- Why is the Johnny Carson show performance a significant moment for both characters? How does the contrast between their actions and reactions serve to suggest Traynor's later death and Gracie Mae's inner strength?
- What do you think of the story's resolution? Why does Gracie Mae think "One day this is going to be a pitiful country . . ."?
- What has Alice Walker taught you about creating plot?

Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston have created glorious stories. While the two stories are radically different from each other, they share the hallmark of well-plotted fiction—strong characters who create tension and change through their decisions about how to approach and live a more satisfying life.

Characters with rich, emotional lives come alive in profound ways for readers. Close your eyes right now and conjure a mental image of Walker's Gracie Mae. Can't you just see her newly trim, living the life Traynor never understood and wasted? Can't you see Hurston's Delia, happy and at peace, in her neat home, now free of abuse?

For every story you ever write, strive to make readers "see" your characters and "feel" their inner lives. Then, when conflict challenges, your readers will be compelled to read on . . . *wanting to know what happens next!*

"Tell me a story." Plot answers this basic human desire.

Celebrate as you become more skilled at weaving tales! You are a griot for the next generation.

7

POINT OF VIEW

He says, she says. You say, I say." Point of view fundamentally reveals your story's meaning.

Whoever tells the story is powerful; the teller and their motives influence every aspect of your story. Because stories are more than just a monologue or dialogue, the person who tells the story is also a lens determining what readers see, the sequence in which they see it—memory, flashback, flash forward, linear time, and what details, thoughts, feelings are most significant. Literally, whoever tells the story, controls your story's meaning.

Selecting who tells the story is a critical decision. Many beginning writers tell stories using first person point of view, almost exclusively. Authors already comfortable with personal narratives sometimes select the "I" by default, finding it far easier to begin a story with *"I remember dancing . . ."* than with *"She danced."* Sometimes, too, the

"I" is a thinly veiled disguise for the author. For example, my unpublished first novel used an "I" narrator who was really me, and related all the anguishing trials of my adolescence. It has all the self-centered tunnel vision you'd expect. Yet while my narrator wailed, it might have been far more interesting to consider more seriously what issues my parents (also thinly-veiled characters) were facing. Inadequate jobs for raising a family, divorce, jealousies, and numerous miscommunications about values, finances, and love would have made a far more interesting story than my adolescent travails. I might have gained a better perspective and more distance had I used "she," a third person point of view.

Remember, a short story or novel is not autobiography. Fiction can have autobiographical elements, but a writer is still obligated to find the best narrative voice for telling any particular story. Multiple narrators would have made my first novel more compelling. Unfortunately, like most first novelists, I was still quite young in terms of my craft and emotions. Nonetheless, my unpublished first novel was a great training ground for understanding how a poorly chosen viewpoint can undermine the potential of any good story. One day, I'll resurrect this novel and tell it with the proper characterization, the necessary "fictional lies," and the appropriate point of view it demands.

MY BEST ADVICE

Never select a point of view by default or simply because you think it's easier. Always consider who will tell your story best.

If one point of view doesn't work, don't be afraid of replacing it. After completing a first draft, it is not unusual for writers to take the opportunity to reaffirm their chosen points of view or, if necessary, transform a thousand "I" pronouns to a third person "she" (or vice versa).

What points of view are available?
What are their advantages? Disadvantages?

1. First Person Point of View

The character speaks and the focus is on the "I." Readers are immediately drawn into the "I's" account of personal experiences—how the the storyteller sees, acts, reflects, and responds within their fictional world.

The "I" is limited, however, to only what the character can reasonably be expected to know and experience. A first person character cannot, arbitrarily, become "godlike" and know "everybody else's business."

ADVANTAGES: A well-done first person protagonist puts your readers side by side, soul to soul with your main character.

DISADVANTAGES: Because the first person lens is narrow, highly focused, you need to have an interesting narrator worthy of it. A weak character with a bland voice will make your story unravel quicker than you can say "fiction."

"I overheard scuffling, then a muffled shot," presumes you'll experience the crime scene only from the "I" view. Anything different would be upsetting to a reader. *"Upstairs, Van paused, his breathing labored,"* would leave readers bewildered by the shift in point of view.

Generally, the "I" is the protagonist, the central character, and most first person narrations employ a single voice. Jervey Tervalon employs a variation on this by using multiple "I's" in his novel *Understand This.* Each chapter heading begins with the name of a character—"Michael," "Sally," "Margot," "Rika," and so forth—but each character tells their own tale in first person. Thus his novel is much like a symphony with differing voices carrying differing thematic melodies and harmonies.

