when you're in Memphis, and those two worlds would never meet, that kind of Appalachian, poor white, and a very savvy, urban, black man, never. What if they were thrown together? So I took the characters from this book that wasn't going anywhere and put them into his world. I tried for a long time to have the white characters narrate the book. First, Fay and Carl's mother was the narrator, then Fay was, then Carl was, and none of it worked. Finally I had Nickel be the narrator, and that worked. He was the only character in the book who was trustworthy. The others were too unreliable, and I don't like unreliable narrators. That just wears me out. He was the only reliable person around to tell the story. It was in no way a conscious effort to write from the point of view of a black man. ■

ELIZABETH McCracken,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Most of your work has been in first person. Have all your projects begun that way, or is that one of the things that tends to change?

In "The Goings-On of the World," I had tried to write about Mr. Green, a character based on an actual murderer who worked around the house for my father's parents in Des Moines. I tried to write about him, but I didn't get any real sense of him in third person. Then, the first-person character came bouncing out. *Niagara Falls All Over Again* began in third person, but changed to first person. ■

POINT OF VIEW: Rigging the Ship Called Fiction

by Peter Selgin

Fiction's stock in trade is subjectivity. And all experience is subjective. There's no such thing, really, as a purely "objective" viewpoint in fiction (or, for that matter, in film, where by mere virtue of selecting her close-ups and camera angles the director injects subjective content). To the extent that certain details are provided while others have been left out, the experience has been modified, customized, or interpreted: it has passed through a subjective screen or filter. To be authentic, experiences must pass through that subjective filter: they must be sorted and sifted either by the sensibility of a particular character or set of characters, or through the mindset of an omniscient narrator, or through an impersonal, objective filter that *edits out* all internal emotional content (feelings and thoughts), relying on readers to supply the missing elements.



The point-of-view filter may enhance or extract, but there must be a filter. Information conveyed to the reader with this filter absent or broken is wine without a glass. You can have all the other stuff—a plot, characters, dialogue, description, setting, conflict—but if these aren't bound by a consistent viewpoint you'll still end up with nothing. Which is why when confronted with point-of-view errors in workshop, I often write on the board in big fat letters:

NO POINT OF VIEW, NO STORY

Too often writers neglect point of view completely, and fail to make this most crucial of choices. They assume that point of view is automatic or unimportant, or that it's something that can be fixed or added later, which is like getting a flu shot after you've caught the flu. And anyway it's the wrong way to be thinking of viewpoint. It's thinking mechanically, from *outside* of the story and its characters, rather than from deep inside them or their world.

And this is the heart of the problem, and why when teaching point of view most writing teachers fail, as I've mostly failed myself. We speak of such things as "third-person subjective" and "limited omniscience," as if describing topgallant yards and second futtocks or other parts of a tall-masted schooner—the S.S. *Fiction*—whose sails can only be hoisted when well underway in heavy seas.

But point of view doesn't work that way. It's not a matter of rigging the ship for optimal performance, but of making it seaworthy to begin with. To speak of revising or "fixing" the point of view of a story is like saying you want to fix a ship that's already at the bottom of the sea. You might be able to salvage some of its cargo and parts, but it's too late to "fix" it. Mechanical solutions may serve pedagogues and pedagogy, but otherwise they are pointless. They're pointless because point of view is more than a set of operating instructions or ropes or pulleys; it's more than just a lever or a handle or even a camera with a built-in microphone. Point of view is a *mindset*; not just a way of seeing, but a complete set of interpretive criteria—a sensibility through which readers experience a fictional world: i.e., through which things are seen, felt, tasted, smelled, and (potentially) weighed and judged and put into personal or historical context and/or perspective. This mindset stems from character. And by "character" here I mean either a member of the work's fictional cast, or that of an omniscient yet invisible host or narrator, or—and at the very least—the character of the author who selects and orchestrates the details with which we, his readers, are presented. And even the most objective, camera-like point of view requires a rigorous selection process. Call it viewpoint by omission, if you like, but it's still viewpoint, and it still requires the exercise of judgment, and judgment exercised in the absence of character is folly.

Point of view without personality, without soul, is impossible. That personality may come directly from us as authors and may color and flavor the world in which our characters find themselves just as a bouillon cube flavors the broth in which vegetables and meat boil. Or we may rely on the souls of our characters to flavor their own fictional broth. One way or another a story must have its tone, its flavor, its soul, its point-of-view filter.

