

Mark Rossiter

The Uncertain Voice: writing the young narrator

Abstract:

In this paper, I investigate ideas of uncertainty and voice. I am writing what I term a Young Narrator (YN) novel — one featuring the contemporaneous first-person narration of a juvenile — and I want to know how to create a voice that is convincing and sustaining, despite the very real limitations of language, expression and experience typical at that age. How does such a voice convey the inherent confusions and uncertainties of adolescence? How is narrative voice made and where does it come from? How can I as a writer overcome my own uncertainty about creating a YN voice?

Biographical note:

Mark Rossiter is an MA in Writing research student at the University of Technology, Sydney. He can be found here: <http://www.markrossiter.info>

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Wiser than he knows

‘All modern American literature,’ says Ernest Hemingway (quoted in Lodge 1992, p. 18), ‘comes from one book ...’, which begins:

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom's Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before.

What could be said to be uncertain about this voice, the first-person voice of Huckleberry Finn? Or about Mark Twain's ingenious intertextual introduction? In this paper, I investigate ideas of uncertainty and voice. For my MA degree, I am writing what I have termed a ‘Young Narrator’ (YN) novel — one featuring the contemporaneous first-person narration of a juvenile — and I want to know how to create a voice that is convincing and sustaining, despite the very real limitations of language, expression and experience typical at that age. How does such a voice construct the inherent confusions and uncertainties of adolescence? How is narrative voice made and where does it come from? How can I as a writer overcome my own uncertainty about creating a YN voice?

Twain's 1884 novel is a road movie on a river and an entertaining satire on the mores of the day. Most of all it is a boy's adventure in search of freedom from what he calls the ‘cramped up and sivilized’ (Twain 2003, p. 76) ways of his guardians. But it's Huck's voice that speaks directly to us. As David Lodge, critic and writer, says:

Twain's masterstroke was to unite a vernacular colloquial style with a naive, immature narrator, an adolescent boy who is wiser than he knows, whose vision of the adult world has a devastating freshness and honesty (Lodge 1992, p. 18).

Reading the Young Narrator

Let's further define the YN genre, beginning with what it is not: YN fiction is not to be confused with Young Adult fiction (the marketing category so beloved by publishers and used to denote a target readership). A YN novel may well be marketed to a youth audience, as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* was before crossing over into the general fiction area, but the YN genre is all about the narratorial stance employed by the writer.

So, a YN novel is written in the first-person voice of a juvenile character, typically but not necessarily the central character. The events described are told by the narrator contemporaneously with, or very soon after, the time of the story. This distinction is significant because it allows us to exclude the more common pseudo-memoir fiction form, where an older — and usually sadder and wiser — narrator reflects on a formative childhood experience, for example *Mister Pip* (Jones 2006) and *The Go-Between* (Hartley 1974). It also

introduces a fascinating aspect of the YN form: the authors are adults but they're writing in the voices of children (Mark Twain was 49 years old when *Huckleberry Finn* was published). My central interest in the YN novel is therefore in how the story is told by an adult writer who has to create a character bereft of the language skills, complex thinking and life experience of an older narrator.

Examples of YN novels which I studied as part of my literature review include: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 2003), *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger 1994), *Hideous Kinky* (Freud 1992), and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon 2003). These novels couldn't be more different, yet what they all have in common is a distinctive and memorable young protagonist.

Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, first published in 1951, combines the naivety of youth with the telling of truths about the adult world. The famous opening lines are disarming:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two haemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them (Salinger 1994: 1).

Caulfield's voice is pugnacious, uncompromising and even defiant. We are initially attracted to the humour and cheekiness, but quickly realise that we are witnessing the protagonist slowly self-destructing. He sounds like a child, but investigates profound themes, frequently deriding what he calls 'phony'. Caulfield himself is aware of his adolescent uncertainty when he describes himself as acting, 'quite young for my age sometimes. I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen' (Salinger 1994: 8).