First person can be very intimate, very immediate. Paulette Childress White in her short story "Getting the Facts of Life" takes us inside the heart of a young girl:

> At Jefferson, we turned and there it was, halfway down the block. The Department of Social Services. I discovered some strong feelings. That fine name meant nothing. This was the welfare. The place for poor people. People

who couldn't or wouldn't take care of themselves. Now I was going to face it, and suddenly I thought what I knew the others [my brothers and sisters] had thought, *What if I see someone I know?* I wanted to run back all those blocks to home.

I looked at Momma for comfort, but her face was closed and her mouth looked locked.

It is important to be aware of how beautifully the "I" storyteller approach fits with the African American oral tradition. Arthur Flowers in *Another Good Loving Blues* uses a first person narrator to frame his story:

I am Flowers of the delta clan Flowers and the line of O Killens—I am hoodoo, I am griot, I am a man of power. My story is a true story, my words are true words, my lie is a true lie—a fine old delta tale about a mad blues piano player and a Arkansas conjure woman on a hoodoo mission. Lucas Bodeen and Melvira Dupree. Plan to show you how they found the good thing. True love. That once-in-a-lifetime love.

While Flowers' first person griot is less directly involved in the action, readers nonetheless feel this narrative sensibility provides the perfect way to tell his story. The "I" narrator lends the novel the resonance of a blues fable and morality tale; when it concludes *". . . they lived happily ever after,"* readers are satisfied.

2. Third Person

Third person point of view employs "he" and "she" pronouns though it is an unidentified narrator who describes the action. There are, however, many variations and degrees of how much this unidentified narrator intrudes or is a presence within the story.

A. Third Person Omniscient Point of View

A "godlike" unidentified narrator manipulates and provides commentary about the story's action. This narrator knows everything about the characters and can move freely within their minds, interpreting their behavior. This narrator also knows what has happened, is happening, and what will happen.

African American fables, retellings of folktales and legends, often make good use of a godlike narrative voice. Fantasy and science fiction tales, too, will use third person omniscient to describe alien worlds and lend authority to fantastical and scientific extrapolations.

ADVANTAGES: Omniscient narrators have ultimate authority and versatility. Readers will believe whatever the godlike voice tells them and accept any shifts in time or space.

DISADVANTAGES: A too intrusive narrator tells readers what to think and feel, rather than allowing space for readers to draw their own attitudes and conclusions about the characters.

The omniscient narrator in Virginia Hamilton's *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* knows not only Pearl's thoughts but also African geography, human civilization's history, and the hierarchy of magical gods:

One long time ago, Pretty Pearl yearned to come down from on high. One clear day it was, she daydreamed of leaving her home on Mount Kenya.

What good it is bein' a god chile, she thought, if I got to hang around up here all de time? What there for me to do when I beat all de god chil'ren at de games, and I learns everthin' so fast?

Great Mount Kenya of Africa was known as Mount Highness by Pretty Pearl and the other gods who lived there. It was a vast and glorious mountain of peaks, valleys, grasslands, forests, bare rocks and glaciers. It was also an extinct volcano with a dome almost a hundred miles around. The Kikuyu, Embu and Meru human beings cul-

tivated the lower slopes of the Mount. Some of the lesser gods on high kept a watch over them.

For this award-winning young adult novel, the omniscient voice is perfect. The narrator's godlike tones and authority are well suited to a mythic tale in which a "god child" alleviates the suffering of slaves and becomes human.

B. Third Person Limited Point of View

1. The story is told using "he" or "she." As with first person, often a single character observes and/or fully participates in the story. But unlike first person, the author can, through the narrator, summarize, moralize, and provide necessary background information or information beyond the ken of the character.

2. Beyond a single third person limited point of view, a writer can also shift between multiple characters' points of view. For example, a story can juxtapose both sides of a marital argument, expressing not only what "he" feels but also what "she" grieves about within the relationship. A writer can create an entire town of characters, delving into each person's experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Third person limited with multiple characters still allows the author to summarize and moralize when desired.

ADVANTAGES: Third person has much of the immediacy of a first person narrative but more versatility. One, two, three, or more characters can be represented, widening the focus and meaning of one's story. An author can add necessary information and commentary when desired.

DISADVANTAGES: Since the narrator isn't quite a character, it may be more difficult to convey the kind of powerful voice and dialect that can be achieved in first person. Also, shifting viewpoints among characters indiscriminately and too often can confuse readers and undermine the story's focus.