What's ironic in all this is that to write without a firm grasp of point of view is so much harder than to write with one. It's harder because we find ourselves writing from *outside of* our material, mechanically, rather than from inside, organically. When writing mechanically we rely entirely on our intellects, poor things that they are. And even if they aren't such poor things, still, our intellects are no match for the sensibilities of our characters, who see and know and feel and even grasp things viscerally (but also intellectually) that we cannot grasp or even fully understand, because we don't live in their shoes: not if we're writing from outside of or beyond them, we don't. ■

BARRY UNSWORTH, interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:

Whether you write in first person or third, the narrative voice in your novels is always strong. What are some of the challenges you encounter when you're trying to locate the narrator's voice?

I think this is a particular problem in the first-person voice, especially in historical fiction—or fiction that is set in the past and called historical—to make a first-person voice convincing. There's quite often a struggle to find the right idiom, the right mode, and the right personality behind the voice, or the right voice for the personality. This has always been a problem for me. I know when I think I've got it, but I have to search for it quite a bit. If you're working in the first person, your narrator is a figure from within the world he's speaking about. He is familiar with that world, and therefore, through him you can make the reader share that familiarity more easily. Certain things can be taken for granted. If it's third-person narration, there has to be more labor of constructing the world, of beginning with details that will seem authentic and convince the reader that he's in the twelfth century rather than the twenty-first. ■

ANDREW PORTER, interviewed by Trevor Gore:

All of the stories in your short-story collection, The Theory of Light and Matter, are written in first person. What advantages do you feel first person affords you?

Well, for one, I like the intimacy of it and the idea of assuming a persona. It's easier for me to engage with a story and fall into the dream of it when I actually become the character. One of the really addictive things about writing is that when you're truly focused and writing well, you're completely removed from the world, and when you assume a persona, you don't really have to think about what you're saying. You can let the character speak. And as long as your sense of that character is strong and you're true to the voice, then you don't have to worry about what it means. You can figure that out later or let someone else figure it out. The process becomes much more intuitive and exciting at that point. It's really just a matter of forgetting the problems in your own life and embracing the character's problems. They need to become your problems, and you need to care about them deeply. If you can't get yourself into that mind-set, then it's probably not a good time for you to be writing.

One of the unique aspects of a first-person story is that the narrator has so many limits placed upon his or her knowledge. How do you, as a writer, use these limits to your advantage?

Marilynne Robinson once said that the majority of fiction is about a character coming to some understanding about his or her false relationship to the truth, and that's something I think about a lot when I'm working on a story. I'm always thinking, *What doesn't the character know?* Often, the tension that drives a story comes from the fact that the character is being kept in the dark about something, or is perhaps in denial. That's a very powerful engine.

The other advantage is that limitations on knowledge allow for certain dramatic turns and possibilities that might not have occurred to me earlier in the writing process. For example, when I was working on my short story "Azul," I never considered the potentially violent nature of Azul's boyfriend or how he might feel about their breakup. The narrator didn't have access to this information, so it wasn't something I thought about. But later in the writing process, when I found myself stuck, I thought about what types of things the narrator didn't know, and the lack of knowledge surrounding the boyfriend's nature occurred to me. That small ignorance on the part of the narrator opened a lot of doors for me.

So I guess what I'm saying is that behind all of those unanswered questions in a first-person story, behind all of those things that the narrator doesn't know, are potential conflicts and plotlines, potential avenues that the story might take. These limits on knowledge help me with all of my stories. I like the fact that the narrator doesn't always know what's going on emotionally or psychologically with the other characters. This allows characters to say and do things that the narrator, and even the reader, might not be expecting. It opens a doorway to a multitude of ways to heighten the tension.

Of course, sometimes your best advantage comes from keeping everyone in the dark. In my story "Coyotes," you have a situation where the narrator's father goes on extended trips. I deliberately kept it ambiguous as to what the father is doing, because the narrator's longing for him comes across even stronger as a result of this ambiguity. Had I given the narrator this knowledge, it would have prevented the story from accessing that deepest sense of longing that we all can relate to, that feeling that transcends the story itself.

You work with a lot of adult narrators who look back on their childhoods and

question aspects of their experiences. How do you keep these narrators in the dark so they can ask genuine questions while still allowing the readers to see the truth?