In the space of only a few days, between leaving school and returning home, Caulfield takes us on an emotional journey as he heads directly for the disaster he refers to when recounting a dream, 'I have to catch *everybody* if they start to go over the cliff' (Salinger 1994: 156), only to be eventually caught himself from an unexpected quarter. It's a simple story, as Lodge says, 'episodic, inconclusive and largely made up of trivial events' (Lodge 1992: 20), but it works because the voice is both cocky and self-confident, yet still palpably insecure. The more Caulfield jokes, the more we realise he is in trouble. This works, I suggest, *only* because of the voice.

In Freud's *Hideous Kinky*, we know we are in the company of a YN. The story opens in the back of an old van on the way to Algeciras and the ferry to North Africa. Our narrator likes a young man, Danny, because he performs magic tricks, making sweets appear out of thin air for her. But, on the second page, she observes: 'Anyway, I thought, however magic Danny said these almonds were, they'd be bound to run out like any others.' (Freud 1992: 2). Her voice has taken on a world-weary and knowing tone. This clever knowing-but-not-saying voice underlies the rest of the novel. It is a hallmark of YN fiction.

The beginning of Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, is intriguing:

It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs Shears' house. Its eyes were closed. It looked as if it was running on its side, the way dogs run when they think they are chasing a cat in a dream. But the dog was not running or asleep. The dog was dead. (Haddon 2003: 1)

We are at first presented with a mystery, and we do recognise the YN voice, but by the next page when the narrator introduces himself, we realise immediately, his is a very different world view:

My name is Christopher John Francis Boone. I know all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,057.

Eight years ago, when I first met Siobhan, she showed me this picture ☹ and I knew that it meant 'sad,' which is what I felt when I found the dead dog.

Christopher is a person with Asperger's Syndrome, and his voice is cleverly constructed to allow us to appreciate his difficulty in empathising with other people, an aspect that makes it impossible for him to get help later in the story. His voice speaks to us with extraordinary frankness and openness (another hallmark of YN fiction) even as he finds himself in terrifying situations — situations that we readers understand perfectly well, but which Christopher does not. This gap, the space between the narrator's world view and that of the reader, is a key aspect of the form.

These novels set out to do different things: as mentioned, *Huck Finn* is in large part a satire of 19th c. American life; *Catcher* is a study of the transition into early adulthood; *Hideous Kinky* is an autobiography disguised as a novel (Mullan 2008); and *Curious Incident* is a one-off mixture of genres (murder mystery, parent-child relationship, a road trip into the unknown, the diary of an outsider). Looking at them as examples of YN fiction we can focus on their most distinguishing feature: the directness and immediacy of the voice of their young narrators.

The Uncertain Voice

Let's consider again the age of our narrators. They are all between twelve and seventeen, and this period is of course one of profound uncertainty. Caulfield's uncertainty is his existential anguish (a universal adolescent theme and a key reason for the book's popularity) as he seeks to resolve his sense of self-importance with the reality that he is drifting pointlessly through life, heading for disaster. Boone's uncertainty is absolute. In a world which he cannot understand and which has let him down, he travels across a city, its chaos and unpredictability terrifying to him, in search of certainty. The unnamed narrator of *Hideous Kinky* is aware that she should be more looked after than she is, and a growing sense of unease pervades her story. Huck Finn is consistently upbeat and cheerful as he travels on the

raft with Jim, even when approaching the fork in the river where they must go the right way so the escaped slave can reach freedom. In fog, they miss the fork and Huck realises the importance, yet his cheerful bravado continues. We, the readers, feel even more keenly the impact on Jim: his life is at stake. The cloud of uncertainty suggested by the fog deepens, even as the air clears.

The stories of our young narrators are uncertain, but their voices are not. This is key.

On Voice

If voice is the key to YN fiction, what do we really understand about how it works? We all know or think we know what voice means when we talk about writing. We contrast the poetic voice of Cormack McCarthy's *The Road* with the harrowing, bleak setting. We smile at the voice of *Pride and Prejudice* which states with complete authority and only a hint of irony that an unattached man of means must be looking for a wife. And we speak of our own writing, saying, 'I haven't yet found my voice', or perhaps, 'I had to try five different voices before I was happy'.

