

Truth in the Narrative Voice

One of the problems readers have is knowing who to believe. This is not too difficult if they understand the nature of the narrative voice talking to them. Fiction consists of a story teller relating a series of events, and the complications of belief are fewer than are found in our everyday lives. As a writer, you must appreciate the confusion to which a reader is subject.

When we're told by our families and friends of things that have happened, we understand that the events are clouded by the limitations of memory and the quite natural desire of the story tellers to make the stories interesting to us and to put the best light possible on their own involvement. This is not offensive to us because it has become a convention of interaction. We find this condition when we read. We must accept that in some narrative voice situations we must not take what we're told as the literal truth.

In fiction, there are two kinds of truth and two levels for them. The first truth is that which we have come to accept as defining the genre (the kind of fiction we're reading). The narrator sets the limits for our disbelief, and we accept what happens in fantasy as realistic (within the limits of our imagination) so that we may enjoy the stories, as we accept science fiction, historical romance and westerns or any other "unrealistic" situations. This kind of truth we agree to when we decide to read in these genres, and this does not give us a problem with believability, for we suspend our disbelief to enjoy the reading.

So, we have the two kinds of truth we must deal with in fiction, that kind which sets the genre and establishes the conventions of our belief, and the kind which is set by the limits of our ability to accept what is told us.

An example of this second kind of truth violation is found in *Relentless*, an adventure novel by Brian Garfield. The hero is in a line shack far up in the mountains in the remote northwest part of this country, in the winter, in a snowstorm. The shack has no electricity and of course no running water. It is just a shack to be used if ranch hands are caught in a blizzard. In the middle of a tense scene with some bank robbers, Garfield gives us this line: "He flushed the toilet but the noise was almost obscured by the steady roar of the blizzard against the log walls."

At this point Garfield lost me. We accept as a convention of the adventure genre that the hero would not be "realistic" he'd be bigger than life, the bad guys would be super-bad, the

women would be virtuous, there would be cliff-hanging scenes, there would be time pressures on the hero, and the hero would be misunderstood and not appreciated by the conventional law enforcement agencies. This is all part of the genre, but we cannot accept flushing a toilet in a mountain cabin in winter when there is no water or electricity.

Garfield does this because he has to get one of the men out of the room, and at the same time he has to keep all of the characters in the cabin. But, there must have been some other way to do that without violating what the reader would accept as "true."

Within this kind of truth there are two levels that we have grown to understand and accept. One level is the truth of the narrative voice when the narrator is objective and is non-involved in the story as a character. This is fiction's most common narrative voice. If this voice tells us that Betty is beautiful, we believe it, because we know that the voice comes from a mind which does not love Betty and has no ego involvement in her beauty.

The other level of truth is that version given us by a narrative voice which assumes a character role. In this situation, we respond much as we do when we're told stories by our friends when they were a part of the action. To be polite, we pretend to believe what they tell us, but we reserve judgment until there is some verification from another party. We know if our friend, John, tells us that his new girlfriend, Betty, is beautiful, she may be, but we accept that this is his judgment, and it is not an objective truth. He's not describing her appearance as a non-involved narrator would, but is telling us how he sees her.

We must understand that the narrative voice in fiction, which assumes the role of a character, speaks subjectively. All that the voice tells us is suspect. The character's voice is not stating a reality, it's relating an event as it was seen, clouded by wishes, anxieties, ego involvement and desires to impress us.

It would help you to understand an author's expectations of the narrative voice believability and the limitation a reader must place on the believability of a narrative voice if you write a creative piece which demonstrates these two levels of truth.

An exercise which will help you to understand this is to relate an incident from your life. This should be one in which there was a good deal of tension involving you and other members of your family. There can be peripheral characters if you need them - characters not central to the story line. This short narration will be easiest in past tense and should have three narrative voices, each telling a part of the "true" story as it is understood by that voice.

1. Character A - First person, subjective, involved, limited in knowledge
2. Character B - First person, subjective, involved, limited in knowledge
3. Narrative voice C - Non-character, third person, objective, non-involved, limited omniscient

The three voices will speak to the reader and will relate a part of the same event but will be handicapped or liberated by the nature of their involvement. You, as author, of course, will write all three positions, but the narrative voice, as first person participant, will assume the position in the story of either character A or B as prejudiced by being involved, but you will present the "truth" of the account as given by narrative voice C.

You will have to plan the mechanics of the narration so your reader will be able to understand who's speaking. Any way you can do this to make it clear to your reader is fine. Try not to set your piece up as a play. The easiest voice to differentiate will be that of C, because of the difference in the point of view (third person).

