

NARRATIVE DESIGN

“Design is a funny word. Some people think design means how it looks. But of course, if you dig deeper, it’s really how it works.”

Steve Jobs

NARRATIVE DESIGN concentrates on the choices around how the story is told. Who, or even what, is telling the tale? Is it a first person narrator or what is called objective narration? In what mode is it to be presented? Is it to be a traditional narrative summary or instead a narrative revealed through letters, diaries or whatever? NARRATIVE DESIGN also looks at the narrative choice of setting, with specific chapters on Time and Place.

As there are many storytelling mediums – books, movies, theatre, radio and others – NARRATIVE DESIGN begins by looking at the differences, similarities and unique aspects of each medium. One point of these comparisons is that *telling* (or narrative) belongs mainly to, but not exclusively so, the world of fiction writing, whereas *showing* (or direct presentation) is how, on the whole, cinema and theatre work.

The Storytelling Mediums: Thoughts from Writers, Novelists, Playwrights and Media Other Creatives offers a selection of quotes from industry professionals on the unique aspects of their chosen medium and the differences that they perceive in the other ways in which a story can be presented or told. **PAGE 4**

The Storytelling Mediums: Similarities and Differences looks at the contrasts between various storytelling mediums, concentrating primarily on the mediums of cinema, written fiction and live theatre.

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Time explores how Story presents and explores Time, looking specifically at duration and the difference between story-time/real-time. **PAGE 36**

Place considers the nature of place, examining the use of location and setting, plus theories around anthropology and social culture.

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What is a Narrative? considers the 'telling' part in telling a story, looking at the choices writers have when considering how a narrative works. This chapter also looks at what we mean by Form, Style and Genre, plus Narrative Voice and the overall concept of Narrative Design. **PAGE 90**

Objective, Subjective, Unreliable Narratives takes a look at the different types of narrative methods available to the writer, plus the nature of stream of consciousness and Meta-fiction in storytelling.

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First Person Narrations examines what is sometimes called the Autobiographical Voice or First Person Narration, examining the advantages and disadvantages of this very personal way of telling a story. **PAGE 125**

Second and Third Person Narrations considers the most popular way of presenting a narrative and that is in the third person. This chapter also looks at the rarest way of writing a novel, namely, in second person, which uses the pronoun 'you' to make the reader the protagonist. **PAGE 147**

Retrospective Narration and *Praesens Historicum* looks specifically at the Retrospective Voice in narrative with particular reference to *Praesens Historicum*, the vernacular or historical present. **PAGE 158**

Narrative Verb Tenses: Past, Present and Future addresses the use of tenses, past, present and future, in storytelling and narratives. **PAGE 164**

Epistolary Tales considers those stories based on letters, diaries or journals which together are usually classified under the general heading of Epistolary novels. **PAGE 182**

Narrative Style offers some thoughts from professional writers on their own Narrative Style and writing techniques, and those of their fellow writers. **PAGE 191**

Story Information – Suspense, Dramatic Irony, Mystery and Anticipation considers the different degrees of story knowledge offered to the readers or viewer, specifically looking at the nature of mystery, dramatic Irony, Suspense and Anticipation. **PAGE 198**

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The Storytelling Mediums: Thoughts from Writers, Novelists, Playwrights and Media Other Creatives

Which is the Best Storytelling Medium?

It has to be live theatre. It's the only storytelling medium where the story is happening right there in front of you and you know that this performance you are watching is for you and not the audience who came last night or will come tomorrow.

No, it has to be the written word because not only is the story happening in your mind, the novel can take you into the mind and thoughts of another human being in a way no other medium can.

No, it has to be cinema, because no other medium is able to utilise every aspect of how you can present a story, from the spoken word and the musical accompaniment to the verisimilitude of the setting. Not only that, the cinema can take you anywhere in this

world – and any other world for that matter – make it real. And do all that on screen ten times the size of life.

What!?! Not a chance!. In our modern age it has to be the medium that democratised art – television! No other medium offers live and in the moment access at a nominal cost to not only fictional tales but real life stories from around the world as they happen.



“The plain fact is that in theatre, no two audiences are ever quite the same.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“Now, what is it that television can do that nothing else can? In my view, it’s a very simple and obvious one, but it’s worth reiterating. It can let you see things at a distance at the moment when they are happening. That is particular to television. And it’s what makes television pre-eminent.”

Grace Wyndham Goldie, veteran BBC television producer

“The essential and abiding pleasure of the theatre lies in foreknowledge. In relation to the characters of the drama, the audience are as gods looking before and after. Sitting in the

theatre, we taste for a moment the glory of omniscience. With vision unsealed, we watch the gropings of purblind mortals after happiness and smile at their stumbles, their blunders, their futile quests, their misplaced exultations, their groundless panics."

William Archer, PLAYMAKING

"I had been writing comic books for years and I was doing them to please a publisher, who felt that comics are only read by very young children or stupid adults. And therefore, we have to keep the stories very simplistic... And those were all things I hated.

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

"What makes literature interesting is that it does not survive its translation. The characters in a novel are made out of the sentences. That's what their substance is."

Jonathan Miller

"All you need for a movie is a gun and a girl."

Jean-Luc Godard, filmmaker

"Life in the theatre is more readable and intense because it is more concentrated."

Peter Brook in THERE ARE NO SECRETS

"The theatre, in the main, uses live personnel, and one can go backstage afterward and tell the actors and actresses and the director and the writer, if they are around, that what they saw did not make sense, and recommend that they fix it."

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

"In a play like RELATIVELY SPEAKING, the four characters are often on stage together when all had a completely cross purposes. We the audience can take this in at-a-glance. Our eye moves faster and has a far wider range of vision than the average camera shot."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

"Movies, after all, are only an illusion of motion comprised of thousands of still photographs. The imagination, however, moves with its own tidal flow. Films, even the best of them, freeze fiction. Anyone who has ever seen ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST and then reads Ken Kesey's novel will find it hard or impossible not to see Jack Nicholson's face on Randle Patrick McMurphy. That is not necessarily bad ... but it is limiting. The glory of a good tale is that it is limitless and fluid; a good tale belongs to each reader in its own particular way."

Stephen King, THE STAND

"The tradition of the theatre as the place we can go to hear the truth... The theatre affords an opportunity uniquely suited for communicating and inspiring ethical behaviour: the audience is given the possibility of seeing live people onstage carrying out an action based on first principles (these principles being the objectives of the play's protagonists) and carrying this action to its full conclusion."

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

"A typewriter needs only paper; a camera uses film, requires subsidiary equipment by the truckload... That is always the central fact about the filmmakers opposed to any other artist: he can never afford his own tools."

Orson Welles, film maker

"I don't think screenplay writing is the same as writing – I mean, I think it's blueprinting. "

Robert Altman, film maker

"Cinema should make you forget you are sitting in a theatre."

Roman Polanski

“When you write for the stage you retain the copyright. The works is yours and no one can change a word without your permission. When you write for the screen you are a labourer hired to turn out a product, and that product can be altered at the whim of those who employ you.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

“One of the nice things about books as opposed to television, and movies to some extent, is it’s not a passive entertainment. People really do get involved, and they do create, and they do have their own visions of what different characters look like and what should happen. It’s great – it means their brains are working”

James Patterson, American author

“Remember that your characters are eventually going to be played by actors. I know, but you’d be amazed how many dramatists appear to forget. They write unspeakable lines of interminable length, couched in language that no person would ever use, and manage to say everything at such length that the actor really has no room left to act.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“The forward movement is something new – brought about by the form of the motion pictures – and movie makers have good reason to be concerned about it. The theatre is not so interested in the forward movement, because it’s time is uninterrupted. Each second of its scene or act represents a second of actual time. Therefore it cannot move faster or slower, and the movement of the mind of the theatre spectator is identical with the movement of the play, neither slower nor faster. The novel does not know this kind of forward movement, because the reader can put the book away at any time he likes and does not have to sit through from the beginning to the end.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

“In television and film, people are ready to accept any kind of jump cut, but the slightest disturbance on the page ruffles their feathers.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“The magic moments, the beautiful moments in the theatre always come from a desire on the part of the artist and the audience to live in the moment – to commit themselves to time.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

“A stage play, unlike TV or film, relies often on multiplicity of reaction. The camera necessarily tends to pre-select your view of proceedings. This preordained choice means in general, when writing for those media, you should always indicate where the ball should be, as it were, at every moment throughout the scene.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“When writing a novel, the only real constraint is how far you want to go with your ideas. With movie scripts, you have time and budgetary constraints. For example, if your screenplay is set entirely at night, you’ve just doubled the cost of the movie. Novels can indulge all five senses, but Film is a visual medium that usurps the novelist’s tool of narration through voice-over to add depth and perspective.”

Stewart Stafford, author

“It is not easy, in the motion picture to let the spectator estimate the distance. The stage play, which is divided into two or five acts of about equal length, lets us clearly distinguish the time of its ending.

In reading a novel the number of pages left lets us recognise the exact distance which has yet to be traversed. Besides, the element of fatigue does not exist in the novel because the number of pages we read in one sitting depends on our energies. But the moviegoer can only estimate the distance if a goal has been set. Once he knows the main goal, the spectator has a continuous feeling for the

distance which has yet to be traversed. He can estimate the difficulties in the way of the main intention. If the picture exceeds this estimated ending point, the spectator feels fatigue. If the end of the picture comes too early, he is left with superfluous energies."

Eugene Vale, *THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING* (1944)

"If we went to the theatre more we might learn to regain our faith in words. If we went and watched and listened and made some demands."

David Mamet, *WRITING IN RESTAURANTS*

"If I am writing a movie and I am stuck, I can call the studio and tell them it's delayed. You can't do that with television – you have air dates to meet."

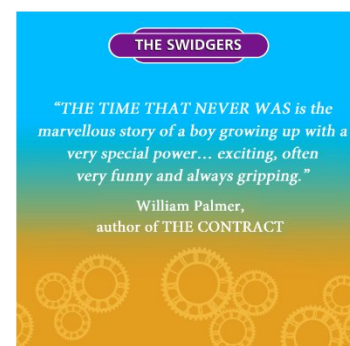
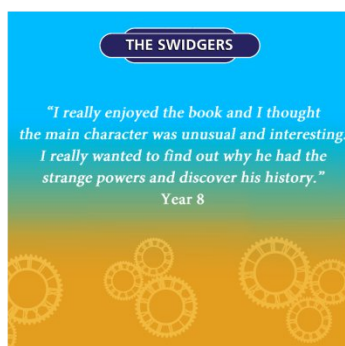
Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter

"Cinema is the most beautiful fraud in the world."

Jean-Luc Godard, movie director

"Using a single location brings into play a lot of basic theatre-writing disciplines. If you only have one set, the characters come to you. Quite the reverse of what happens in film or television where the camera delights in following people elsewhere – anything, it often seems in film, to get out of the same location. Stage is the reverse."

Alan Ayckbourn in *THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING*



NARRATIVE DESIGN

The Storytelling Mediums: Similarities and Differences

“We could say: the motion picture is theatre carried to every location that that might be chosen by the novelist.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

The Storytelling and the Storytelling Mediums

Aristotle had it easy. In his day, that is classical Athens in the fourth century BC, there were essentially only three storytelling mediums. The Greek of that period had the lyric poem, which told a story but without direct speech from characters, the theatre, which presented only the direct speech of characters through actors on a stage, and the epic saga, such as Homer’s THE ODYSSEY, which mixed narration with short exchanges between characters. The epic, incidentally, was recited or sung to the accompaniment of a lyre (perhaps the nearest equivalent today would be somewhere between a storyteller and a folk balladeer). Anyway, in his POETICS Aristotle discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the medium

of theatre as opposed to the lyric poem and the epic saga. On the whole, Aristotle comes down in favour of the medium of theatre, mainly because of its directness of imitation.

Nowadays, of course, we have a whole host of storytelling mediums from which to choose. Apart from the medium of theatre, we have television, written fiction, radio plays, video games and the cinema, plus there are many forms of the plastic arts (or visual arts) which have within them a story they tell. Even, for example, the willow pattern plate some of us eat our breakfast from has a narrative there in those blue sketches. In fact, even in Aristotle's day the three mentioned weren't quite the whole truth, for there existed as well children's puppet shows which are mentioned briefly in the works of Plato.



It should be said that many of the storytelling mediums we do have today have boundaries that are blurred. The way we experience a novel written on the printed page is clear enough, but what about the graphic novel, which mixes the printed word with the visual arts, often in a cinematic style of presentation? Then there is the theatre

experience of the lone storyteller who, with or without a lyre to accompany them, essentially *tells* a story as opposed to acting it out exclusively in the direct speech of characters. And the video games medium of storytelling, usually experienced on a television, is incredibly cinematic in its images and soundtrack.

“If Shakespeare and Michelangelo were alive today, and if they decided to collaborate on a comic, Shakespeare would write the script and Michelangelo would draw it. How could anybody say that this wouldn’t be as worthwhile an art form as anything on earth?”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer



“I’ve had nine of my books adapted to film, and almost all were enjoyable. I’ve been very lucky with Hollywood, and look forward to more movies being adapted. But I don’t get involved in that process. I know nothing about making movies and I stay away from it and hope for the best.”

John Grisham, novelist

How a Story is Experienced in Storytelling Mediums

It’s an obvious point to make but how a story is experienced will clearly be different depending on the medium in which it is

presented. In other words, the way a story is received inevitably effects the *how* it is received. We have the pressure cooker experience of live theatre, the visual and musical thrills of the cinema and the absorbing power of the written word. Each is different, for each has its own strengths and potencies. Some are more passive, others are more active.