It's a tricky thing to manage, but it relates to the fact that when you're writing in the first-person point of view, you're always telling two stories at once. One of those stories is being told through the somewhat biased lens of the narrator, and one of those stories is being told through the slightly more objective lens of the writer. If you consider my story "Hole," for example, you have a narrator who is looking back on his childhood and the accidental death of his friend, a death that he feels responsible for, even though he was too young to know how to prevent the accident. As a reader, you can understand the causal relationship between the events in the story, and you understand that this was a freak accident, because you weren't present; you don't share the bias of responsibility and guilt. But the narrator is biased in his view, so at the end of the story, his guilt still blinds him and leaves him confused about what actually happened that day, whereas the reader can see the truth. ■

D M GORDON:

I love W. Somerset Maugham's statement that there are three rules to writing a novel; unfortunately no one knows what they are. The same could be said for short stories and poems. Sometimes I wish this were less true. Specific checklists exist in how-to books, with questions that can force a further draft. Do you need a compelling beginning? Are your characters true? Does your pacing work? Etc., etc. There are formulas to apply, the most basic being to write a desire that leads to a conflict, which leads to action, then resolution. But each story has its own questions, and each answers to its own world.

Lately looking for those questions has been leading me to five or more drafts. Maybe this exposes how I struggle, but at least the drafts prove I've been tenacious and curious. One version is often a switch in point of view. It's amazing to me how both troublesome and enlightening that basic element can be. I gravitate toward omniscient narration partly because I want permission to be in multiple minds. Switching to first person makes the story more invested, better focused, and I can always pull back the lens once I've gotten what I need. ■

MARY GAITSKILL, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Your collection *Because They Wanted To* opens with “Tiny, Smiling Daddy,” a story about a man thinking back on his ambivalent relationship with his lesbian daughter. What drew you to exploring this father’s point of view?

That was a story that took a long time. I wrote it originally when I was writing the stories that went into *Bad Behavior*. The original version wasn’t as developed.

In that draft, the daughter hadn’t written anything—there was a phone call that triggered him thinking about her, which was much less dramatic. I don’t remember why I chose to write it from his point of view. In general, I think it can give a story a very interesting energy if you write from a point of view that you’re not naturally sympathetic with, or that’s somewhat foreign to you. **I tell my students, if you’re going to write a story from your real life, what can make it interesting is to write it from the point of view of someone besides yourself—ideally, a person you didn’t like. ■**



K.L. COOK, interviewed by Lucrecia Guerrero:

The following is a quotation from Daniel Rifenburgh, in his review of The Girl from Charnelle for the Houston Chronicle: “It’s often said that the ultimate test of a male novelist lies in his ability to faithfully and compellingly portray the inner, emotional life of a woman, and that only the greats like Tolstoy, Flaubert, and James can pull it off...Cook pulls it off admirably.” Your ability to get into the mind and soul of a teenage girl is impressive. The book is told from a third-person point of view, from Laura Tate’s perspective. How did you decide on third-person point of view? And why specifically from Laura’s, and only Laura’s, point of view? In Last Call the stories are told from the points of view of different characters.

When asked this question, I sometimes say that I felt, during the writing of this novel, like I was a sixteen-year-old girl. Seriously, I struggled with point of view in this book. One of the challenges for me was writing believably from Laura’s point of view for four hundred pages. At times, I questioned whether I could or *should* do it, but she was the character I was most interested in. The novel is hers. I wrote a complete draft in third person from her perspective. Then I rewrote the novel in first person,

which of course necessitated many changes in voice. The big problem with first person was that it didn't allow me as much freedom with language. I also grappled with the retrospective voice. **Anytime you use a first-person narrator, you must, unless you're writing in present tense, figure out what I call the fixed point in the retrospective narration—the point in time from which the narrative is being written.** In a first-person narration, there are always two narrators: the character who went through the events, and the older narrator looking back on and making sense of those events. After writing the novel in first person, I realized that such a choice was wrong for this book; it lost its immediacy and perspective, and drained the story of some of its suspense. So I switched it back to third person and again made many more changes. ■

VALERIE LAKEN, *interviewed by Peggy Adler:*

You do a beautiful job writing from multiple points of view in this book [Dream House], which is part of how you earn the story's complexity. Did you ever change point of view while writing? And how did you arrive at the choice to write in the third person versus the first?

I think there were a few very early, sketchy, brief drafts that had Kate narrating in first person—which is really my preferred narrative mode—but I realized early on that this particular story was going to require multiple points of view. And I heard Elizabeth McCracken say at a reading once that a writer should never attempt multiple first-person points of view in a novel unless he or she was named William Faulkner. She was joking, sort of, but I took it to heart and quickly switched to third person.

In terms of deciding which characters' perspectives to enter, that was definitely a strategy that evolved over time, and was a subject of some debate among readers of the drafts. There used to be chapters, for instance, in the perspective of Walker's mother, but I ultimately found them unnecessary and cut them, even though I loved them. My favorite is chapter 25, which I think of as sort of the house's point of view, and some readers felt I should have done more chapters in that perspective, but I liked the way that it stood out as unique in that pivotal moment of the book.