You can make the voices of A and B recognizable by creating differences in their:

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| 1. Attitude | 4. Sentence length and type |
| 2. Sex | 5. Activities |
| 3. Vocabulary | 6. Tone |

An easy way to set your piece up would be to have the objective narrative voice be C, and then to have C call on the other two voices to speak. The model is not done this way. This example may not be the best way to do this exercise, and if it doesn't work for you, invent your own mechanics.

Note the labels in the following model: (A), (B), and (C), indicating which narrative voice is speaking. It's labeled for you to understand who's speaking and how the "reality" of that voice influences the story.

(C) There was a good bit of trouble at 231 Oak Street last week. It ended with the police coming and parking their car with its flashing red light casting its intermittent glow off the windows all along the street. Before it was over, most of the neighbors were standing in their bathrobes in front of their houses wondering what in the world was going on. Mrs. Wiggins is still convinced it had something to do with spies. Of course, she has always looked for communists ever since her TV got the rollover problem during the McCarthy hearings. That was when Ralph's TV Repair still used the red truck. "There has to be a reason for this," she was fond of saying. The first indication the neighbors had that there might be a problem was when the first gunshot was heard.

(A) I'd been trying to tell my dad all summer that there was something in the wall of my room. Late at night, after the house got quiet, I could hear small scratching noises. Lots of times I'd get up and turn on the lights. But, of course, I could never see anything, and no one would believe me. Dad always told me it was my imagination. Uncle Henry used to hear it after he came to

live with us. That was after Aunt Eunice died, and he took to drinking so much beer all the time. Dad never believed him even when he was sober. Dad used to say, "Henry's been hearing things all his life. Don't you start." It used to make me furious when he didn't believe me and told me it was my growing imagination. Where does it say that just because a person's only twelve years old she's not supposed to know what she hears?

(B) I have a business in this town and a reputation to maintain. What happened last week wasn't my fault. If I didn't have so many people living in my house, I know it never would have happened. Janice was always hearing something in the walls. I used to tell her it was her imagination, but I thought it was probably mice and didn't want to scare her. And my wife's drunk brother should never be allowed out in public. He's a real danger to himself and all the rest of us. I told him not to bring that gun with him when he came to visit, but no, he wouldn't listen.

(C) There were at least six calls to the police station. Down there they thought there must have been a small war going on with all the reports of "Shots heard." They hadn't been at the house but a few minutes when the new emergency truck, the one the village just bought, came racing around the corner and smashed into the back of the only police car the village owns. Ralph Venter lost his job over that.

(A) Gosh, it would have been all right if Uncle Henry hadn't been still up when I first saw the bat. I think the trouble all really started when I ran through the living room in my pajamas shouting, "Help! He's in my room!" Uncle Henry was well into the TV and beer by then. Mom and Dad had been in bed for at least an hour. He didn't know I meant that I had finally seen the cause of the noises. A bat had landed on the end of my bed. I could see it in the light from the streetlight which came in the front window of my room. I was running to get my tennis racket. Uncle Henry must have thought there was a man in my room.

(B) I first woke up when Henry yelled. Betty and I were asleep in the back room, and I heard him yell, "You stay there. I'll get the gun!" I grabbed an old six iron from the upstairs hall closet and ran toward Janice's room ready to defend her against I didn't know what. I had just turned the corner in the dark hall when Henry hit the top of the stairs. I could hear Janice yelling now, and I admit there was a good bit of confusion. I think the head of the six iron connected with Henry's nose. I think that's how it got broken. Anyway, that's when the gun went off the first time. The shot went out through the side of our house and clear through the wall next door and into the front of Old Lady Wigeon's TV:

(C) At the first shot, which blew up the television next door, Mr. Bancroft, a retired bank guard, thought there must be a robber in the neighborhood and got his shotgun out of the basement. He was the one who shot out the headlights on the volunteer fire truck, that was the one that ended up on his porch. Clint Williams said he never would have hit the house if he hadn't been trying to avoid the kid running down the driveway waving the tennis racket.

(A) I think it was after the first shot that Dad's golf club went through the hall window and onto the front lawn. I'll just bet it hit Minster's dog, and that's why it acted so strange and got reported as "A Mad Rabid Beast Loose in the Neighborhood" by Mrs. Willis who was walking her cat by the front of our house. If it hadn't been for her, I'll bet the animal protection man would never have broken Uncle Henry's glasses with the net. Anyway, after the gun went off the first time, and Dad and Uncle Henry fell down the stairs on top of me, and the gun bounced down and went off the second time and put a hole in the power transformer that gave power to the whole neighborhood. . .

Of course, this never happened at my house. I was just having fun with the story line. You should recognize my copy of the style of James Thurber in this short example. If you don't, you might get some of his work from the library and try him. He's really very funny.