

Who Do You Trust?

Frank Soos

Yes, I know, it should be “whom do you trust,” but that little grammatical glitch might be a good place to start. Because this meditation is about trust and about how readers come to trust or mistrust their narrators, specifically their first person narrators.

First, let’s face a crucial fact. In every story we are at the mercy of our narrator regardless of what voice the narrator speaks in. No narrator means no story. So everything we read on the page is the gift of a narrator. If the narrator says it’s raining, it must be raining. At some point, the factuality of a story is its bedrock.

But in the case of first-person narrators, we find ourselves in the hands of narrators who speak to us directly, who tell us stories to some end. Like ancient mariners, they’ve come to tell stories we simply must hear. Our narrators want something from us in our participation: they want us to see things as they do.

Once it was common to divide first-person narrators as either reliable or unreliable. Ring Lardner’s “Haircut” is a classic example of an unreliable narrator, and it’s a “how to” model for a writer to take a look at. The first person narrator, a small town barber, tells his new customer the story of the many hijinks his old friend Jim Kendall. The trouble is that none of Jim’s pranks seem very funny to readers—or at least they shouldn’t. Passing through a town by train, Jim catches the name of a business Henry Smith, Dry Goods, say, then writes a postcard addressed to Mr. Smith: “Ask your wife about that book agent that spent the afternoon last week.” Funny, right?

Each successive prank becomes more cruel and damaging, but the ugliness of Jim’s behavior is lost on our narrator. If readers didn’t think the first pranks were so bad, by the time the worst prank has run its course, they must certainly view Jim as a monster. And must understand what the barber narrator also fails to understand, that Jim’s death in a hunting accident is, in fact, a murder.

If this story could be graphed, we could have an axis representing what we might think of as acceptable behavior and Jim’s behavior representing a curve bending farther away from the norm. At some point, the dissonance between what a typical reader considers acceptable, and the barber’s version is too great for a reader to find the barber trustworthy. But remember: what happened happened. What’s different is the alternate takes on what it might have meant.

Here’s a trickier example: Joseph Conrad’s Marlow, the narrator in “Lord Jim,” “Youth,” and most importantly, “Heart of Darkness.” “Heart of Darkness” contains Marlowe in an envelope, an unnamed narrator is among a group of men sitting on

the deck of the cruising yawl *Nellie*, all of whom listen to Marlowe's tale of his steamer trip up the Congo River. This Marlow sits on the deck, his legs crossed like a Buddha. He is given to harsh judgments about colonialism and of the Congo colony he travels through. And he says this:

You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world— what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do.

Of course, all readers remember Marlow's encounter with the dying Kurtz and Kurtz's dying words, "The horror, the horror." But when Marlow returns to Europe, to what has passed for civilization, and meets Kurtz's fiancé, he assures her the man's last words were her name.

Marlow presents readers with a much more complicated narrator. Do we trust him or not? What is Conrad asking of us readers?

Marlow is a narrator for the modern world, not the clearly befuddled barber of "Haircut," but a man who has seen much and willingly made judgments. To what degree do we agree or disagree? This is a much harder question, and it requires a higher level of reader participation. We can quickly judge the narrator of "Haircut" for a knucklehead and set him aside. It's much harder to make such judgments about Marlow, the story he tells, and his own judgments and decisions. The simple question of reliability has been transformed to a perpetual skepticism readers bring to a narrative.

Still, "Heart of Darkness" is like "Haircut" in this essential way: what happened happened. The facts are not in dispute, just the interpretation.

There is one more step down this road toward total unreliability. You'll find such a narrator in a story like Robert Coover's "The Magic Poker." This narrator begins by telling us, "I wander the island, inventing it."

I have brought two sisters to this invented island, and shall, in time, send them home again. I have dressed them and may well choose to undress them. I have given one three marriages, the other none at all, nor is that the end of my beneficence and cruelty. It might even be argued that I have invented their common parents. No, I have not. We have options that may, I admit, seem strangely limited to some . . .

This narrator has us readers fully in his power, yet he will give and take away elements of his own story as he sees fit. Not only are his judgments up for grabs, but so are the facts of the story itself. Whenever this narrator chooses, his characters may change personalities, even shapes. The story line itself may be altered and readjusted. We have passed into another level of unreliability. The bedrock of reliable fact has been stripped away.

Now might be a good time to ask ourselves as writers about the wise use of our narrative powers. And to ask ourselves who these twenty-first century readers we

hope to engage might be. Let's accept the truth that our readers are wise to us. They're always watching us for clues, and they're going to be assembling those clues. And I'd suggest they don't need to be constantly reminded that fiction is an invention.

Who do you trust? Even that grammatical gesture is a tip toward a stack of information that enables readers to make meaningful judgments about a first person narrator and his story. We make this common grammatical mistake every day, all the time, so maybe it doesn't mean very much. But if a speaker persists in non-grammatical speech, we're being asked to hone in on his voice and what that might mean about the narrator. Add those clues to the narrator's descriptions of fellow characters and actions, and readers begin to make their judgments.

Who do you trust? Could it be your reader?