The problem with opening up to multiple points of view is deciding which points of view are truly essential. Some early readers felt Stuart's point-of-view passages were not essential, and I entirely rewrote them more than once, trying to convince those readers, because for me it always

seemed necessary to have his point of view riding alongside his wife's. It was important to me that this not just be "Kate's story." It was really important to me that this book be more expansive than just one woman's perspective on her house. This probably had something to do with my sensation that a novel is kind of like a mural rather than a portrait. To me, the whole point of a novel is that, unlike most short stories, you get to portray an entire community coping with a variety of related problems. I thought, *Well, if I'm going to go to all the trouble of writing a novel, then I want to take advantage of all the liberties the genre affords.*

Of course, with multiple points of view, you have so many threads, characters, and stories to keep track of. Did you figure out any of those plot points beforehand, or did you just work it out through the writing?

I charted out the plotlines of the book many times, in different colors and schemes, trying to keep track of what each character was up to and how their paths could cross again. I'm a fairly visual person, and there was something reassuring about charting out the book's structure that enabled me to relax more in the writing of a given chapter, and just watch what the characters might naturally and unexpectedly do next. And then, of course, they would often surprise me, and I'd have to go back and change my charted plan.

That's really interesting. Did you do that charting after you had a relatively complete first draft, or did you start plotting from the get-go?

Somewhere in between. At first I just wrote and wrote, but I found the scope of the novel so daunting that it was paralyzing me. So I started charting things out, and that lifted the burden and clarified my vision of the project.

Since you did switch point of view, I wonder if you worked on the story chronologically in early drafts, or if you ever worked on one character for a while, then spliced it in the editing room?

Sometimes I cut chapters apart or spliced them together for the sake of structure, but I did not write one character's entire trajectory and then move on to another's. I wrote the chapters alternating between characters, more or less in the order they appear in the book. I would say, "Okay, if I can just get through this chapter, then in the next one, I get to go back to X's POV, and that'll be easier." Or something like that.

Did switching point of view appeal to the short-story writer in you?

Yeah, definitely. One of the great joys of short-story writing is that you pour everything you have into ten or twenty pages, knowing that when it's over, you get to put it all behind you and start over with a clean slate, a whole new set of characters and ideas. When I was writing this novel, I had a friend who was writing a novel that focused on one character, one point of view, chapter after chapter. I remember thinking, *Man, don't you get sick of that character?* At the same time, sometimes I kicked myself: *Man, why didn't I just start off with one of those beautiful little quiet, first-person, coming-of-age, 180-page novels?* That sounded like such a joy to me, though of course those novels contain their own scary challenges. ■

ELIZABETH McCracken, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

The key to writing a first-person book is to train yourself to think like the narrator; everything else takes care of itself. The deeper you delve into the book, the easier you slip into it when you sit down to write, because you've probably been living in it for hours anyhow. It's not a matter of saying, "What would Peggy do now?" You're thinking like Peggy, so accessing her brain is easy. That's how it felt when I was writing *The Giant's House*, and that's how it feels on this new book, too.

When I was working on *The Giant's House*, I thought it was a tremendously autobiographical book. Then when I read it, I realized that it was in no way at all autobiographical. The narrator and I have certain characteristics in common, but she's a completely different person. I guess I had to believe that it was autobiographical in order to write the book, because I was thinking like her. When it's working well, it feels like channeling. You have your characters say all kinds of unbelievable things. They're better people than you are, and they're worse people than you are. Their strengths are not your strengths, and their weaknesses are not your weaknesses, but you may not even have thought about your own strengths and weaknesses until you began to write this character. ■

CAROLYN CHUTE, interviewed by Barbara Stevens:

How do you decide whether to write in first person or third person? This is something I really struggle with sometimes.

I struggle with that, too. I think I've given up on first person.

Why?

You can do almost all the same stuff with third-person subjective that you can do with first person, but the thing is you can get a little bit fancier with the language with third person. First person really limits you in that anything a character wouldn't see you can't talk about, or it will sound too contrived. You're really limited. And sometimes I like to pull back and not see what's in characters' heads, because sometimes it's even more powerful to just see what they're doing. ■

PATRICIA HAMPL, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

The first-person voice in Virgin Time permits the writer to examine interior and, as you say, exterior realities: Someone strolls through Prague, climbs the hills outside Assisi, and reflects on the place of prayer and of culture in her life and the lives of those around her, taking the reader along from place to place and thought to thought.

I also think the American consciousness is most congenial in the presence of the first-person voice. Not because we're egotistical, but because, for good or for ill, we did predicate this nation on individuality. We're not communal at our base. We're individual. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—what a strange concept on which to base a nation! But that's us. You only need to listen to our greatest poet and our greatest poem, Walt Whitman in his "Song of Myself," to hear this self echoing through the American spirit.