The intention in the section is not to say which is best, but rather to look at the differences and explore the uniqueness of each medium and what it has to offer. And as it would be difficult to compare the differences between all the mediums we have today, we will concentrate here primarily on the cinema, reading a novel in the printed form and live theatre. We will offer comparisons between the physical forms of each medium (for cinema, the projected image; for theatre, the actors on a stage, and for books, the printed page) as well as the space in which the story is experienced. What we are dealing with, therefore, is essentially how Time and Space exist in our three very contrasting storytelling mediums. In effect, what we are doing is looking at the ontology and

very nature of the storytelling mediums of cinema, written fiction and theatre.

“Having your book turned into a movie is like seeing your oxen turned into bouillon cubes.”

John le Carré



“Books and movies are like apples and oranges. They are both fruit, but taste completely different.”

Stephen King

Contrasts in Form and Space in the Storytelling Mediums

By ‘form’ here is meant the physical nature of the medium. For example, written fiction comes in the form of a book, whether made of paper or on a Kindle, and what makes that form so different from cinema or the stage is that it can be carried in the hand and so exist pretty much anywhere. The book medium therefore allows stories to be can be read on a bus, in your living room, up a mountain or even down a cave. But of course the ‘space’ where the story actually exists is in your head.

In contrast, the physical form of a cinema, at least in the traditional sense, requires a specific purpose built structure. In the early days of cinema these were called 'Picture Palaces', and for many working class families their visit to 'the pictures' was the only time all week they ever walked on carpet. This is an important point because cinema going in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s was far more of an event in a way it isn't today.

The theatre medium is more complicated in terms of its physical form. Yes, we have the traditional West End and Broadway theatres, some of which are elaborately constructed, others are more what is usually known as a 'black box' spaces. However, theatre can be a more flexible medium than the cinema when it comes to space. As Quince in MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM says when rehearsing with Bottom, Snug, Snout, Starveling and Flute, "The green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our tiring-house."



But we're not quite done with form yet. Again the book is simple enough, for all you have to do to experience the story it tells

is open its pages and read. However, in the cinematic medium, the physical nature of the film, whether it be traditional celluloid or modern digital, needs to be projected onto a physical screen. And interestingly the physical nature of the movie reel when it is projected presents a paradox. Although the reel is a recording of what has past, the medium of cinema itself, as it is experienced by the viewer looking at a screen, is very much in the now. Yes, a movie is ultimately only flashing lights of images created in the past but what we see appears to be very much happening right there in front of you. Of course, those who work in the medium of the theatre like to remind you that the theatre medium goes one better, for the action witnessed in a theatre space *is* truly happening right there in front of us.

In this sense it could be argued that the written word does not have the same immediacy or verisimilitude of cinema or theatre. Plus fiction itself is usually concerned with what was and what has been, as the majority of novels are written in the past tense. There is, it should be acknowledged, a modern trend towards the use of present tense, but that is still the exception rather than the rule. However, the essential point here is that the cinematic and theatre mediums, and the narrative worlds we experience through them, are very much in *The Now*, whereas the narrative world of the novel is in *What Has Been*.

“Books are no more threatened by a Kindle than stairs by an elevators.”
Stephen Fry



“The theatre knows the powerful restraint which space puts upon the story because the play has a definite time of performance.”
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

Contrasts in Temporal Nature of the Storytelling Mediums

Strictly speaking temporal art refers to a work that has a limited existence that is dependent on the physical nature of how it has been made. An obvious example is an ice sculpture, for the carving, however magnificent, will eventually melt. The cinema medium is also temporal in its own way, for the showing of a film at 8.00 pm at the Odeon Leicester Square is time dependant. Further, its temporal nature – at least in the traditional cinematic experience – is continuous and unbroken. As a result, the viewing of it is always in time forward motion. Yes, you can close your eyes and even put fingers in your ears, but the movie relentlessly goes on with or without you. Likewise, the theatre.

There are some theorists who argue that the unbroken image from which you cannot easily escape is one of the keys aspects of both the theatre and the cinema. The viewing can become so intense

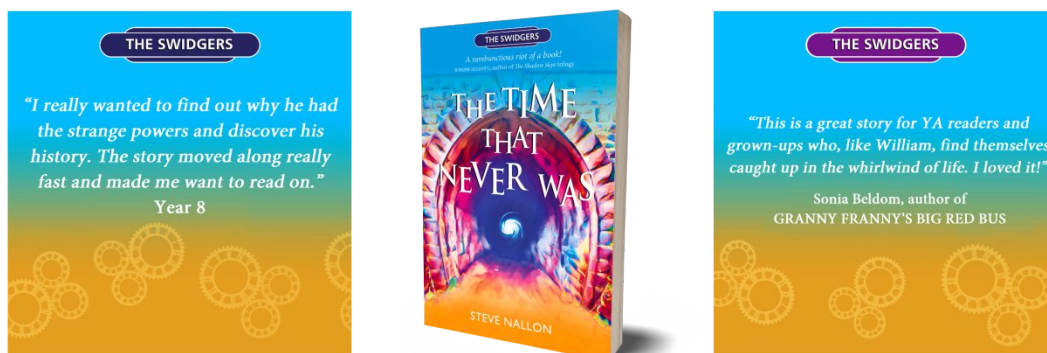
that it's as if you're experiencing some of 'blood poisoning', with the result that you are physically unable to leave your seats. Words like 'gripped' and 'petrified' suddenly take on a very literal meaning. That's why horror movies shown in packed cinemas are always so popular, for you put yourself in a situation where you can't easily escape. And that the appeal.



Stanley Kubrick's A CLOCKWORK ORANGE fascinatingly explores and exploits this aspect of the viewing experience in a frightening way, for in the story the protagonist, Alex, is forced to keep his eyes open and watch, without even blinking, horrific images of violence. Some might even take this as a warning about the masochistic and sadistic nature of the cinematic experience itself.

An historical point worth mentioning here in considering the cinematic experience is the difference between 'Continuous Performances' and 'Separate Showings'. Nearly all movies shown today are Separate Showings, meaning that when the film finishes the auditorium is cleared and everyone leaves. Not so with Continuous Performances. As the phrase suggests, the movie (or

movies) on show were on rotation all day. In fact, right up until the late 1970s you could enter the auditorium half way through a film and simply wait for it to come round again. This led to the phrase, “And this is where I came in”, for when you’d caught up with what happened in the part you’d missed you then left. An odd way of experiencing a story, but that was how it was. And, for any young and would-be writer, such a way of seeing a movie was a useful insight into how stories are constructed.



When it comes to its temporal nature, the written word is very different from both cinema and the theatre. A novel certainly *needs* time, in that a book can take many hours to read, but a novel does not exist *in* time in the same way a film does which show at your local cinema from 20.10 till 22.30. Yes, the novel may be a page turner, and you’d like to read it all in one sitting, but, if it gets too distressing or violent, you can very easily put the book down if you want to. You, the reader, have control. Plus when you have the novel in your hand, you can go back and forth and re-read a section you didn’t quite understand, or even skip parts you think might be a bit

dull. Reading then, unlike the cinema or the theatre, is rarely continuous, unbroken and in constant forward motion. Of course, it's possible to read a book in one sitting, though if it's Dickens's BLEAK HOUSE, some of that sitting by necessity would have to be done on a lavatory. But the essential point is that the choice to continue reading or not is always yours.

"A film is a petrified fountain of thought."

Jean Cocteau



"When you come into the theatre, you have to be willing to say. 'We're all here to undergo a communion, to find out what the hell is going on in this world.' If you're not willing to say that, what you get is entertainment instead of art, and poor entertainment at that."

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

Communal or in Solitude

Theatre is the ultimate medium for the communal experience of storytelling for the simple reason all participants are living, breathing human beings. Further, theatre can be interactive, think of pantomimes at Christmas – "He's behind you!" "Oh no he isn't!" "Oh yes he is!!". The cinematic experience is also shared but those are just lights flashing on the screen, not real people. The medium of the

book is, in contrast, the ultimate in the experiencing of a story in solitude. You may belong to a book club where that experience can later be shared, but that's not quite the same thing.

“The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.”

Jane Austen, NORTHANGER ABBEY (1818)



“The summer movies are coming out. My advice: just stay home and burn a good book.”

Stephen Colbert

Passive or Active

A contentious issue in comparing mediums of storytelling is how passive or active they are. Books, it could be argued, are the most active because the act of reading takes effort and imagination. Cinema, on the other hand, is just sitting watching flickering lights. Well, movie directors would certainly dismiss that last statement as nonsense because audiences psychologically invest in the characters in the story and that takes effort too.



A brief word here about something called ‘saccadic movement’. Saccades are rapid, ballistic movements of the eyes that abruptly change the point of visual fixation. Movements are smaller and more rapid when reading, whereas when watching on the big screen saccades are larger but fewer in number. And the important point to make is that there is, naturally enough, a symbiotic relationship between saccadic movement and mental alertness. In other words, every time there is movement of the eye there is brain activity. Reading, rather obviously, requires constant saccadic movement, but not, sadly, the medium of television, where minimal eye movement is necessary, which results in minimal physiological stimulation to the brain. And perhaps this gives us a better understanding of the expression: ‘couch potato’.

“Television remote controls encourage couch potatoes to exercise their options while broadening their base.”

William Arthur Ward



“The book is a film that takes place in the mind of the reader. That’s why we go to movies and say, ‘Oh, the book is better.’”

Paulo Coelho

‘The Mind’s Eye’

It’s an old line but one worth repeating and it’s that the radio is more preferable to television because the pictures are better. The mind’s eye beats reality anytime. And this is perhaps the biggest contrast between reading books and the cinematic experience. The movie, once made, is essentially frozen in aspic. It is singular and unchanging. The movie CASABLANCA, if shown today, is the same CASABLANCA that was shown in 1942. Of course the physical words on the page are the same for everyone who reads them, but when we as individuals read those pages, the characters, the setting and the action exist exclusively and uniquely in our heads alone. As for theatre, well that can change slightly night by night, plus plays can be restaged and reinvented with a new cast, but it can never have the uniqueness of the mind’s eye of the reader.

“When Charles Dickens or Jane Austen lay down their pen, the character is to some extent a created and fully rounded entity in the mind of the readers; when Shakespeare or Caryl Churchill (or you or

I) finish your play, however, the characterisation is always incomplete. Actors will be cast in the roles and will bring their own appearance, physicality, and interpretations to the text. They will seek out motivations, and discover speech rhythms and buried secrets. The playwright mustn't be too prescriptive, because characterisation is the ground on which the playwright and the actor meet. The playwright hands over the baton; it is the actor who finishes the race."

Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE



"I remember being told by a telephone engineer in 1989 that books could be sent down a telephone line. I tried to visualise a physical book being stuffed into a telephone and was convinced he was a mad man."

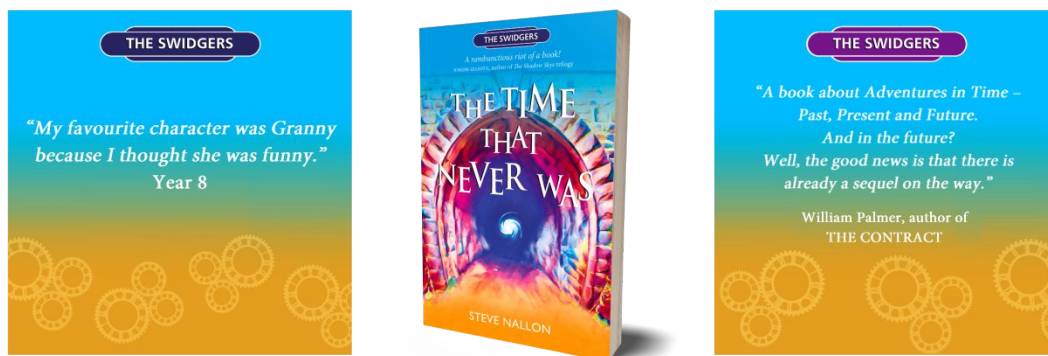
Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

Blurring of Boundaries

But aren't we in danger of getting very confused here? Take the point that books are primarily written in the past tense. Well that may be so, but isn't a story when you read it in a novel always in a way happening right there in front of you? Doesn't the prose, past tense or otherwise, create in the mind of the reader a then-and-there feeling? And what about streaming movies via the internet on home cinema equipments? Or even old DVDs? I mean, you can easily

stop both when it suits. Hasn't modern technology brought the experience of a viewing a movie much closer to that of reading a book in that you can now watch a film on your smart phone?

And another blurring of boundaries has come as a result of the increasing popularity of audio books. Aside from the fact that an audio book now exists in time in a way it didn't when on paper, isn't listening to an audio book, like watching a movie, a fundamentally more passive experience? And there's certainly no saccadic



movement with an audio book. But you could argue as well that even before recordings of audio books (or 'talking books' as they were first known), hadn't we always had books read to us? Parents at bedtime and a teacher at the end of the school day, and didn't they have ultimate control over how long the readings would go on? And it's a shared experience. Then there's the fact that children growing up in the 1950s and 1960s even had a radio programme called LISTEN WITH MOTHER ("Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin?"), and later, on television, there was JACKANORY (1965 – 1996), where a well known performer would read episodes of a book each weekday

afternoon at roughly the time you got home from school. And you could watch JACKANORY with your friends, making it a more communal event. All boundaries of our different mediums seem to blur when you consider the nuances involved. That said, it's fair to say that reading a book alone under the covers and the experience of watching a movie at the cinema are still pretty much chalk and cheese.