Exploring the thoughts and perceptions of multiple characters is perhaps best when actions and motives within a story are suspect and open to interpretation.

In Richard Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," a mother attempting to kill her son to spare him from further Klan torture is herself shot:

> She gave up as much of her life as she could before they took it from her. But the sound of the shot and the streak of fire that tore its way through her chest forced her to live again, intensely. She had not moved, save for the slight jarring impact of the bullet. She felt the heat of her own blood warming her cold, wet back. She yearned suddenly to talk. "Yuh didnt git whut yuh wanted! N yuh ain gonna nevah git it! Yuh didnt kill me; Ah come here by mahsef . . ." She felt rain falling into her wide-open, dimming eyes and heard faint voices. Her lips moved soundlessly. *Yuh didnt git yuh didnt yuh didnt . . .* Focused and pointed she was, buried in the depths of her star, swallowed in its peace and strength, and not feeling her flesh growing cold, cold as the rain that fell from the invisible sky upon the doomed living and the dead that never dies.

If Wright had chosen only a first person narrative, then the last sentence, in particular, could not have been written. By using third, Wright gains the thoughts and feelings of his character but also reserves the right to comment and moralize. Even after death, he seems to be saying, his character still lives in a merciful universe attuned to salvation for the just.

In *Magic City,* I used third person limited with multiple characters. Chapters alternate between Joe Samuel's and Mary Keane's points of view:

> In a year of shining shoes, Joe had saved two hundred dollars. Another year, he'd have four hundred. Another year, his father might understand why he wanted to go. Might even wish him well. In another year, Joe might be able to say good-bye to his sister Hildy. To Lying Man.

His brother's grave. He might understand why, in a place he loved so much, he felt like he was dying.

Mary stopped cleaning. Children, she thought. Water drained from her hands, pooling at her feet. Bubbles floated out the window. Her mouth puckered. A fly swept by her ear and she stared out the window, studying the mound near the shed where she'd buried countless years of bloodied rags. Each month, tossing in the week's rags, shoveling dirt, she'd mourned—not just the lost babies—but all the touching, kissing she dreamed flowered between a man and woman before making life.

Dell was right. Nothing would change. There wasn't any magic in the world. His touch would sharpen another kind of loneliness. She'd cook, clean, launder, sew; when the sky filled with stars, he'd take her without asking and make her crazed, mourning for an honest loving he couldn't give.

Transitions within third person limited can be handled smoothly if the differing views are set off by new paragraphs or chapter or page breaks. Novels, too, because of their scale and scope more easily accommodate multiple viewpoints than short stories. But whether you explore one, two, or five characters, the third person point of view can, if well done, provide readers with intimacy and immediacy rivaling a first person viewpoint.

Once you've established a point of view, it is generally best not to change it within your story. Dramatic shifts can be disconcerting. However, it is also true that anything you can get to work in fiction is acceptable. Following a chapter break, Flowers in *Another Good Loving Blues* shifts from first person griot to third person limited; thus, his story is able to make use of the advantages of both points of view.

. . .

Point of view selection is one of the most significant choices a writer can make. Readers rely on viewpoint, the narrator's perceptions, to be their guide into the best storytelling experience possible.

A poor viewpoint choice will limit what you can do in a story. You may also find that certain viewpoints are more natural to you than others. The following exercises will help you explore viewpoint choices.

EXERCISE 1

REAFFIRMING YOUR POINT OF VIEW

You can use any point of view as long as it works and helps you tell a fine story. However, even after you've made your selection, it's worth testing it, reconsidering what you're giving up and what you're gaining. An afternoon rethinking and experimenting with point of view can enhance any story. While shifts from third to first person voice or from omniscient to third person limited can provide dramatic change, so too can narrative shifts within the same category.

Reread Edwidge Danticat's "New York Day Women" in Chapter Five. It's written in the first person voice of the daughter but italics convey the mother's voice: *"If they want to eat with me, let them come to my house, even if I boil water and give it to them." "You are pretty enough to be a stewardess. Only dogs like bones."* These italics convey a strong sense of the mother's character. Yet how would the story be changed if the mother's point of view were dominant?

The story begins: "Today, walking down the street, I see my mother." Reimagine the story opening with the mother's view: "Today, walking down the street, I see my daughter."

Even though you're still writing in first person, everything changes when you switch point of view among characters. The details, observations, reflections, and, by extension, the heart of the story are altered when the mother becomes the story's eyes and voice. Do you