We speak in the first person not because we're especially self-absorbed, but because it is the way American imagination works. *The Great Gatsby*, even *Moby Dick*—both naturally gravitate to the first-person voice, and both are recognized as our most American novels. Not personal, not autobiographical, but national at base, and necessarily written in the first person. ■

DAVID MALOUF, interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:

In the first paragraph of *Johnno*, the kind of irony we get, or comic view, is part of the novel's tone and of the narrator's character. His voice tends to be innocent and transparent, but it also throws up all sorts of contradictions and comic reversals. *Johnno* begins, "My father was one of the fittest men I have ever known." In the first paragraph, we are told how he is examined for a new insurance policy, and the letter that declares him A1 in health

turns up two days after his death. That's very much the tone of the book, and so much like the kind of reversals on which the book is based, because it plays with one of the problems of first-person narratives. What he knows then is everything that comes after and that went before. The narrator is often aware, at that point, that what he told us earlier was wrong, because he didn't know enough then or didn't see things in their proper light.

At almost every point in *Johnno*, what the narrator thinks is happening and what is actually happening are completely different. The novel is about the way people change, and what changes they are capable of. It's not only what happens that changes, but the difference between what they see now and were able to see then and what they once felt and feel now. ■

JIM GRIMSLEY, interviewed by *Jim Schumock*:

What about the voice you use in Winter Birds? It's almost like a long soliloquy in second person.

The book is written in the second person, speaking about Danny as “you,” and I made the choice when I eliminated the other two main points of view. I tried the book writing about Danny as “I,” and I couldn't make it work, and then I tried it again, writing about Danny as “he,” and I couldn't make that work either. Both of those points of view tended to put the wrong kind of distance between me and Danny, the point-of-view character.

When I hit on using the second person, which is a very common point of view for poetry but isn't used very often in prose, it worked for me in a very clear way—and I think eventually what I understood was that it is a long monologue. It is the older Danny telling the story to himself, but with some kind of strange separation between himself as the older person and himself as the remembered eight-year-old. So I think the point of view actually gives you exactly the right distance and connection between the narrator and the point-of-view character.

It's infrequently that we read a confessional novel written in second person. It's so much easier to write in first person, don't you think?

It is terribly easy to write in first person; in fact, I think it's so easy that unless you're *really* gifted, like Kaye Gibbons, you're going to use it in a cheap way. The first-person point of view is incredibly plastic—it'll take you anywhere you want to go. And the tendency that I had, at least when I

was writing *Winter Birds*, was to meander with that point of view, whereas when I hit on the second person, it focused me very much on the moment I was trying to write about. ■

JOHN MCNALLY, interviewed by
Stephanie Kuehnert:

How do you decide what point of view a story will be in? Do you experiment a lot or just get a sense right away? Has there ever been a story you had to completely rewrite in a different point of view?



Photo: Wake Forest University

“Smoke,” which is the first Hank and Ralph story, was originally written in third person from the mother’s point of view. Plus, Kelly, the sister in “Smoke,” was an older son in the first draft, and there was no Hank or Ralph. Tex, the dog, may have been the only character who survived intact, and he’s, well, a dog.

I like writing in first person, and I’m probably more naturally drawn to it, but sometimes I have to ask myself, Is there a reason for writing in first person? I mean, a book like *Catcher in the Rye* had to be a first-person novel. So, these days, I like to think that there’s some necessity for it, either in terms of voice or in terms of narrative strategy. ■

RICHARD BAUSCH, interviewed by
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

I once made a student rewrite the beginning of *The Great Gatsby* in the third person because she glibly said it was in the wrong point of view. I said, “By next week I want you to have the opening chapter rewritten in the third person.” ■

DAVID LONG, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

Most of my stories are in a third person that’s so intensely focused on one character that it’s almost like being in the first person. There’s a line from “Blue Spruce,” for instance, just to give you an example: “[Laurel] had no intention of staying on in Montana, much less with Eva. Good Lord, what

an arrangement.” So, you’ve got two sentences. The first is a general exposition sort of sentence, and the next one is down inside Laurel’s thoughts. I *could* have written: “Good Lord, she thought, what an arrangement.” But it was quicker and more supple to just dip down inside. So, what happens is, you become the narrator part of the time and you become the character other times. You’re kind of moving in and out. Hopefully, it’s done with enough grace that the reader doesn’t find a great discrepancy. ■

SIRI HUSTVEDT, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

I am always eager to write a completely different book from the one I wrote before. I knew that it was time to write as a man. Both of the other books were from a female perspective. For this particular book, I wanted a voice from the center. It had to be a male voice. Nevertheless, he’s a Jew and an intellectual, which puts him outside the heart of the culture. He is me, too. He was just waiting to come out, I suppose. That’s one of the mysteries of making art—all the people we carry around inside us. ■

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

In your article for the New York Times, “New Insights into the Novel? Try Reading 300,” you explain how reading three hundred novels in five months as a judge for the National Book Award gave you new insight into what makes a successful novel and what does not. After that experience you returned to your novel-in-progress, threw out two hundred pages, and started again. What did you discover that made you want to throw out those two hundred pages?