"Movies are not scripts – movies are films; they're not books, they're not the theatre"

Nicolas Roeg



"The important role which place plays in the motion picture results from the fact that the camera can go to any location in this world. Without any delay, it can show a scene in Africa, following it up with one in Asia. It can show a scene in an airplane and the next one under the earth in a coal mine."

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

Pros and Cons

So what would Aristotle have made of our modern storytelling mediums? He preferred the theatre to the epic saga because of the directness of its imitation to life, so does that mean he would have

preferred the cinema over all others, which in its verisimilitude is arguably closest to life? However, perhaps Aristotle would have found the cinema lacking in physical reality, in the form of human living flesh and blood, that the theatre offers. Maybe our famous ancient philosopher would have learnt to enjoy the 'realism' of the novel, or perhaps he would have dismissed it out of hand for its complete fictionality.



All storytelling mediums have their strengths and weaknesses. The medium of the written word in book form means that it is portable and so can be experienced in an almost infinite variety of places. Reading of course requires imagination, and so the pictures you create in your mind are ultimately as much yours as the writer's. As for the medium of cinema, well, that is unrivalled in its ability to stimulate the senses in its visual power and its music. And it can take you and show you anywhere in the world, and, with CGI, anywhere in the universe. Plus, there's the extraordinary size of the screen, whether it be at your local cinema screen or at an IMAX where people are as big as giants. And the movie is a permanent form, which allows you repeated viewings. The medium of theatre, of course, has its immediacy and its intimacy. Its uniqueness is in the living shared experience that will never happen in quite the same way again.

Other mediums can also boast their uniqueness of experience. Video games, through the technology of the internet, can offer a story experience shared with others all over the world. Plus, unlike any other storytelling medium, a video game is built to be both proactive and interactive, where you, the player, can decide what happens next. The television medium can, of course, broadcast the same live events into living rooms all over the planet. Its power politically is without parallel. And arguably the stories television has told over the years have led culture changes rather than being led by

them, especially in the area of social attitudes towards sexuality. Then there's the medium of the radio. Like a book, the radio is portable, like the theatre, its plays offer intimacy, and like the cinema, the medium of radio can take you anywhere, and with a much lower budget.

All tastes and preferences are different. There are those who find theatre deadly dull, and there are those who won't read books because there are too many words. There are still some who regard television as the idiot's lantern, and those who find video games juvenile. But these perhaps are really prejudices rather than preferences, for, surely, all mediums of storytelling offer their own distinct experience for those who need and love Story.

"I used to be embarrassed because I was just a comic-book writer while other people were building bridges or going on to medical careers. And then I began to realise: entertainment is one of the most important things in people's lives. Without it they might go off the deep end. I feel that if you're able to entertain people, you're doing a good thing."

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer



“In modern theatre there is a direct inverse relationship between the size of the cast and the likelihood and frequency of its production. This has virtually nothing to do with the relative quality of the plays themselves and much to do with the cost.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Cost and Production

Movies used to be impossibly expensive to make, but with your very own camera on your mobile phone, and editing software to boot, movie production, albeit it at a basic level, has suddenly become very cheap. Book production too used to be expensive and the exclusive preserve of publishing houses, but self-publishing, E-Books and print-on-demand have together made it cheaper and far more democratic. But theatre hasn't in this financial sense changed that much. Actors still need paying and theatre buildings need to be maintained. That said, extra revenue for streaming and showing filmed stage shows in cinema has helped a little.

“When I get a little money I buy books, and if any is left I buy food and clothes.”

Desiderius Erasmus, philosopher (1466 – 1536)



“Casting is everything. It is my view that this process is the single most important action or series of actions that you will make on a production. Most things are reversible, but if you have the wrong actor, however good an actor they may be, in the wrong part, your job as director is reduced to one of a damage-limitation specialist.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Collaboration

All the story telling mediums involve at least some degree of collaboration. Theatre is arguably the most collaborative simply because most of the creative team – writer, director, actors, designers and so on – are usually there in the building at the same time as the play is put on. Although it’s true that more people work on a movie than in a theatre production, the different collaborators aren’t always brought together as they are in the theatre. The film editor, for example, is only likely to collaborate with the director after all the scenes have been shot.



As for fiction, well, if novel writing were a political system it would be a dictatorship. And as we’ve seen from looking at the psychology of the writer THINKING STORY, its rule is not necessarily a

benign one. That said, the editor of a book can sometimes play a key role by suggesting changes to the storyline and so on.

But there are other political structures out there, and certainly other (and arguably better) methods of creating stories. What we are talking about here is collaboration and devising, and these put us primarily in the world of theatre, cinema (especially animation) and video games.



The psychology of those who work in these shall we say, 'democratic' environments is often far different from that of the obsessive scribbler with his candle and his papers in his garret, but that doesn't mean such work is any lesser. And to that description of the lone writer you might add the words 'privileged', not only in the sense that is it normally a 'his', but also because the individual writer is usually presented as different or special or somehow uniquely capable. This is partly because of the gatekeepers of the literary world and partly too because of the literary cannon itself. Perhaps 'the novelist' and 'the playwright' do need to possess in order to how they do certain innate qualities and characteristics (not all of them, it

should be said, necessarily that pleasant), but that needn't mean that the other creative ways of working, or indeed their results, should be devalued or excluded.

Some more thoughts on collaboration...

"I could be just a writer very easily. I am not a writer. I am a screenwriter, which is half a filmmaker... But it is not an art form, because screenplays are not works of art. They are invitations to others to collaborate on a work of art."

Paul Schrader, American screenwriter, film director, and film critic, noted for his screenplay for Martin Scorsese's TAXI DRIVER (1976)

"Before you start production, you have characters you have created without actors in mind, then all of a sudden you've got actors. They bring an enormous amount in creating these characters, and creating the dynamics between the characters that you've written."

Charlie Kaufman, director and screenwriter

"When writing a play, a writer might find themselves asking, 'What does my character look like?' And the ultimate answer is that your character looks like the actor who will be playing the part!"

Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE

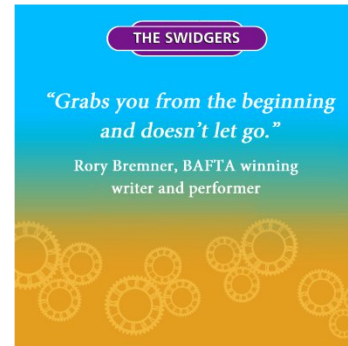
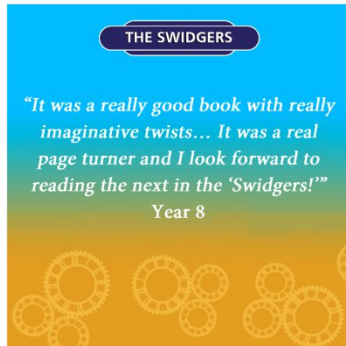
"I do believe that playwrights should think of themselves in part as orchestral composers. Before you sit down to write a passage for the woodwind section, say, it's handy to know the octave range of a flute."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

"Listen to those simple adverbs – the choice of actions and adverbs constitutes the craft of directing actors."

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

“A choice made by the actor is worth five imposed by the director.”
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING



Time

NARRATIVE DESIGN

“Every action requires time. Every development needs a certain amount of time. Every accomplishment implies a certain lapse of time.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

Duration and the Storytelling Mediums

A word of warning: talking about time and duration across and in a narrative, particularly when comparing the different Story mediums, can become very, very confusing.

Let's begin though with a basic distinction between what you might call 'Story Time' and 'Narrative Time'. In simple terms, story time covers the entirety of the time period over which the whole story occurs, but more specifically it is the time duration of those events mentioned in the story. Together they make up *story time*. Narrative time, on the other hand, is essentially the time duration of the narrative as it is presented.

Well, that seems straight forward enough, but problems arise when you start considering what *narrative time* means when applied to the different story mediums.



This is what David Lodge says concerning duration in the novel in his university notes *FORM IN FICTION*: “[Duration is] the relation between the duration of events in the action and the duration of the telling them in the discourse. (This controls what is sometimes called the narrative tempo. A ‘fast-moving’ narrative is one that describes a lot of actions in a comparatively small textural space).” And this is what David Lodge says about time in *Story* in general: “Story is normally conceptualised as a chronological sequence of events, some of which may occur simultaneously. The narrative discourse may also be chronological, but it need not be. It cannot imitate simultaneity because of the linear nature of language. It will almost certainly be selective, concentrating on certain events, deleting or condensing others.”

The point about simultaneity is that the novel can’t do two things at once. However, the cinematic medium on the other can present two events at the same time because there is always the possibility of the split screen. Stage plays can also have two actions in different places simultaneously happening together, and sometimes

even present action different actions simultaneously in different time periods. Tom Stoppard's *ARCADIA*, for example.

Another issue when looking at time in the novel is that it is difficult to quantify duration in terms of minutes and seconds because many actions involving time are rarely given in details. 'He then walked to the railway station.' Well, did it take five minutes or half an hour? And then there's the issue of how do you quantify narrative time when everyone's reading speed is different.

In the cinema narrative time in terms of duration is fixed and it's usually referred to as 'running time'. In the theatre narrative time is more or less the same every night, but can differ slightly depending on the audience and the actor. In the theatre narrative time is also described as 'running time', though this will also probably include the interval or intervals. 'Performance times', incidentally, are the specific lengths of each act and these are usually announced to the cast by the DSM (Deputy Stage Manager) at the end of each performance.

Yet a further issue concerning time, story time, narrative time and duration is that in that different writers use different terms to make their distinctions about time. For example, Stephen Jeffereys in his book on playwriting talks about 'closed time' and 'open time', where 'closed time' signifies that the play is in continuous time (sometimes also called 'real time'), whereas 'open time' is where there are blackouts and so we understand that time has passed. Alan

Ayckbourn has his own expressions for these when he talks about 'stage time' and 'theatre foyer' time.

An important point to make about story time in the theatre and the cinema is that, unlike the written word, both have the option to present the story in what you may call 'real time', meaning the duration of the event in story is of the same duration on the screen or stage. Related to this is the idea of 'unity of time'. It is more common in the theatre, Stephen Jeffereys calls them 'pressure cooker' dramas, but occasionally they can be found in the cinema in movies such as *HIGH NOON* and *ROPE*. However, most movies don't do this. Instead they opt for what is known as 'elliptical storytelling'. What this means is that many events across the narrative are simply left out and what this means is story time duration is usually far longer than screen time duration or narrative time.

It's worth saying as well that when a novel is adapted to the screen, the story time of the narrative is often condensed. For example, the James Grady novel *SIX DAYS OF CONDOR* quickly became *THREE DAY OF CONDOR* when it was adapted for the screen by Lorenzo Semple Jr. and David Rayfiel for film director Sydney Pollack. Critics will start using words such as 'rambling', 'sluggish' and 'sprawling' if a movie adaptation of a novel isn't more time and action focused. Equally, if you were to take a movie manuscript and simply print it as a novel, literary critics would no doubt accuse it of

being 'lacking in depth' or 'rushed' with 'no time to breathe'. Horses for courses and all that.



But back to the written word. As said, because reading speeds differ, 'real time' in the novel is pretty much impossible to gage. That said, the 'stream-of-consciousness' novel does come close, for here you could argue that the story time is simply the thoughts of the character over time and that time is roughly equivalent to the length of time a reader might take to read it. Some of the works of Virginia Wolf have explored this way of presenting a story.

Some more thoughts on time, story and duration...

"Elapased Time. During a theatre performance there are two 'time streams' running simultaneously: stage time and real (theatre foyer) time. A play may, according to the front-of-house clock, run for two hours and twenty-five minutes with an interval, while on stage we may have witnessed action that has taken us through twenty-five years. The choice here is entirely the dramatist's. The question I always ask is: in how short a time can I hope to tell my story – both according to the foyer clock and on stage?"

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“Time is not a thing, thus nothing which is, and yet it remains constant in its passing away without being something temporal like the beings in time.”

Martin Heidegger

“Another aspect of fictional time is duration, as measured by comparing the time events would have taken up in reality with the time taken to read about them. This factor affects narrative tempo, the sense we have that a novel is fast-moving or slow-moving. The adventure novel moves rapidly from one crisis to another – though the rendering of the critical situations may be artificially prolonged to increase suspense.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

“The more closely stage time equates to real (theatre foyer) time, the closer to the action we appear to get. In a play like ABSENT FRIENDS, the two time streams are virtually synchronistic. The result is to give stage minutiae considerably greater significance. In that play, over the course of a tea party, the selection of a sandwich, the pouring of a cup of tea, the embarrassed silences as the conversation lapses, are brought sharply into focus. Whereas with a play like JOKING APART – taking place over all of twelve years – events are seen from a greater distance, as we witness not just a tea party but whole lives unfold. Neither play, however, says more or less than the other about the human condition. They just say them in different ways.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“In the case of WAY UPSTREAM, the time span follows the demands of the story. Interestingly, it starts more or less in real time, one day following another, but as events blur into unreality, so the clock hands become less and less apparent. Day or night, winter or summer – who knows anymore? It all finishes up in a sort of Thames Valley equivalent of the Garden of Eden.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING



“Slow motion gets you there faster.”

Hoagy Carmichael, song writer

Time – Frequency and Temporal Order

Next we move on to examine time and specifically time dimensions within the narrative world itself. What we are essentially talking about here is frequency, temporal order and speed. And since we are now concerned with time *within a tale* there are fewer differences between the actual mediums of presentation.