But what exactly is voice? Where does it come from? How is it made? Do we all hear the same voice when we read the same piece of writing? If so, why? And if not, why not?

Writer and critic Al Alvarez, in *The Writer's Voice*, has no doubt: '... A writer doesn't properly begin until he has a voice of his own' (Alvarez 2005: 9). Yet, if the voice is the writer's, does it vary from one text to another? In *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, and speaking about Melville's *Omoo* and *Moby-Dick*, Browne and King say that 'even the greatest voices develop over time' (Browne & King 2004: 214). This acknowledges that voice varies between texts, but also importantly suggests that the variation is a function of time and maturity. And therefore, voice is a property of the writer.

But is that really what we mean by voice? Is voice not also an aspect of writing, or of a particular text? Confusingly, Browne and King go on to say:

Of course, the writer's voice in a novel generally belongs to a character. The voice in *Moby-Dick* is Ishmael's as much as Melville's. But character voice and authorial voice are intimately connected (Browne & King 2004: 214).

John Mullen, in *How Novels Work*, devotes a chapter to 'Voices' (Mullen 2006: 127) which examines writing style and the use of character speech, dialect, forms of dialogue, language, translation, cliché and swearing — but nothing about the voice of a text.

In *How Fiction Works*, critic James Wood does not actually mention the word 'voice' (nor does it appear in the index), yet its importance is acknowledged implicitly when, on the first page, he begins by examining perspectives of narration, that is to say the telling of a story. This is particularly evident in his enthusiastic appreciation of the free indirect style, by which:

... we see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language, too. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens between author and character, and the bridge — which is the free indirect style itself — between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance. (Wood 2008: 11).

The key is the idea of language as a property of both character and author. Wood, like Browne and King above, implies that voice (that which narrates, my definition) is a combination of both the language of the characters within a narrative *and* that of the entity which we refer to as 'author'. But it doesn't help us to really understand what voice actually is.

What Is Voice?

In 'Finding a Voice', the first essay in *The Writer's Voice*, Alvarez begins by describing the effect of voice:

Imaginative literature is about listening to a voice. When you read a novel the voice is telling you a story [...] the voice is unlike any other voice you have ever heard and it is speaking directly to you, communing with you in private, right in your ear, and in its own distinctive way. It may be talking to you from centuries ago or from a few years back [...] all that really matters is that you hear it—an undeniable presence in your head, and still very much alive, no matter how long ago the words were spoken (Alvarez 2005: 15).

Alvarez continues, looking more at style than voice, quoting Joyce, Flaubert, Kipling, Woolf. The other essays in the book deal with listening (focusing on poetry and musicality) and romanticism and the myth of the artist. What Alvarez does not do in his book is tell us anything more about voice.

We need to simplify our understanding of the term 'voice' so that we can see more clearly how it is heard, and therefore how it can be generated. Suppose we say that voice is simply the sound in our head that we hear when we read a piece of text. As simple as that. No voodoo, no magic *something out there*, ethereal, spirit-like. Just an effect in our heads. That effect is identical to the actual hearing of a real voice (storyteller, actor, anyone), the only difference is that the real one is carried by sound waves to our ears ... and the second one is solely generated inside our heads by reading. But in terms of what we understand the voices to be saying, they are *strangely enough* identical. (You're thinking: *what about inflection? What about modulation?* I respond: *can't you hear the inflection in this question?*) The end result is the same, I suggest, whether the voice is carried to us through the air or generated in our heads as a result of reading.

Debra Adelaide, writer, critic and academic, who also cites Alvarez, recognises the crucial role of the reader in creating voice:

When I write I imagine the reader is reading it, and this means the reader's voice is articulating, creating the words. This is the real voice of the text. When the author remembers the reader and allows the reader's imagination to assert itself. (Adelaide 2007).