That was a painful experience. I was very happy, actually, as I restarted the novel, because I knew it was going to be so much better. What I learned from reading so many novels is that the novel, as it goes on, has to expand. It has to give you a sense of a larger life, not just the story you’re dealing with, no matter how well it’s told. There must be a sense of resonance, a sense that in that story is the knowledge of a whole larger story whose presence is felt. I realized that my novel wasn’t doing that.

How did you undertake the work of re-visioning and re-beginning that novel?

I had to change the narrative structure. I had the novel in a multiple-narrator perspective, some who saw the story up close, but I had to add

the omniscient narrative voice. I'd used this voice sporadically, but it hadn't been a big part of the narration. It's like changing the lens on a camera. Sometimes you're seeing it up close and sometimes from afar. I hope this gives the novel a sense of opening up and expanding. I think it does. ■

TOBIAS WOLFF, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

Several stories in The Night in Question have a serial point of view.

There are a couple stories in there in which the point of view does shift. It is an unusual move to make in a short story, and one that you had better have a good reason for doing, because it can feel like a cute device. It can feel like fancy footwork. You have to have good reasons for doing it.

I did it in the story "Casualty," where there's a change of point of view at the end of the story to that of a nurse. I was even thinking of calling the story "The Nurse's Story," to alert the reader that this change was coming. The point is that our way of thinking about war is almost incurably romantic, because we get seduced by the figure of the young soldier who tragically loses his life or his character and becomes someone other than the decent person he started out to be. There is something romantic even about anti-war novels like *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It's our love affair with the young man, really. I wanted to break the hold of that vision and show another perspective, show the terrible damage that radiates out into the human community through an event like that. In this case, it's a nurse.

At the end, you break away from the story's concentration on the soldier. You are in another mentality altogether, a feminine mentality that has been shaken to its roots by the things she has had to witness and attend to. And it's had terrible consequences for her. I wanted to widen the perspective and give a sense of how this event, the detonation of these events, reaches far, far beyond the tight focus in which we're accustomed to seeing war. ■

ANN PATCHETT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

This is your first omnisciently narrated novel, and it has the fullness and breadth of a vision realized. Do you feel that it was a leap for you in terms of craft?

Huge. It's what I've always wanted to do. It is exactly the thing that I have not been able to pull off in my last three books. In my last three books,

every time, I was trying to do this, and I couldn't. With *The Magician's Assistant*, I finally moved into the third person, but it's a very first-person-ish kind of third person. In *The Patron Saint of Liars*, I have those different first-person narrators because I couldn't figure out any other way to do it. I didn't know how to do third person, and I didn't know how to do omniscient, but I did know that these characters didn't communicate with one another. The only way I could structure it was to have three first-person narrations, because they're all feeling things they can't say to the other ones.

Then in *Taft*, I have those Taft scenes that are in third person, which was like a little running jump at something. In *The Magician's Assistant*, I have the limited third person. So you can see the trajectory of where I'm going with this.

What were the challenges in writing it from the omniscient point of view?

The challenge of balance, especially when you have sixty characters, to feel like you're seeing everybody in a sweep. It's not just that you have this scene and you're in their head, and you have the next scene and you're in this other character's head. There has to be an easy flow between point of view. You also don't want to create a situation where the reader is more interested in one character than another. It's the responsibility of the narration to keep the story even in its interest.

You were saying earlier that when you're writing from the omniscient point of view, you don't have that voice in your head that you can latch on to. It's not a voice-driven enterprise. What does drive it forward?

Nothing! That's what makes it so hard. *Bel Canto* was like a piece of knitting. I'd work on it fiercely for two weeks, and then I'd put it in a drawer for three months. Every time I finished a chapter, I felt like it was over—I didn't know where to go next. I didn't have anything that compelled me from point to point. It was just sheer will. So it took me a lot longer. ■

ELIZABETH McCracken, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

I wrote an opening, a third-person opening, and I thought the book [*The Giant's House*] was going to be third person. This opening included the line, "Everybody said the librarian was in love with him." I thought, maybe this librarian could be an important character, because she'll be the person who establishes the museum and then leaves it to Alice, and Alice always

feels the shadow of this great librarian looking over her shoulder. Peggy Cort was scarcely going to be in the book. She was dead before the book began, but I decided to write a little bit in her voice, to get a handle on her, find out what she was like. Well, she just wouldn't stop talking. ■





CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

www.glimmertrain.org

ADLER, Peggy. Interviewer. Teaches writing at University of Michigan.