First, frequency. Frequency simply refers to the number of times an event is presented in a story, including where different people may have alternative recollections of the same event. Classic examples of this latter point are the movies CITIZEN KANE and RASHOMAN, where the same event is told from different perspectives. Another example of where the same event is presented twice would be where that event is used as a framing device to, as it were, to begin and end a story. David Lodge in his 1980 university notes FORM IN FICTION offers this comprehensive

list on the relationship between the frequency of events in the 'action' (that is across the actual story or *fabula*) and the frequency of the events actually presented in the narrative discourse (or *sjuzet*):

Frequency: The relation between the number of times an event occurs in the action and the number of times it is in narrated in the discourse: (Possibilities: i) telling once what happened once (e.g. Moll Flander's first theft); ii) telling n times what happened n times (e.g. sexual encounters between Mellors and Lady Chatterley); iii) telling n times what happened once (e.g. Jim's jump into the boat in LORD JIM); iv) telling once what happened n times (e.g. "I do not remember very much about the days, except they were hot and that there were many victories in the papers" – chapter nineteen, A FAREWELL TO ARMS by Ernest Hemingway). This last treatment of frequency is generally used to summarise repetitions that are not important to the discourse; but in combination with 'stretched' duration it can represent a habitual but important action. Genette calls this 'iterative narration' and cites the opening of Proust's A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU: "For for a long time I used to go to bed early."

Second, temporal order. Temporal order is concerned with what is past, what is present and what is future. David Lodge in his notes offers some terminology recommended by Gérard Genette in NARRATIVE DISCOURSE (1980) to define temporal order variations:

Although the basic temporal structure of the narrative Discourse is often chronological, there may be – almost inevitably will be – small local deviations from chronology in the course of a written narrative. Genette proposes

“designating as *prolepsis* any narrative manoeuvre that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later, designating as *analepsis* any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where are we at any given moment, and reserving the term *anachrony* to designate all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of the story and narrative.”

“Imagination allows you to bend the rules of the temporal world.”
Amy Sherald



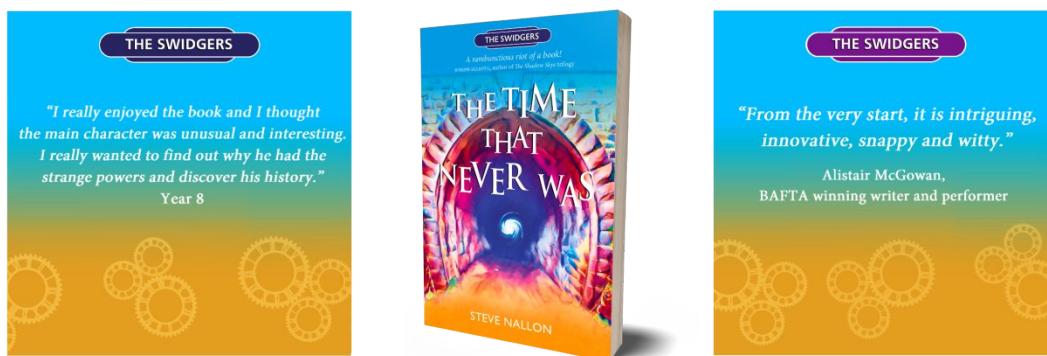
“As a writer, one of the things we all learned from the movies was a kind of compression that didn't exist before people were used to watching films. For instance, if you wanted to write a flashback in a novel, you once had to really contextualize it a lot, to set it up. Now, readers know exactly what you're doing.”

Salman Rushdie, novelist

The Flashback (*Analepsis*)

The cinema, of course, came up with the terms ‘flashback’ and ‘flashforward’, and *analepsis* here would equate to flashback and *prolepsis* would be flashforward. In the movie world then the past is usually presented in a flashback and the future in a flashforward. The anchoring point, or the present, is where we are in the narrative itself and it’s from this point in time that you can go back and forth.

But all that can get confusing. Take the 1980 movie *BAD TIMING*, directed by Nicolas Roeg. The anchoring point of the present is the apparent attempted suicide by means of an overdose by Milena Flaherty and it's from there that the story of her relationship with Alex Linden is told through non-linear fragmented flashbacks. Though where they are in time is never exactly clear. But perhaps the strange nature of their relationship, one inevitably doomed to fail, that lends itself to that sort of jumbled up time distortion.



Perhaps a little more straight forward are those tales where a *analepsis* or flashback naturally emerges from a story a character is telling in the present. In cinema what usually happens in this instance is that a character starts speaking of an event that happened years before and as he or she carries on speaking, the screen goes all blurry and we then begin to witness that event as a flashback. Yet you could argue, and many do, that since these events are being told in the present, that temporal order hasn't strictly speaking being broken. Take the movie *BRIEF ENCOUNTER*.

The bulk of the movie of BRIEF ENCOUNTER is a confession of near adultery told, as it were, by Laura in her mind to her husband as she listens to the wireless broadcasting a Rachmaninoff concert. Although we hear her words as part of her mindscape, her husband does not. And so you could say that story time and the movie's time duration are essentially the same thing as her mindscape, for Laura telling her tale *is* the story time. And further point here is that the music, the Rachmaninoff concert, is not a *non-diegetic* soundtrack but rather, since it's part of her listening experience as Laura 'tells' her tale, it is within the story world itself. But Gérard Genette's key phrase when defining *analepsis* is 'an evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the in the present in the story where we at any given moment.' Well, that's fair enough because Laura is certainly doing a lot of evocation. Even so, BRIEF ENCOUNTER, and others like it, certainly blur the concept of temporal order.

Historically, the first flashback in a movie is said to be in THE ADVENTURES OF DOLLIE in 1908, but the flashback in fiction arguable goes back to Homer and the ODYSSEY, where Odysseus, within the narrative itself, tells his own story of his adventures to the king and queen of Phaeacia. But again, as with Laura's internal narrative in BRIEF ENCOUNTER, there is some blurring, for what distinguishes the flashback to the past in each case is that it is subjective and comes from within a story world where a story is being told by a subjective storyteller.

But what of narrative where there is no internal narrative from a story teller or a story-within-a-story? *THE GODFATHER II*, for example, presents two stories, one in the past, one in the present. The back story in *THE GODFATHER II* is not in any way a subjective flashback but rather a narrative in its own right that is simply told in parallel with another – and in doing so the director, Francis Ford Coppola, draws ironic comparisons between father (Vito) and son (Michael). Flashbacks then come in different forms and so if we are to use the term it might be best to distinguish between the ‘subjective flashback’ and the ‘objective flashback’, as in Vito’s story.



A very different kind of temporal ordering and intension can be found in Quentin Tarantino’s *PULP FICTION*. Events seem to be in chronological order but Tarantino pulled a neat trick and in fact events are out of order. And we only fully realise this in the last section of the movie where one of the characters we have already witnessed being killed is now suddenly alive. It’s a shock and cleverly forces the viewer to re-think and re-assess what they’ve already witnessed.

So, what terms should we be using? In a way Quentin Tarantino is playing a time game in PULP FICTION, almost defying us to see or pin point where past, present and future actually are. And PERFORMANCE, a film by the maverick director Nicholas Roeg, goes even further in chopping around events in time.

However, most movies do have an understood narrative present. Likewise, the novel. That said, the post-modern author William S. Burroughs occasionally used to physically cut up bits of his manuscript and then randomly mix them into his narrative with the intention of creating a disjointed and often confusing narrative time line.

Some more thoughts on the flashback...

“As an actor, you can't play a flashback; you can't play someone's memory. You just have to play each circumstance as if it was real and understand that person's point of view.”

O. T. Fagbenle

“Flashback in film rarely works.”

Susan Hill

“I always think that's really lazy, when I'm watching a TV show or a movie or something, and there's a flashback and the idea is, 'This one moment is the reason that everything happened. This character saw this guy, and this guy said this thing to him, and that's why he is this way.' Because I think in real life, it's not so one-to-one.”

Raphael Bob-Waksberg

“The present and the past coexist, but the past shouldn't be in flashback.”

Alain Resnais



“Naturally, one does not normally discuss plans to commit murder with the intended victim.”

Robert J. Sawyer, FLASHFORWARD

The Flashforward (*Prolepsis*)

The flashforward or *prolepsis* in storytelling is quite rare, for the simple reason that no one wants to be told the ending when we haven't got to that bit yet. Homer's ODYSSEY, composed nearly three thousand years ago, does have a *prolepsis* in that the storyteller (Homer), when discussing one of the suitors to Penelope, gives us a glimpse of that suitor's future. Long before he dies in the story, the Poet informs his audience that not only that the suitor will die, but also *how* he will die (not that this would have been a 'spoiler', for the listening audience would have known the legend anyway). But of course the true flashforward (or foreshadowing) has to be at the behest of the omniscient narrator rather than a character within the narrative. Unless of course that character has the ability to see into the future.

“Beware the ides of March.”

The Soothsayer in William Shakespeare’s JULIUS CAESAR



“There is more to life than increasing its speed.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Time – Speed

We’ve looked so far at time in terms of frequency and in terms of temporal order, and so next, and finally, is speed. Here the cinematic medium does differ with the written word for a cinematic narrative can be presented in physical slow motion or fast motion. Technically fast motion would be where the camera shooting rate is set faster than real time (‘under-cranking’) and slow motion is where the camera shooting rate is set slower than real time (‘over-cranking’). The term ‘cranking’ comes from the time when cameras were physically turned by hand and the rate at which this was done set the speed of the movie itself in that they reel was then projected at that same rate. This meant if you under-cranked it would look fast and if you over-cranked it would appear slow.



By, as it were, stretching time, slow motion intensifies action and so is often used in sexual scenes (THE LUCKY ONE, TOP GUN: MAVERICK) and at moments of death (BLADE RUNNER). It is also used to indicate and exemplify grace, for example in sport (CHARIOTS OF FIRE), or a slower and easier way of life (the opening of BLUE VELVET). Slow motion can as well suggest power and moments of decision. One example of this is in GOODFELLAS where James Conway (Robert De Niro) is at the bar and his look, presented in slow motion, suggests that this was the moment when

he decided to kill the man who sells wigs. Over-cranking slow motion is also used by film makers to suggest dreaming, sluggishness and inebriation.



Fast motion, on the other hand, is used mainly for comic effect, for example in Woody Allen's *SLEEPER* or *CARRY ON SPYING* where characters are speeded up as they are moved along on a conveyor belt. But it can be used in serious and even distressing scenes, for example, the sexual sequence in *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE* that is accompanied by the *William Tell* overture by Rossini. The police action in Hitchcock's *REAR WINDOW* is also very slightly speeded up.

Film has the capacity as well to offer the 'freeze frame' (essentially stopping time), which traditionally has been achieved with an optical printer. Sometimes the freeze frame is used to pause the action in a narrated movie and then offer a commentary on it. The most famous example of this is in *GOODFELLAS*. There is a freeze frame as well in *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE* when Clarence is being told George Bailey's back story. But that's heavenly angels – and you'd expect them to be able to do that sort of thing.

These techniques of the cinematic experience have arguably corresponding narrative devices in the written word. Think perhaps of the work of Laurence Sterne where the story stops at moments of pivotal action. Or Henry Fielding where the author has a moment (or indeed an entire chapter) of reflection. That said, there are no direct equivalents or parallels in literature to the very physical and visual nature of under-cranking/over-cranking and the cinematic freeze frame.



Some more thoughts on speed...

“The world is moving so fast these days that the man who says it can't be done is generally interrupted by someone doing it.”

Elbert Hubbard

“People come and people go, moving fast and moving slow, I'm in a crowd and yet I'm all alone.”

Micky Dolenz

“Bad news travels at the speed of light; good news travels like molasses.”

Tracy Morgan

“As you get older, time speeds up but life slows down.”

John C. Maxwell

"There is more to life than increasing its speed."

Mahatma Gandhi



"The key test for an acronym is to ask whether it helps or hurts communication."

Elon Musk

Anachronisms

The problem of setting Shakespeare out of time and in modern dress is that one message on WhatsApp could have avoided the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. Yet Shakespearean plays themselves are abundant with anachronisms. The striking clock in JULIUS CAESAR – mechanical clocks wouldn't be invented for centuries. The mention of Aristotle in TROILUS AND CRESSIDA – the play is set at the time of the Trojan war, nearly a thousand years before Aristotle was born. And most bizarre of all the mention of a game of billiards (not around for another millennium at least) in ANTHONY AND CLEOPATRA.

But dramatists when they write plays set in the past are usually actually writing about their own times. And that includes Shakespeare. The Tudors brought in a period of relative calm after

decades of chaos and civil war – and that’s why in Shakespeare there are so many plays with a form of political internal strife. Think here of KING LEAR, JULIUS CAESAR and MACBETH.

When a writer or dramatist puts in an anachronism there is usually a purpose behind in. For example, a typewriter appears in Derek Jarman’s film CARAVAGGIO. It’s jarring, yet has a purpose. Caravaggio was a late sixteenth century Italian artist whose art works include various anachronisms. For example, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* by Caravaggio (1599-1600) is set in a contemporary tavern rather than ancient Palestine, but with the intention of helping people of his own era better connect with the gospels. Jarman understood what Caravaggio was up and hence intentionally put in anachronisms in his film history of the painter.

Just for the record, *parachronism* is anything that appears to be from the wrong time period and can include a colloquial expressions and social customs, whereas *prochronism* is where there is an impossible anachronism, object or concept, that is used in a story long before its invention.

“My past is everything I failed to be.”

Fernando Pessoa



“Our society is run by insane people for insane objectives. I think we’re being run by maniacs for maniacal ends and I think I’m liable to be put away as insane for expressing that. That’s what’s insane about it.”