The voice is therefore also the reader's. Yet, paradoxically, what the voice says depends on the words chosen by the author. And which ever way we look at voice, we end up back with the author. She must make many decisions about the various elements of writing that David Lodge lists in his essay 'Creative Writing' in *The Practice of Writing*:

[the] aspirant writer [should] acquire a descriptive vocabulary for and explicit awareness of such technical matters as [...] point of view, narrative voice, frame-breaking, time-shifting, etc., etc., to entertain a wider range of possibilities in these respects than the writer might have discovered independently, and [...] appreciate how important are the choices made in these categories to the final effect of a narrative text (Lodge 1997: 175).

The key point is there's no magic involved in creating voice. Writing is, in TS Eliot's words, 'critical labour, the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative' (quoted in Lodge 1997: 174).

Writing the Young Narrator

The uncertainty of the predicaments of the young narrators we have looked at mirrors the uncertainty for a writer: how can a successful YN voice be created, one that will sustain over the length of a novel?

Let's look again at the two key limitations of the YN voice. The first is that the narrator has limited vocabulary and language skills. This is a problem because it restricts the freedom a writer has to create different effects using language (rich description, complex ideas, clever similes and metaphor, etc). The second problem is that the YN has little life experience and is therefore naïve, uninformed, arguably uninteresting. Think about twelve-year-olds you know. Their stories are often derivative, relying on stereotype, and the outcomes might easily be predicted. Could they really hold you spellbound for the duration required to read a novel?

The solution to these problems is to recognise them and turn them to the writer's advantage. Listen to young people, but at the same time remember that fictional characters don't really talk like real people, nor do they tell the same stories. This is where the art comes in. Accept the limitations, but turn them round and make them strengths.

Considering the first problem, that of limited vocabulary and language skills, the task is to create a distinctive and clear voice that transcends these limitations. Simplicity and directness are what is required.

Looking at the second constraint, that of the YN's limited life experience and innate naivety, we need to find ways to assert our character's voice to compensate for this. The first way to do this is for the voice to challenge us directly, fixing itself in our minds. The second way is to use humour. Nothing reveals character as much as humour.

My final suggestion is for the voice to exploit the gap referred to earlier, that between what the young character knows and what the adult reader knows. I call this 'Minding the Gap'. Let's examine these suggestions in turn.

Simplicity

Thinking about the novels we've looked at, the voice of the narrator of *Hideous Kinky* is the best example of simplicity. There's no dialect and little teenage argot — just a few choice phrases (e.g. the title).

Holden Caulfield also appears at first to have a simple voice, full of repetition and clichéd phrases. But as we listen to the cursing and the teenage slang, we realise that the rhythms and patterns skilfully create a rich, rewarding and memorable voice. His is an apparently simple voice, and this is how it must appear, despite being carefully constructed.

Similarly, Christopher Boone's voice also appears simple. Yet, his is special case. His voice obeys mathematical and other curious logics. It too is carefully constructed and utterly unique.

Finally, Huck Finn's voice appears to modern readers to be much less simple, with its dialect and phrasing that is hard to read and even off-putting. His voice comes to us from another age. Nevertheless his attitude and cheerful optimism remind us of the simplicity of youth.

Whether a character uses dialect, teenage argot or slang, they must appear to readers as communicating simply. We should not be aware of the voice. For a contemporary novel, my conclusion is to avoid voice coloration and instead construct a young voice through plain syntax and limited vocabulary.

Directness

By directness I mean simply that the voice must introduce and situate itself very early on. As we saw in the opening pages of the four novels I've studied, each voice addresses us directly, unambiguously displaying characteristics, interests, proclivities — aspects of character which enable us to build quickly a mental picture. Of course, all fictional narrators are obliged to differentiate themselves from every other narrator we've ever read before, but given the YN's limited linguistic skills, the task is more urgent. The narrators must communicate quickly with us and make their uniqueness immediately noticeable.

Challenge

Following on from above, the YN must assert herself so that we are obliged to acknowledge her. Of the books studied, perhaps Freud's character is the least challenging, functioning more as a narrator and concentrating on the consequences of the premise, increasingly disconcerting as they are to the reader.

We can contrast this with both Holden Caulfield and Huck Finn's almost impudent assertions as they begin their respective tales. Remember Caulfield's 'If you really want to hear about it' and Huck's 'You don't know about me without you have read ...'.