BANKS, Russell. Recent novels: *The Reserve*, *The Darling*, *Trailerpark*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Rule of the Bone*, *Cloud-splitter*. Story collections include *The Angel on the Roof*. Nonfiction: *Dreaming Up America*.

BAUSCH, Richard. Novels include *Hello to the Cannibals*; *Good Evening Mr. & Mrs. America*, and *All the Ships at Sea*; *Rebel Powers*; *Violence*; and *The Last Good Time*. Story collection: *The Selected Stories of Richard Bausch*. richardbausch.com

BAXTER, Charles. Novels: *The Soul Thief*, *Saul and Patsy*, *Shadow Play*, *The Feast of Love*, *First Light*. Story collections: *Gryphon*, *A Relative Stranger*, *Through the Safety Net*, *Believers*, *Harmony of the World*. Books on writing: *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*, *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot*. charlesbaxter.com

BIRNBAUM, Robert. Interviewer. Editor-at-Large of the literary and cultural website IdentityTheory.com

CHUTE, Carolyn. Novels: *The School on Heart's Content Road*, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts*, *Merry Men*, *Snow Man*.

COOK, K.L. Story collection: *Last Call*. Novel: *The Girl from Charnelle*. Work in *Shenandoah*, *Poets & Writers*, *Threepenny Review*, *Harvard Review*. klcok.net

CUNNINGHAM, Michael. Novels: *By Nightfall*, *Specimen Days*, *The Hours*, *Flesh and Blood*, *A Home at the End of the World*. Nonfiction: *Land's End*. michaalcunninghamwriter.com

DIVAKARUNI, Chitra Banerjee. Novels: *Queen of Dreams*, *Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Vine of Desire*. Story collections: *Arranged Marriage*, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. Published in *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Yorker*. Author of three books of poetry and a children's novel. chitradivakaruni.com

GAITSKILL, Mary. Novels: *Veronica*; *Because They Wanted To*; *Two Girls*, *Fat and Thin*. Story collections: *Don't Cry*, *Bad Behavior*. Syracuse University. marygaitskill.com

GORDON, Mary. Novels: *Pearl*, *Spending*, *Final Payments*, *The Company of Women*, *Men and Angels*, *The Other Side*. Also a book of novellas, *The Rest of Life*; a story collection, *The Stories of Mary Gordon*; a book of essays, *Good Boys and Dead Girls*; and a biography, *Joan of Arc*. Memoirs: *The Shadow Man*, *Seeing Through Places*. Barnard College.

GORDON, D. M. Work in *Massachusetts Review*, *Nimrod*, *Poetry Daily*.

GORE, Trevor. Interviewed Andrew Porter. Work in *Missouri Review*, *The Pinch*.

GRIMSLEY, Jim. Novels: *Forgiveness*, *Boulevard*, *Comfort and Joy*, *Winter Birds*, *Dream Boy*, *My Drowning*, *Kirith Kirin*. Plays: *Mr. Universe* and *Other Plays*. Emory University. [Jim Grimsley home page](http://JimGrimsley.com)

GUERRERO, Lucrecia. Interviewed K.L. Cook. Story collection: *Chasing Shadows*. Work in *Colorado Review*, *Louisville Review*.

HAMPL, Patricia. Poetry: *Woman Before an Aquarium*, *Resort and Other Poems*. Memoirs and other books: *The Florist's Daughter*, *Blue Arabesque*, *A Romantic Education*, *Virgin Time*, *Spillville*, *I Could Tell You Stories*. University of Minnesota. patriciahampl.com

HUSTVEDT, Siri. Novels: *The Summer Without Men*, *The Sorrows of an American*, *What I Loved*, *The Blindfold*, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*. Essays: *A Plea for Eros*, *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, *Yonder*. Poetry collection: *Reading to You*. sirihustvidt.net

JIN, Ha. Novels: *War Trash*, *Waiting*, *The Crazed*, *In the Pond*. Story collections: *Under the Red Flag*, *Ocean of Words*, *The Bridegroom*. Three books of poetry. Boston University.