John Lennon

Time and Time Travel Tales

The irony of most time travel adventure stories, of course, is that they are not really about the past or future at all, for their focus is nearly always on the world we live in today – the past or the future is a mere backdrop. And this is as true for the contemporary series TIMELESS, DARK and TRAVELERS as it was THE PLANET OF THE APES in the 1960s or indeed H.G. Wells’s THE TIME MACHINE in the late 1890s.



Ever since the dawn of the nuclear age, nuclear wars and the potential danger of nuclear power have a major concern for storytellers. Nuclear conflict or accidents of the future have featured regularly in the back story (or should that be ‘ahead story’) of Time Tales. It’s there in WORLD WITHOUT END (1956), THE TERMINATOR

(1984) and IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOON (2019), plus the television series such as TRAVELERS and DARK. And so too have many other social, political and environmental issues. In fact, there are occasions when watching these series and films that you might think the time machine fiction was actually created for the sole purpose of allowing political writers to explore topics such as civil rights, sexual freedoms and the rest. And perhaps you wouldn't be far wrong, for it was a divided and unequal society that was the theme in H.G. Wells' seminal novel THE TIME MACHINE, written way back in the nineteenth century.

***“Well, the moral of the story,
The moral of this song,
Is simply that one should never be
Where one does not belong.”***
Bob Dylan

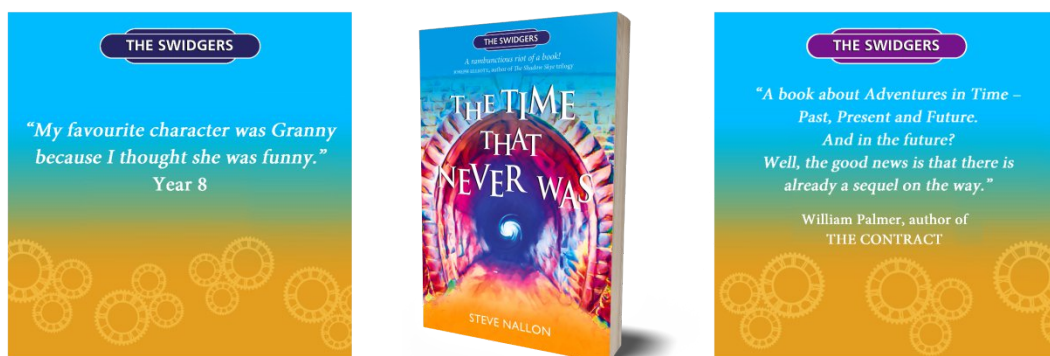


“There is a tyranny in the womb of every Utopia.”
Betrand De Jouvenel

Utopian/Dystopian Fiction and Time Times

Utopian/Dystopian fiction and time tales sometimes have a symbiotic relationship with each other and there is an entire genre to

be found when the two come together. And there are many such tales in both books and the movies, including, for example LOST HORIZON and A WRINKLE IN TIME. BACK TO THE FUTURE II could even be said to be a dystopia, where Hill Valley becomes like the nightmare version of Pottersville in IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE, only more so. And the problems resulting from Biff's gambling success in this alternate world have clearly had major and widespread political repercussions for there is a frightening headline about Richard Nixon to seeking a fifth term and vowing to end the Vietnam War by 1985.



Two positive thinking utopian tales are worth a particular mention here and they are SULTANA'S DREAM and BEATRICE THE SIXTEENTH: BEING THE PERSON NARRATIVE OF MARY HATHERBY, M.B., EXPLORER AND GEOGRAPHER, for both are early feminist narratives. SULTANA'S DREAM is a Bengali feminist Utopia and was written in 1905 by Begum Rokeya, a Muslim social reformer. It is a sort of gender based *Planet of the Apes*, where gender roles have been reversed. Strictly speaking it's a 'Time Sleep' tale not time travel, and it's a very short tale too. However, in its brief telling it

depicts a world where science better serves society. Here's the exchange between the new arrival and the lady she meets who tells her of this new world and how it came about:

'While the women were engaged in scientific research, the men of this country were busy increasing their military power. When they came to know that the female universities were able to draw water from the atmosphere and collect heat from the sun, they only laughed at the members of the universities and called the whole thing "a sentimental nightmare"!'

'Your achievements are very wonderful indeed! But tell me, how you managed to put the men of your country into the zenana. Did you entrap them first?'

'No.'

'It is not likely that they would surrender their free and open air life of their own accord and confine themselves within the four walls of the zenana! They must have been overpowered.'

'Yes, they have been!'

'By whom? By some lady-warriors, I suppose?'

'No, not by arms.'

'Yes, it cannot be so. Men's arms are stronger than women's. Then?'

'By brain.'

BEATRICE THE SIXTEENTH is about a time traveller who discovers a lost world that turns out to be a utopian post-gender society. It was written in 1909 by Irene Clyde, a writer and lawyer, who was transgender. In the story, the explorer Mary Hatherley receives a kick from a camel while journeying through Asia Minor

which sends her into another time period and a place called Armeria, which is ruled over by Queen Beatrice the Sixteenth of the title. The Armerians are strict vegetarians and their life partnership, known as a 'conjux', appears to be based on love and companionship, rather than sex. Their language, a combination of Latin and Greek, contains no gendered pronouns. Mary forms a conjux with Ilex, one of the leading figures in the kingdom, and even when offered a way to return home by the court astrologer, she decides to remain. However, Mary is able, with the astrologer's help, to send a manuscript to a friend in our world, who then arranges for it to be published by Irene Clyde.

The key point about any Utopian/Dystopian tale is that you are not being shown what is, but rather what could be, be that good or bad. And in seeing these alternatives, you are able to re-evaluate your own society and understand it in a new light. In these two stories it just happens to be gender identity and what is now called sexual politics.

"I abhor the idea of a perfect world. It would bore me to tears."
Shelby Foote



“Reader, I married him.”

When Jane Eyre tells us that she has wed Mr. Rochester, from the Charlotte Brontë's novel JANE EYRE

Time – Period Setting

What we’re talking about here is historical fiction and drama which has a specific period era setting. World War Two is usually a popular setting (GOODNIGHT, MISTER TOM by Michelle Magorian) as is the Victorian era (THE PRESTIGE by Christopher Priest). Many hours in libraries are needed to get the facts right, but this has to be balanced with the drama of the tale. To slightly alter the words and advice once offered in a Noël Coward song – *‘Don’t put your research on the page, Mrs Worthington. Don’t put your research on the page.’*

A quick word here about George Orwell’s 1984. 1984 was written in 1948 – and so you really just have to just swap the last two numbers round to understand what the novel is ultimately about. Just because a book is set in a time period that is out of the present time doesn’t mean to say it’s not *of* the present time.

“It was like a scene straight out of a Merchant Ivory film!”

Kevin Kwan



Some more thoughts on time, story and narrative...

“In terms of pace, the first half of a play should be longer than the second half. If the first half is an hour, and the second half is an hour and fifteen minutes, audience perceive it as slow.”

Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE

“Literature must rest always on a principle, and temporal considerations are no principle at all. For, to the poet, all times and places are one; the stuff he deals with is eternal and eternally the same: no theme is inept, no past or present preferable.”

Oscar Wilde

“Time. This is an area that’s rarely talked about as much as it should be, I find. To me it’s one of the vital choices to be made in play construction.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“It is an oddity of the theatre that audiences understand that when the lights fade it’s the end of the scene, and then some people in black sweaters come on and move furniture around to preordained tape marks on the floor, while your favourite hit songs play in the background. Stephen Daldry rather hilariously calls this ‘Burglary Theatre’. The audience instinctively knows that during this period, time and place will have somehow changed.”

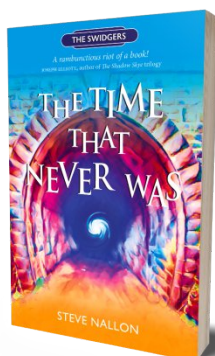
Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE

THE SWIDGERS

*"What struck me most about reading
'Swiggers' was just how funny it was.*

*I didn't expect to laugh quite so
much when reading a story about
lonely boy with special powers*

Year 10



THE SWIDGERS

*"Beguiling, inventive and magical:
Nallon has conjured up a perfect
world and a perfect read."*

Jonathan Maitland, playwright and
presenter of ITV's TONIGHT

Place

NARRATIVE DESIGN

“ABSURD PERSON

SINGULAR

never took flight in my mind until I consciously switched its original sitting-room location to the kitchen.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

The Characteristics of Place and Setting

In Story it's often useful to think of place and setting as almost a character in its own right. Place doesn't 'talk' in a conventional sense, but it can often 'speak' to us in a metaphorical way. And, of course, location and environment can friend or your enemy.

But let's begin by looking at some of the basic characteristics of place and its role in Story.

Place consists of where, meaning location (London, the planet Tharg, the world of your dreams); type of space (school, ranch, harem, hospital); function and purpose (museum – to exhibit art; jail – to imprison wrong-doers; library – to read books); description (old, expensive decor, overrun by bugs, empty but for ghosts); social associations (the bowling alley for blue collar workers; the Savoy Grill for the rich and famous and under the pier for amorous lovers who can find no other place to love) and finally codes of behaviour linked with that particular environment (you cheer at a football ground; you pray in a church; you make friends or get into fights in a pub), for the

social manners of a lift are very different to the social manners of a bar. You might also add to this list the intended use of the space in the sense that the characters in the tale have a specific reason to be there (to hide the jewels, to kill the wife's lover, to handover the secret microfilm).



It also should be said that certain environments are in Story by tradition have become connected to particular experiences, activities, behaviours and actions. Woods and forests are testing grounds, whereas bogs and swamps are seen as areas that absorb your energy, both mental and physical. The corporate tower is a building which cuts you off from human contact, but the family kitchen is the warm room where social graces are less important and so becomes the place where one can share a personal truth. And kitchens in fairy stories and legends are often the room where an adventure begins. Think of *Cinderella* and of young Gareth (disguised as a kitchen servant) in the Arthurian legend.

And spaces sometimes have within their nature their opposite, for example, when a location that is usually filled with people is

empty it takes on its own unique sense of space. The forsaken nursery, the deserted funfair, the derelict church. All can appear creepy and even malevolent.

“HUCKELBERRY FINN... with the best river to ever flow through a novel, our own Mississippi, and in the voyage down those waters of Huck Finn and a runaway slave on their raft, we are held in the thrall of the river. Larger than a character, the river is a manifest presence, a demiurge to support the man and the boy, a deity to betray them, feed them, all but drown them, fling them apart, float them back together. The river winds like a fugue through the marrow of the true narrative, which is nothing less than the ongoing relationship between Huck and the runaway slave.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”

Dumbledore in J.K. Rowling's HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

Place and Exposition

As Eugene Vale says in THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING, "It is sufficient to identify a certain place once because place remains the same... Not so in regard to time. Time, which is forever changing, must be constantly exposed." That said, the moment you choose to reveal the exactly nature of location can become a key part of the drama and lead to important revelations. The opening image of Alan Bennett's play THE OLD COUNTRY seems straight forward enough: *'As the curtain rises, Hilary is asleep in a rocking chair. The sound of Elgar on the gramophone drifts through from an adjoining room. A very English scene.'* Except, as the play goes on, it slowly becomes apparent that we're not in England at all but Russia, and Hilary is a Soviet spy who defected and has been given his house for his services to Mother Russia. Another twist concerning location can be found in Noël Coward's CAVALCADE which features a wonderfully romantic scene on the deck of a ship between two newly-weds talking about their future. All through the scene the man has had his coat hanging over the barrier but as he picks it up and leaves the name of the ship is revealed: *H.M.S. Titanic.*

BRON: That's our little garden.
VERONICA: Sweet. Duff. Look. The garden.

DUFF: *The English garden.*
BRON: *We'll go through.*
VERONICA: *(Off) So cool here. Moscow was boiling.*
From THE OLD COUNTRY by Alan Bennett



“I’m always interested in the way people speak and move in their environment, in a very particular environment. I’m never interested in writing a kind of neutral, universal novel that could be set anywhere. To me, the novel is a local thing always.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

Choice of Place

The point is whatever location is chosen make it interesting and pertinent and purposeful to the drama. David Mamet set AMERICAN BUFFALO (1985) in a junk store which becomes a sort of mirror image of American Society. Nell Dunn’s STEAMING (1981) uses her Turkish bath setting as a meeting place where she explores the lives of local characters and their interactions. THE CHANGING ROOM (1971) is play by David Storey which is set in a men's changing room before, during and after a rugby league football game. It’s pure theatre vérité and in production you can even smell the liniment that the players (meaning the actors) used. Never before had a London theatre audience been so physically close to the sporting aspect of working class life.

In fish-out-of-water stories what is important isn't just the fish but the new and usually alien environment the poor fish finds itself in. Dramatically, the use of contracts and extremes are very important. In the movie *BIG*, Josh's low point is finding himself in a rundown motel room far away from home. Of course later in the story Josh, a twelve-year old boy in an adult body, swaps that very adult world for the perfect place for a true twelve-year old – and that is in a toy shop. And then Josh lands himself the perfect job when he begins working for FAO Schwarz in the toy development department.



In a story then it's useful to consider the characteristics of space in order to find your character's best and worst environment – and then put them in it. And this can be for either dramatic or comic effect. For example, in *LIAR, LIAR*, where a lawyer has magically become unable to lie, finds himself in court defending someone he knows is in the wrong. And, indeed, when asked certain questions, sharing more personal details than he could ever have intended.