Christopher Boone challenges us in another way. The first page is easy enough, but as we proceed to the second, we realise his challenge is altogether different: his is a world we have never seen before and we are privileged to be offered a glimpse.

These challenges prick what might otherwise become a sentimental balloon surrounding the young narrator. The simple language, the childish directness, these are both forgotten when the voice challenges us directly, bridging the gap between the child's world and our adult knowledge.

Humour

Reading the various YN novels, it is impossible to underplay the importance of humour in creating character. And just because a character is funny doesn't mean she cannot explore serious issues. As Terry Pratchett has said, 'The opposite of funny is unfunny: books can be funny and serious' (cited in Jones 2008).

Humour is the hardest character attribute to pull off. This may be because humour is a two-level form of communication. There is the literal level at which a joke is told, a punchline delivered, a situation described. And there is the 'I get it' level, the mental connection, the moment of realisation. A joke must be well told. A jokey narrator must be well written.

Humour is a terrific attribute for any fictional character. For the young narrator, constrained as she is by her lack of life experience, humour is almost essential, again bridging gaps and bringing a multidimensionality to an otherwise potentially flat character.

Minding the Gap

Here, everything we've looked at about voice and the young narrator comes together. When we looked at voice and its production, we found that the problem was creating a voice that was at once that of a recognisable character, yet also one that spoke with the authority of the highest diegetic level of narrative, that of the book itself. The very text should speak directly to us.

We heard James Wood say that for a third-person narrator the most effective technique to bring that narrator's consciousness into the story is to use the free indirect style: the author, the character's thoughts, and the text itself all appear as one.

Our YN is already speaking as the implied author, her voice is already at the highest diegetic level. Yet it is constrained because it lacks the life experience, the knowledge and the understanding of both reader and author. It is not the sophisticated voice of an adult, one from whom we instinctively feel we can learn what we would otherwise never know.

There is a gap between the character's small, childishy-viewed world and that of the reader's understanding. It is this gap to which I refer, and it is this gap that the writer must exploit. Just as Twain's reader grows increasingly concerned when Huck and Jim miss the fork they should have taken to ensure Jim's safety; just as Salinger's Caulfield continues his wisecracking, even as we the readers witness his descent into oblivion; just as Esther Freud's narrator blithely describes her predicaments in hippy Morocco, and we want to tell her to find someone who can help her and organise her better than her unreliable mother; just as Haddon's Christopher Boone describes his complete confusion crossing London, scared as he is by the strange people, the noises, the wind in the Tube tunnel, and we want to reach out and help him and tell him everything will be all right if he only trusts the policeman.

We readers know very well what the young narrators do not. We know their worlds — or at any rate we quickly understand them — and they do not. In fact, all fiction exploits such a gap, the gap between what a character believes and what a reader knows very well. We want to shout at our favourite characters to simply think clearly, to stop being fools, to realise what is going on around them. They never do; not until it is too late, anyway.

But the young narrator genre is special. We, readers, were young once too. We were once vulnerable and not cynical and not understanding of the big world we began to perceive when we were twelve or so years of age. We've all experienced the frightening realisation that the world is a bigger place than we thought; that people lie about important things; even abuse or hurt each other; that people simply don't care.

This gap, the one between the narrator's understanding and that of the reader, creates a dynamic or a vacuum. The character is trapped on the page and cannot fill the vacuum. She just keeps talking, her vulnerability magnified precisely because of her youth. Everything is left to the reader. Into this gap, readers pour themselves, because they understand innately what the narrator is going through. This investment of care or emotion or concern is what ultimately generates the magic of the YN novel. This therefore is the task of the writer of this genre — to create the YN gap.

In Conclusion

As we have seen, the most successful YN voices combine the characteristics described above in clever and unique ways, and in doing so they manage to reveal greater truths than their characters appear capable of expressing. They capitalise on the inherent uncertainty of characters who do not fully understand their worlds, by obliging the reader to bridge the gap. The young narrator — an entirely fictional construct — is of course, in Lodge's words, 'wiser than he knows'.

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