JOHNSON, Sarah Anne. Interviewer. Editor of *Conversations with American Women Writers* and *The Art of the Author Interview*. sarahannejohnson.com

KLASS, Perri. Novels: *The Mercy Rule*, *The Mystery of Breathing*, *Recombinations*, *Other Women's Children*. Story collections: *Love and Modern Medicine*, *I Am Having an Adventure*. Nonfiction includes *Treatment Kind and Fair*, *Every Mother Is a Daughter* (co-author). perriklass.com

KUEHNERT, Stephanie. Interviewer. Novel: *I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone*. stephaniekuehnert.com

LAKEN, Valerie. Novel: *Dream House*. Stories in *Ploughshares*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Antioch Review*. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. valerielaken.com

LEVASSEUR, Jennifer. Interviewer. Editor, with Kevin Rabalais, of *Novel Voices: 17 Award-Winning Novelists on How to Write, Edit, and Get Published*.

LONG, David. Novels: *The Inhabited World*, *The Falling Boy*, *The Daughters of Simon Lamoreaux*. Story collection: *Blue Spruce*. Nonfiction: *Dangerous Sentences*.

MALOUF, David. Novels: *Ransom*, *Untold Tales*, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, *An Imaginary Life*, *Remembering Babylon*, *Fly Away Peter*, *Johnno*. Story collections: *The Complete Stories*, *Dream Stuff*, *Child's Play*, *Antipodes*.

MCCRACKEN, Elizabeth. Novels: *The Giant's House*, *Niagara Falls All Over Again*. Story collection: *Here's Your Hat*, *What's Your Hurry*. Memoir: *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination*. elizabethmccracken.com

MCINNIS, Susan. Interviewer. Center for Distance Education, Fairbanks, Alaska.

MCNALLY, John. Novels: *America's Report Card*, *The Book of Ralph*. Story collection: *Troublemakers*. Editor of four fiction anthologies. Wake Forest University.

NELSON, Antonya. Novels: *Bound*, *Talking in Bed*, *Nobody's Girl*, *Living to Tell*. Story collections: *Nothing Right*, *Some Fun*, *Female Trouble*, *The Expendables*, *In the Land of Men*, *Family Terrorists*. University of Houston.

PATCHETT, Ann. Novels: *State of Wonder*, *Run, Bel Canto*, *Taft*, *The Magician's Assistant*, *The Patron Saint of Liars*. Memoir: *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*. annpatchett.com

PORTER, Andrew. Novel: *In Between Days*. Story collection: *The Theory of Light and Matter*. Work in *One Story*, *Epoch*, *Story*, *Antioch Review*, *Story Quarterly*. Pushcart anthology. Trinity University, San Antonio. andrewporterwriter.com

RABALAIS, Kevin. Interviewer. Editor, with Jennifer Levasseur, of *Novel Voices: 17 Award-Winning Novelists on How to Write, Edit, and Get Published*.

SCHUMOCK, Jim. Interviewer. Author of *Story Story Story: Conversations with American Authors*.

SCHUTZ, Greg. Interviewer. Work in *Sycamore Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Juked*.

SCHWARTZ, Lynne Sharon. Story collection: *Referred Pain*. Novels: *Disturbances in the Field*, *Leaving Brooklyn*, *Rough Strife*, *In the Family Way*. Nonfiction: *Ruined by Reading*, *Face to Face*. lynnesharonschwartz.com

SCOT, Barbara. Books: *The Violet Shyness of Their Eyes: Notes from Nepal*, *Prairie Reunion*, *The Stations of Still Creek*.

SCOTT, Andrew. Interviewer. Fiction: *Modern Love*. Work in *Writers Chronicle*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*. Ball State University. [Andrew Scott website](http://andrewscottwebsite.com)

SELGIN, Peter. Novels: *Drowning Lessons*, *Live Goes to the Movies*. Memoir: *Confessions of a Left-Handed Man*. Nonfiction: *179 Ways to Save a Novel*, *By Cunning & Craft*. Antioch University. peterselgin.com

STEVENS, Barbara Lucy. Interviewer. Journalist and fiction writer who teaches writing at Rhode Island College.

TEMPLIN, Charlotte. Interviewer. Nonfiction: *Feminism and the Politics of Literary Reputation*. Interviews in *American Studies*, *Missouri Review*, *Boston Review*.

UNSWORTH, Barry. Novels included *The Quality of Mercy*, *Sacred Hunger*, *Land of Marvels*, *The Ruby in Her Navel*, *Morality Play*.

WOLFF, Tobias. Story collections: *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories*, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, *The Night in Question*, *Back in the World*. Novels: *Old School*, *Ugly Rumours*. Memoirs: *This Boy's Life*, *In Pharaoh's Army*. Novella: *The Barracks Thief*.

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