JUDGE MARSHALL STEVENS: How are we this morning, Counselor?

DANA APPLETON: *Fine, thank you.*

JUDGE MARSHALL STEVENS: *And how about you, Mr. Reede?*

FLETCHER REEDE: *I'm a little upset about a bad sexual episode I had last night.*

[Shocked pause]

JUDGE MARSHALL STEVENS: *Well, you're young. It'll happen more and more. In the meantime, what do you say we get down to business?*

From the screenplay of **LIAR, LIAR** by Paul Guay and Stephen Mazur



"The best time I ever had in a movie was when I pushed Joan Crawford down the stairs in WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE."

Bette Davis, actress

Use of Place – The Staircase

Of course places and spaces can have many different uses. Consider the staircase. Staircases are by nature transitional and so can be particularly useful in presenting character transformations. Take the walk-down entrance of Eliza Doolittle in **MY FAIR LADY** on the night of the Embassy ball, or, more recently, the arrival of Mrs. Harris at the local dance in **MRS. HARRIS GOES TO PARIS**. In fact there's hardly a Bette Davis movie *without* a staircase entrance. But staircases can also bring danger. Think here of **THE HAUNTING** and

that seemingly endless rickety staircase or the stairs in Scrooge's house which become strangely supernatural in the flicking light of his candle:

You may talk vaguely about driving a coach-and-six up a good old flight of stairs, or through a bad young Act of Parliament; but I mean to say you might have got a hearse up that staircase, and taken it broadwise, with the splinter-bar towards the wall and the door towards the balustrades: and done it easy. There was plenty of width for that, and room to spare; which is perhaps the reason why Scrooge thought he saw a locomotive hearse going on before him in the gloom. Half a dozen gas-lamps out of the street wouldn't have lighted the entry too well, so you may suppose that it was pretty dark with Scrooge's dip.

And people in stories have a habit of falling down staircases, often raising the question did he trip or was he pushed? Think here of Agatha Christie's DUMB WITNESS, the classic ghost tale THE SHADOWY THIRD by Ellen Glasgow or the famous *The Young One* episode of ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS. Staircases can be a danger zone and if you have your doubts watch PSYCHO, HOME ALONE, THE SHINING, NATIONAL LAMPOON'S CHRISTMAS VACATION, THROW MAMA FROM THE TRAIN, GONE WITH THE WIND, THE CHANGELING, FARGO, KISS OF DEATH, LOOPER, FIGHT CLUB, THE BLUES BROTHERS, THE RETURN OF THE PICK PANTHER, THE LADY, DEATH BECOMES HER and, classically, the Odessa Steps sequence from Sergei Eisenstein's BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN.



In *THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS*, on his first night at the Old Coach Inn, William stubbles on a knot in the timber as he makes his way up the rough wooden staircase:

‘Proceed.’

His voice, like his skin, is burnt and scarred.

‘It’s very dark,’ I mumble. ‘I can’t see very well.’

His reply comes in Latin, I think, making that voice seem all the more scorched and blistered.

‘*Non est tanti*. The stairs await.’

The steep wooden steps, bumpy, and of differing heights and widths, are navigable only with care. But with the oil lamp at my back, it’s my own darting shadow that puts me most in confusion. I lose my footing and stumble badly where the staircase turns, hitting my jaw hard upon the treads.

The Red-Faced Man stops but does not acknowledge my fall. His oil lamp, now close by his head, lights up a line of sharp, half broken teeth.

But it’s only later that he realises that that knot was the biggest clue to the secret of the Old Coach Inn.

Staircases are also often used in dream-fantasy as the way to Heaven. Think *JACOB’S LADDER* or *A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH*. In

fact, staircases in stories can take you everywhere. And so they should be. As Martin Scorsese often says, “Every great movie has a staircase shot.”

***‘I’ll build a stairway to Paradise
With a new step ev’ry day !
I’m gonna get there at any price;
Stand aside, I’m on my way !
I’ve got the blues
And up above it’s so fair.
Shoes ! Go on and carry me there !
I’ll build a stairway to Paradise
With a new step every day.’***

I’ll build a stairway to Paradise, lyrics by Arthur Francis (the early pen-name for Ira Gershwin) and B.G. Desylva, with music by George Gershwin



CHEYENNE: Listen, Harmonica, a town built around a railroad – mmmm – you could make a fortune, huh? Hundreds of thousands of dollars. Hey, more than that. Thousands of thousands.

HARMONICA: They call them "millions."

CHEYENNE: "Millions." Hmm.

From ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST, directed by Sergio Leone, with screenplay by Sergio Donati and Sergio Leone, from a story by Dario Argento

Place – Social Stages and the Guilt Cultures and Shame Cultures

Human societies have what you might call 'staging posts' in their social and cultural development. There's the wilderness, then the first settlement village which then becomes the growing town. Next is the expansive city and finally its opposite, the dysfunctional metropolis. And the transitional half-way house between these environments can be rich ground in story terms.

The evolution from the wilderness world to the more secure environment of village life is often explored in the pioneer myth of the Western genre. John Wayne as Ethan Edwards standing on the threshold but not seemingly able to enter the house in John Ford's *THE SEARCHERS* gave us, for example, one of the most icon images in the history of the genre. The difference between village and town is more subtle but it is a distinction that is certainly there in Sergio Leone's *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST*, where the arrival of the railway will soon turn the small settlement into a thriving civic world.

The disparity between town and city is explored in many Frank Capra movies, notably *MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON*, but also, to a degree, in *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE* when Bedford Fall becomes Pottersville. Suddenly the values of the town – caring for others, neighbourliness – are overtaken by the hard self-centred credo of the world of city. And the movement from village to city offers even greater contrasts. In *CINEMA PARADISO*, Giancaldo, a small village in Sicily, gave Salvatore Di Vita his love of movies and the city offered

fame and success. But not true love. That could only be found in Giancaldo itself.



Of course cities can be good places too, as it is in Woody Allen's *MANHATTAN* and his *MIDNIGHT IN PARIS* (though as this is a time travel tale the 'midnight' keeps changing to the past). People have even gone as far as to say that New York is the second lead in Woody Allen's *MANHATTAN*. And they're right. The isle of Manhattan is more than a backdrop, it's a living place of culture, romance and thinking. But it's how your story sees it. Woody Allen's hymn to New York is a far cry from John Carpenter's dystopian New York in *ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK*. Here that second lead is hostile, intimidating and ultimately a killer. In fact there are many films where the city becomes a dystopia, notably *BLADE RUNNER*. Los Angeles in particular is seen as a disjointed, destructive and disruptive world. Think *L.A. CONFIDENTIAL*, *COLLATERAL*, *FALLING DOWN* and *CHINATOWN*. And, you might add, most *film noirs* of the 1940s.

Often certain values and the codes are connected to certain places and spaces. And this brings us to the ideas of the 'Shame

Cultures’ and the ‘Guilt Cultures’, which are ideas explored in the story theories of John Truby. The shame culture, he suggests, is concerned with physical capability, strength, ceremony, honour, symbols, remembrance and unspoken emotion. It’s a world where, as they say, ‘A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do’, otherwise he – and it usually is a he – will live in shame forever. This code of thinking belongs somewhere between the wilderness and the town. The guilt culture on the other hand is more concerned with accommodating others, tolerance, fairness, reliability and doing good. The point being that if you don’t do these things you will be consumed with guilt. These values, Truby says, belong more to the town.



Where all this can become interesting dramatically is build up contrasts and conflicts between the different values and the chalk and cheese codes of living. CITY SLICKERS (inspired by the Western RED RIVER) explores these different values in a comic way, as does CROCODILE DUNDEE. DELIVERANCE is more serious. In this movie four Atlanta businessmen decide to canoe down a river in the

remote northern Georgia wilderness before it is dammed. But it turns out to be a brutal world for which they are ill prepared.

MICHAEL 'CROCODILE' DUNDEE and SUE are approached by a teenage youth stepping out from the shadows, followed by some others

TEENAGE YOUTH: You got a light, buddy?

MICHAEL 'CROCODILE' DUNDEE: [reaching for lighter] Yeah, sure kid.

TEENAGE YOUTH: [flicking open a switchblade] And your wallet!

SUE: Mick, give him your wallet.

MICHAEL 'CROCODILE' DUNDEE: What for?

SUE: He's got a knife.

MICHAEL 'CROCODILE' DUNDEE: [chuckling] That's not a knife.

[‘Crocodile’ pulls out a large bowie knife]

MICHAEL 'CROCODILE' DUNDEE: THAT's a knife.

From the screenplay of CROCODILE DUNDEE by Paul Hogan, Ken Shadie and John Cornell



“Choice of location can greatly affect the mood and tone of the play... Setting SEASON’S GREETINGS in the hall of Neville and Belinda’s home gave a sense of us being at a crossroads in their house, allowing me to have characters moving freely from one part of it to another, often as if en route. Additionally, by having both the sitting room and the dining room only partially in view I could employ a ‘now you see them, now you don’t’ effect, and achieve greater flexibility when it came to shuffling characters on and off.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Place – Image System, Metaphors, Microcosms and Transformations

In the movie CASABLANCA, the place itself is not an actual prison but it is that it is presented as such in that permission is needed to escape and leave. In fact the prison image system is there in the *mise-en-scène*, where shadows cast long lattice like bars on people. The stripes of the costumes too suggest a prison-like world. SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION on the other hand is a literal prison and those who watch the film often find it that world of incarceration a metaphor for their own entrapment in life, be it in a marriage or a job or an environment they hate.



Place can also be a microcosm of society, as is the case in the worlds of GULLIVER'S TRAVELS or the island in William Golding's allegorical tale LORD OF THE FLIES, where unsupervised school boys turn to savagery. Place can as well reflect the internal world of the character, as it does in Shirley Jackson's THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE and, to a degree, in Martin Scorsese's TAXI DRIVER.

Places can have high points and low points. And each can be symbolically used by the writer. *THE THIRD MAN* is about a corrupt fraudster called Harry Lime living in Vienna immediately after the Second World War who has been dealing in the black marketing and selling diluted penicillin. And he's becoming a rich man. There's a scene where Harry Lime and friend Holly Martins are high above Vienna in the Wiener Riesenrad, a gigantic Ferris Wheel. Lime says, "Look down there. Tell me. Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever? If I offered you twenty thousand pounds for every dot that stopped, would you really, old man, tell me to keep my money, or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spare? Free of income tax, old man. Free of income tax – the only way you can save money nowadays." But Lime is also a wanted and the police are onto him. Lime escapes down into the sewer tunnels. He eventually escapes via a manhole grate, where he exchanges looks with his friend Martins before he is shot by the police. What we have in *THE THIRD MAN* are highs and lows, both physical and symbolically.

Environments can turn or be turned against you, but equally you can use and transform what they have to offer to fight back. In both *DIE HARD* and *HOME ALONE* the protagonists make unexpected use of both space and the objects they discover it as means of attacking the Bad Guys. You could almost argue that *HOME ALONE* and *DIE HARD* share the same plot: Hero uses place and its assets to

foil the villains. And in DIE HARD specifically the designer was told by the director that it was in effect a 'jungle movie' and so many aspects of the set were created with this concept in mind, notably the unfinished décor with hanging polythene strands. The 'jungle' concept became the image system for the movie and that's reflected too on the changing costume of hero.

In fact, places and spaces can imaginatively be transformed into different environments. Who hasn't enjoyed, for example, the magic in MARY POPPINS where London, especially its rooftops, becomes almost a children's playground.

JOHN MCCLANE: [huddled in an air vent, recalls his wife's invitation] 'Come out to the coast, we'll get together, have a few laughs...'

From DIE HARD, directed by John McTiernan, with screenplay by Jeb Stuart and Steven E. de Souza, based on the novel NOTHING LAST FOREVER by Roderick Thorp



"Once outdoors, people generally get 'freed up'. They sit on the grass, lie flat out, make love together or tend to gaze into the distance a lot more, which allows them to deliver self-conscious soliloquies. (It's always difficult to address your remarks to the

sitting-room sideboard, but outdoors, what could be more natural than to address the horizon?)”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Place – The Move from In to Out and from Private to Public

A party. A meal. A dance. A celebration. A story begins with private people in private spaces but then, and it's usually is about half way through a tale, those same people go public and the consequences are often the focus of the second half. Jane Austen did this with tea parties and balls, for example, the picnic and ball in EMMA and the society party in PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. Public occasions raise the stakes for here reputations are made and lost. Also public occasions allow two worlds collide, think of Jack joining all those First Class passengers for dinner in TITANIC.

THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS has two key public events. In the first half of the novel it is the Parents Teachers Meeting, where Granny confronts William's various teachers and the headmaster. The consequences of Granny's and William's actions that night lead to the climax of the first half of the novel. And the social gathering of the second half of the book is the dinner at the Old Coach Inn. And the consequences of what happens there leads to the climax of that story as well.

“Outdoors or indoors? Don't forget this option. Personally, I love the outdoor choice whenever I can make it work. I've probably

chosen it for a sizeable percentage of my plays. It allows characters a greater freedom of movement. It's the equivalent of having a room with an infinite number of doors: it enables them to come and go with far greater flexibility. They can wander on and off at will or march up the garden with a glint in heir eye, as if off to do something. They can wander through with wheelbarrows and saunter around picking roses."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING



Some more thoughts on place...

"Cities have sexes: London is a man, Paris a woman, and New York a well-adjusted transsexual."

Angela Carter

"As a writer, London has been one of my muses, my connection to it runs deep, and this was fostered through living in so many of its districts. I have spent my entire adult life shooting across London on every form of transport including the bipedal one, and soaking is all up. A cursory look at my books will reveal the presence of London through multiple iterations: contemporary, historical, re-imagined as alternate universes. My relationship to the capital, through living in many homes many homes across it, has been hugely inspirational."

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

"I've never seen the point of the sea, except where it meets the land. The shore has a point. The sea has none."

Alan Bennett

“I’m never interested in writing a kind of neutral, universal novel that could be set anywhere. To me, the novel is a local thing.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist



“When an object in the setting is motivated to operate actively within the ongoing action, we call it a ‘prop’.”

FILM ART: AN INTRODUCTION, by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Jeff Smith

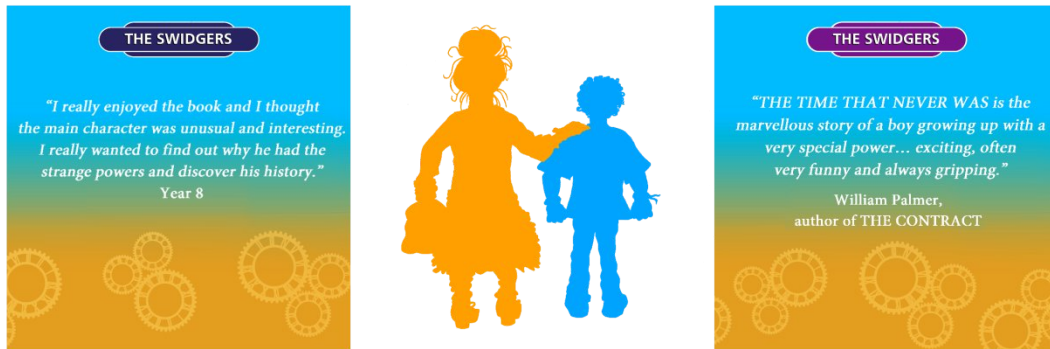
Properties

The snow globe and the sledge called ‘Rosebud’ in CITIZEN KANE (1941) are two of the most famous props in the history of film. But that snow globe is more than just a paperweight. Or at least it represents thematically something more than what you use to stop papers blowing away. The paperweight is first seen by Kane in Susan's home but, unlike many other objects, it is thrown to the ground and destroyed. And exceptions create significance. When people have said or ‘read into’ globe is that it represents a world, arguably Kane’s lost world of innocence when we first see him as a child playing in the snow. People, mainly meaning film critics and academics, have said that Kane lost one world, his mother and his family, and gained another, the world of vast wealth, but that

world/globe never gave him happiness and so he tried to cling on, literally, to that which brought back in some way that childhood word. And his world ends when he can cling on now more and the snow globe drops to the floor. Incidentally, the use of a snow globe was not original to CITIZEN KANE and in fact one made a significant appearance as a prop in KITTY FOYLE the previous year. As for the sledge called 'Rosebud', on which the boy Kane is seen playing at the beginning of the movies, well, that is in a way the narrative drive of the plot, for an newspaper editor sends a reporter off on journey to find its significance when it is revealed that it was the last word Kane said as he died.

The director, Orson Wells, laughed at all these theories in later life. He said that the point of finding out what Rosebud meant was a wild goose chase because no man's life could be summed up by one word. Besides, he added mischievously, it was his private word for a certain part of the female anatomy.

The Godfather trilogy uses the orange, or more specifically the Sicilian orange as a prop of significance. it is not a symbol of death but it is associated with death. In GODFATHER PART ONE Vito dies in an orange orchard. Making faces with the peel of an orange. In GODFATHER PART TWO Vito is gifted an orange, showing he doesn't pay anymore. In GODFATHER PART THREE Michael drops the orange and dies. Helicopter assassination an orange falls. Vincent (Andy Garcia) plays with oranges in Sicily.



Animism is the belief that objects have desires and intentions. And that of course includes props. However, it's an idea that not surprisingly is rarely used in films, except in a supernatural manner. In RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK the swastika is burnt off the crate that hold the Ark of the Covenant.

"It is tempting to say the prop in the motion picture takes the place of the adjective in the novel. The novelist may say 'an elegant woman'. The screenwriter may show her in a mink coat. The novelist may say 'a messy room'. The screenwriter may show empty cans on the floor."

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)



Some more thoughts on theatre spaces and place and setting in stage dramas from the playwright Alan Ayckbourn in his book THE CRAFT ART OF PLAYMAKING...

“Always try to have the audience looking at the same thing at the same moment. A well-designed set will assist this.”

“Don’t let [characters] go off without a reason... In life people don’t need a reason to leave the room. In plays they normally do if an audience is not going to start with remarking on the coincidence.”

“Don’t bring them on without a reason. Normally, it’s good to know where people have been or are going... Bringing them from somewhere definite with a spanner or a dishcloth performs the other valuable function of creating a world beyond the stage itself.”

“BEDROOM FARCE was actually written that way only because Peter Hall had asked to write something for the newly completed Lyttelton Theatre, and I could not for the life of me think how to fill that big wide stage. So I divided it into three and wrote a play set in three different bedrooms.”

“Proscenium theatres generally make scenic statements whether they want to or not: the round makes none unless called upon to do so.”

“To a certain extent, it is often the narrative which predetermines the where and when. If your story intends to cover, say, the rise and fall of a family dynasty, it follows that events will be spread over several time periods. Also, unless you are extremely skilful you will be looking at a number of different locations. Both of these decisions, once taken, will have far-reaching effects.”



“The story world isn’t a copy of life as it is. It’s life as human beings imagine it could be. It is human life condensed and heightened so that the audience can gain a better understanding of how life itself works.”

John Truby

THE SWIDGERS – William’s Story World

The physical world of the Story World – meaning, for example, the home and lived environment – should be a reflection of the main character. Oddly enough, however, we never see William at home. He briefly talks about where he lives being empty and loveless, but at no stage does William take us, the reader, inside the house. Instead, we first meet William one busy Saturday on the High Street, waiting at the entrance of a pub in order to alter someone’s timeline. But this is William’s world, for, in effect, William is a street urchin or rather, as he’s a *Swidger*, more a cosmic ‘Street Angel’. And that’s the point. We never see him at home because he’s not a domestic creature and more importantly he, and *Swidgers* such as Granny and himself, ultimately has no home. And that is one of the early lessons Granny wants William to learn and why she was so keen to get him out of school.



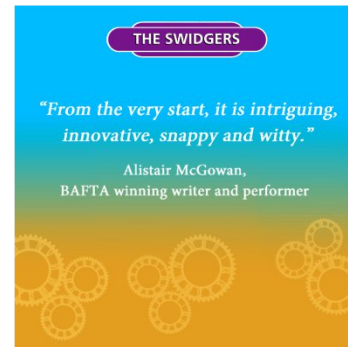
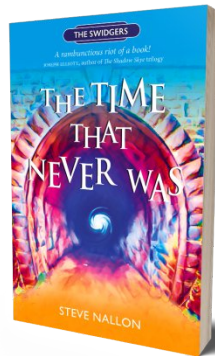
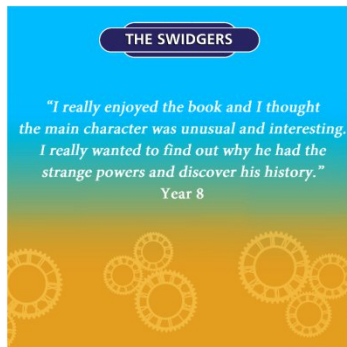
Of course it's not just the hero who should have a physical environment that is a reflection of his nature. In fact, all the major characters in the Story World should have an environment that somehow is a reflection of who they are. This is certainly the case for the physical world of Echo's railway carriage. That said, the shaman-like Echo truly belongs to an even the bigger world: the Universe itself. And that is why Echo likes to spend his time under the stars. And why too, when he tells the tale of the *Swidgers* cosmos creation story, Echo truly becomes alive and himself. No surprise then that the tale has such a big effect on William.

At the other end of the other extreme, there's the terrifying world of the Old Coach Inn. It's world of bareness of wood. Of bareness of Time. Of cobwebs and decay. Of all that is old and nothing that is new. This Aloysius's world. A world empty and void of feeling. It's everything that Aloysius is and William isn't and never wishes to be.

"As a writer and as a reader, I really believe in the power of a narrative to allow us ways to experience life beyond our own, ways

to reflect on things that have happened to us and a chance to engage with the world in ways that transcend time and gender and all sorts of things.”

Kim Edwards



NARRATIVE DESIGN

What is a Narrative?

“Preparatory work is vital to all playmaking. A dramatist needs to make certain key decisions. Sometimes the solutions automatically present themselves, on other occasions they need careful consideration. The questions need to be asked: how, when, where and with whom are you going to choose to tell your story? In other words: narrative, time, location, characters. These decisions are made in no particular order and often overlap.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Narrative

In Book III of Plato’s REPUBLIC, Socrates distinguishes between *mimesis* (where the poet imitates the speech of a character) and *diegesis* (pure narrative description where the poet speaks in his own voice). The Greeks, during the life times of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, essentially had three ways of presenting a Story: pure *diegesis*, in which the poet spoke exclusively in his own words, exemplified by the lyric poem; pure *mimesis*, in which the poet spoke only in the imitated voices of characters, as exemplified in drama in both comedy and tragedy; and a mixture of *diegesis* and *mimesis* as found in the epics of Homer such as THE ILIAD and THE ODYSSEY.

And the important distinction to be made is between *show* and *tell*. The theatre medium is usually pure *show*, in the sense that normally all there is to see and hear from a Story point of view are the speeches of characters. The novel, a direct descendant of the epic, is primarily *tell*, in the sense that fiction uses narrative description throughout to communicate its Story. That said, Evelyn Waugh occasionally has whole scenes in his novels that are all in direct speech, without even a 'he said' or a 'she said'. And even theatre sometimes has a narrator, as in Shakespeare's PERICLES with the narrator John Gower.



But where does cinema fit into all this? The medium of cinema is curious because, unlike a spectator in a theatre, who can look wherever they like, the cinema has the camera to guide you. And because the camera offers a literal point of view and the option of subjective perspective, the nature of its *tell* and its *show* can occasionally get blurred. What this means is that the camera can take on a narrative position in way that the eyes of the audience

watching a stage play cannot. And that gives the cinema at least an element of what we call *diegesis* or narrative.

“Literary genres are not just external labels. They are techniques, approaches, infrastructures, methods that facilitate the concepts behind our writing.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP



“No literary form is more revealing, more spontaneous or more individual than a letter.”

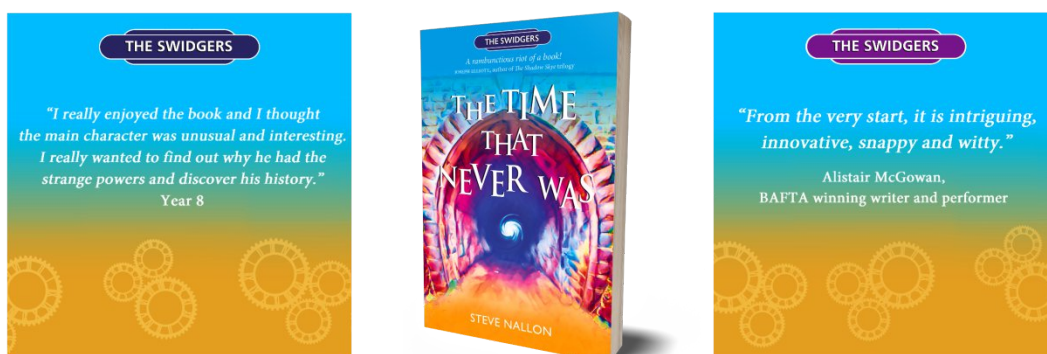
P.D. James

Narrative Form, Style and Genre

Terms such as Style, Form and Genre always present problems, not only as to what they mean but the way people use them. For example, musicians may define form in terms of musical organisation in a composition, whereas a filmmaker may well define ‘form’ in terms of genre. So let’s then try and be clear from the start what we mean in this section by style, form and genre.

Form as it is used here is the central concept determining how the work (or story) is communicated or presented (‘form’ in fact

comes from the Latin *forma* meaning ‘idea’). In other words, it is the basic nature of the thing itself –be it in written form, in theatrical form or in visual form. *Style* on the other hand might be summed up as the myriad of choices around language, metaphor and sentence structure, which, word by word and line by line, make up the manner in which a work is put together. Take a dress, for example. The idea of ‘a dress’, a one-piece garment of covering worn over the body and which usually extends at least down to the legs, might be said to be the *form*, whereas the pattern upon it or the choice of colour could be said to be the *style*.



How does this all this apply to, say, writing? Well, let's take the example of a letter to someone. A letter is a written, typed, or printed message, which is usually sent in an envelope by post, or occasionally delivered by hand. That's its form. And, as it's a universal definition of what a 'letter' is, it's conceptual rather than actual. Of course the way in which people express their thoughts in letters is as varied as the number of people who write them. And so it's the way that it's written which could be said to be the letter's

style. And style in this sense covers language, grammar, use of metaphor and so on.

But what then do we mean by the term 'Narrative Form'? Again, put as simply as possible, narrative form is *the way that story is told and presented*. The novel – the novel being a fictional story written in prose – has a variety of potential *narrative options*. For example, a novel can be told or presented in first person narration or third person narration. And these might be said to be the novel's *narrative forms*. And of course there are other narrative forms too, such as the epistolary novel. Style, on the other hand, is more concerned with the choices made by the writer concerning language, metaphors and syntax. For example, is the manner of the language plain and simple or florid and colourful? The linguistic texture, you might say.



But what then of *Genre*? As said, many critics and academics unfortunately use *form* and *genre* interchangeably and this can be very confusing. To distinguish between the two, *genre* is best thought of as that aspect of a work that deals with its classification.

Again, put as simply as possible, what we are talking about with *genre* are notions of ‘types of’ and ‘kinds of’. Take the example of our dress. A dress is a garment and that’s the *form*, it has colour and patterns, that’s its *style* – but there are different *types of dresses* for different occasions. There’s the cocktail dress, the wedding dress, the formal evening dress. Likewise, there are numerous *kinds of letters*, the thank you letter, the rejection letter, the dismissal letter and so on. And the notion of *genre* works in the same way in that there are different *types and kinds of story narratives* – there is the Horror genre, Romantic Comedy genre and indeed, you could say, the Time Travel genre.

“Certain human relations are compatible to literary forms. For instance, the one-night stand is like a poem, good or bad. The affair that does not go on forever is equal to a short story. By this logic, marriage is a novel.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



“You could tell THE HANDMAID’S TALE from a male point of view. People have mistakenly felt that the women are oppressed, but power tends to organise itself in a pyramid. I could pick a male narrator from somewhere in that pyramid. It would interesting.”

Margaret Atwood

Narrative Design

Having distinguished *Form*, *Style* and *Genre*, are we any closer to saying what we mean by *Narrative Design*?

It has been said that Story is all the events of what happened in chronological order, whereas plot is the rearrangement of those events in a different time sequences and in a causal ‘this-happened-because-of-that’ manner. Of course such reorganising and linking of what happened requires an element of design in terms of structuring but here narrative design specifically means the *mode of presentation*. If a story is everything that occurred, and plot is the why, where and when those things happened, then narrative design is the *manner in which that tale is told and communicated*.

Remember E.M. Forster’s famous observation that the king died and then the queen died is a story but the king died and then the queen died of grief is a plot? Well, what Forster didn’t say was how that tale should be told. From the perspective of their son, the prince or their daughter, the princess? Or even from the point of view of the court jester? What we’re talking about is who tells it, the way they tell it, plus the perspective from which they tell it, meaning, is it told with hindsight or as if it were happening right now and in the moment?



And there are other detailed narrative choices that have to be made. For instance, what sort of narrative voice should the story have? Will the narrative be told as an objective narration, a subject narration or even stream of consciousness? Is the tale to be communicated in first person, third person or even second person? Will it be written in present tense or past tense or a mixture of both? Are events to be imparted exclusively through narrative description or might some aspects be told through letters or emails or direct speech? And these are important questions, not least because all these choices are usually made well ahead of any actual narrative composition – and all these together they make up what we call *narrative design*.

“The book [LAURA] only became its own unique entity when I eschewed convention. From then on, most of my books began in one literary genre and ended up as something else. I have no idea if this is the experience of other writers; I suspect not.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP



“There are so many different narrative traditions across the world, and each of those traditions has evolved dramatically over time. Once I understood that, I felt truly free; I could write and invent the way I wanted to because there never has been only one way to tell a story.”
Ken Liu

Narrative Voice – Who is Telling the Tale? And why are they telling it that way?

‘The Voice’. This has recently become the biggest buzz word in literary circles, especially in the world of publishing. “We loved the ‘Voice’,” literary agents will tell you, with enthusiasm and excitement. And yet, if you ask them exactly what they mean by ‘The Voice’, they will often flounder and resort to a bamboozle of half understood literary terms they once heard on a creative writing course.

But if ‘The Voice’ is a term that is used regularly then it must mean something. So what is it? Well, it’s not literally the speaking human voice, except, you could argue, that there is a uniqueness in how we all speak and if you can translate that ‘voice’, as it were, to the page, then your writing will certainly have its own distinctness.

And that the nature of that difference is an important aspect of what we mean by 'The Voice'.

However, the sound of your voice, unique though it may be, is not the same as what you say. In writing terms, it might be better to think of 'The Voice' as the manner in which your story is told. Yet even that sounds a little like jargon. Is there then a simpler way of describing what 'The Voice' is without having to use a load of half understood gobbledygook?



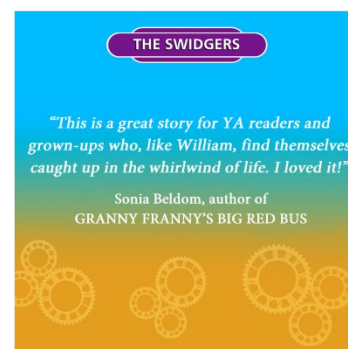
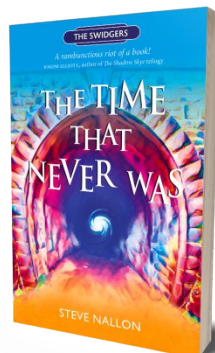
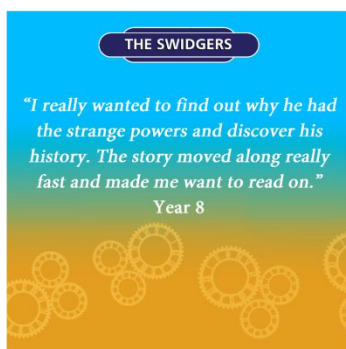
Yes. Put as simply as possible, 'The Voice' is the way your storyteller thinks. The Voice is their thought process. Instead of an individual way of speaking or vocalising, the voice then, in a literary sense, refers to a unique way of thinking – plus how those thoughts are expressed and conveyed in terms of language, metaphor and those textures we call style. It's only you that vocally speaks as you do, so find a way of translating, as it were, your uniqueness to the page. The key point is that a good book – a good narrative – puts you inside, if you like, the speaking mind of the teller of the tale. And that

mind is what we call ‘The Voice’. It’s really no more complicated than that.

Of course, people who work in the literary sphere of publishing are fond of presenting themselves as having some sort of special expertise that separates them from the chaff. And using expressions such as ‘The Voice’ helps them do that. Yet all too often when talking about ‘The Voice’ they overcomplicate the matter by putting all the emphasis on stylistic choices, things like syntax and metaphor, when really all we’re really talking about is capturing what the narrator is thinking and, perhaps even more importantly, *why they are thinking like they are*. The voice then shouldn’t be thought of as some sort of florid showy-off style of writing, but rather writing that is truthful to the mind of character, no matter who that character is or how clever or simple they are.

“If a good story plot somehow won’t work out right, it may be that the point of view is in the wrong place.”

Madison Smartt Bell, NARRATIVE DESIGN: WORKING WITH IMAGINATION, CRAFT, AND FORM



NARRATIVE DESIGN

Objective, Restrictive, Subjective and Unreliable Narratives

“Writers use narratives to select from everything there is, and make contexts by putting the pieces into relation; that’s what writers do, they make contexts.”

Paul Shepherd, HOW TO LIKE EVERYTHING: A UTOPIA

The Narrative Forms – Objective, Restricted and Subjective

When discussing the narrative forms of Objective, Restricted and Subjective Narrations, it’s important to remember that although they are usually applied to *diegesis* – that is, written narrative fiction – they can as well be used in describing the cinematic form and it’s narratives. However, terms such as first person narration and third person, which, respectively, are closely connected to objective and subjective narratives, are usually only used when discussing novels. Although all these terms are related and sometimes used interchangeably, let’s for now just stick to the concepts of objective,

restricted and subjective narratives. And in essence what we're talking about here is what you might call *narrative perspective*.

“A narrative is like a room on whose walls a number of false doors have been painted; while within the narrative, we have many apparent choices of exit, but when the author leads us to one particular door, we know it is the right one because it opens.”

John Updike



“If it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else. Even when there is no one.”

Margaret Atwood

Objective Narration

The standard narrative form of most novels – and indeed the Hollywood movie – is what is usually known as objective narration (or, in fiction only, the implied author). In other words, it can be assumed when reading a book or watching a film that someone has put the narrative all together and so controls how, and what, and when the reader or viewer sees and hears what there is. Of course, whoever is the story’s creator or creators, they want the story to be told in the best possible way. No good story maker would ever, for

example, tell you what the twist is at the start of the narrative. And nor would you as a viewer or reader want them to. So you assume that whoever has put the story together has done so for strategic reasons. Put simply, those presenting the story, plotted it out in order to achieve the greatest possible effect on the reader or viewer, be that emotional, comedic or dramatic.



A further point to make about objective narration is that it's exactly that – *objective*. Objective narration keeps its distance. It's all about showing and presenting as impartially as possible, rather than putting forward a moral judgement or pointing out where one of the characters made a terrible mistake. Objective narration can still be expressive in how it conveys its story, it's just that it chooses, on the whole, to keep its distance when it comes to passing on its opinion.

Another important point to make here about objective narration is that it rarely keeps itself to the perspective of one character. Usually in objective narration there is equal access to a fair range of characters across the whole narrative. However, there is a type of narrative that does keep itself to a very limited number of

characters, or even just one character. And this way of presenting Story brings us to what is usually known as ‘Restricted Narration’.



Some more thought on objective narration...

“Hitchcock makes it very clear to us. There’s an objective and a subjective camera, like there’s a third- and first-person narrator in literature.”

Manuel Puig

“The voice of the narrator who knows the whole story... cannot be dismissed as old-fashioned or uncool. It’s not only the oldest and most widely used storytelling voice, it’s also the most versatile, flexible, and complex of the points of view.”

Ursula K.le Guin

“There’s no way to approach anything in an objective way. We’re completely subjective; our view of the world is completely controlled by who we are as human beings, as men or women, by our age, our history, our profession, by the state of the world.”

Charlie Kaufman, director and screenwriter



“Don’t go into your protagonist’s thoughts until you have something to say about his or her inner life that is more interesting than the reader’s suppositions. To jump in only to offer banal material is a fatal error. It is the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

Restricted or Reflector Narration

Perhaps though a better phrase to use rather than restricted narration is ‘Reflector Narration’, for what we’re really talking about here is keeping the range of knowledge to one or maybe two people in the narrative who act as a kind of ‘reflector’ through which the story is presented. Put simply, it’s from their point of view alone that the reader or viewer will experience the tale and all that happened in it. And that’s why restricted narration is a bit of a misnomer, for what it often means in practice is actually seeing more but only from one point of view. A narrower perspective, yes, but usually one that’s far deeper and more penetrating.

“The narration, in fact, doubles the drama with a commentary without which no mise-en-scène would be possible.”

Jacques Lacan



“I get the impression from some people that unless they get direct access to characters’ thoughts and realizations, either through thought balloons or narrations or some sort of showy action, then those thoughts and realizations never existed.”

Adrian Tomine

Time Travel ‘Reflectors’

Not surprisingly, restricted/reflector narration is particularly popular in mystery and crime tales. For example, *IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOON* is a *film noir* time travel crime story that is presented more or less exclusively from the standpoint of the cop called Locke. The plot itself concerns a time travelling serial killer who seems to know Locke very well. In the end the mystery of the identity of this killer is revealed – it’s his granddaughter from the future trying to re-set events in the past to save the world in her time. But the point here is that, had the movie told the tale from her point of view, there would have been no mystery. Or at least, it would have been a different type of mystery.

Of course not all reflector narrations are as clear cut as the classic cop or private investigator tale. Take the movie *PRIMER*. It’s true that *PRIMER* is presented pretty much exclusively from the perspective of Aaron and Abe. However, there are so many missing

pieces in this jigsaw puzzle of a tale that even at the end, coming to any sort of full understanding of this elliptical time travelling plot is pretty much impossible. Detractors on IMDb mock this but those who are admirers of the movie see it as one of its greatest strengths.

Another point to make about the restricted/reflector narration is that the character being, as it were, followed can change as the story develops. Jonas, for example, is the main reflector in the television series *DARK*, but not exclusively so. But again *DARK* is a mystery crime tale, and ultimately it is Jonas who must discover a clear path – his own *Holzweg* you might say – through the forest-like complexity of the plot. And it's only when Jonas succeeds in this, and so finally come to an understanding of the whole mystery, that he is able to make the decision that will change everything. And that of course is why Jonas is the central reflector, because that moment is the pivot on which the whole Time Tale rests.



So far then we've looked at objective narration and restricted/reflector narration but now let's move on to consider two

more types of narration, namely ‘Unrestricted Narration’ and ‘Subjective Narration’.

“When writers are self-conscious about themselves as writers they often keep a great distance from their characters, sounding as if they were writing encyclopaedia entries instead of stories. Their hesitancy about physical and psychological intimacy can be a barrier to vital fiction. Conversely, a narration that makes readers hear the characters’ heavy breathing and smell their emotional anguish diminishes distance. Readers feel so close to the characters that, for those magical moments, they become those characters.”

Jerome Stern



“I think that people create the world that they live in. Your existence is very subjective, and you tell stories and organise the world outside of you into these stories to help you understand it... We’re all subjective beings and trapped in our own realities and our own biographical stories and physical bodies and our histories – and that’s the only way we can experience the world.”

Charlie Kaufman

Unrestricted Narration and Subjective Narration

Unrestricted narration goes a lot further than either objective narration or reflector narration in that unrestricted narration does what it says on the tin: it’s a narration that is unlimited in knowledge

and truly ubiquitous. An unrestricted narration can go anywhere, including sometimes even inside the minds of the various characters. An example of an unrestricted narration in a movie might be said to be the movie *THE JACKET*, where the narration takes the audience into the mind/memories/dreams/hallucinations of Jack Starks (Adrien Brody). But what's real and what's imagined is not always that easy to tell. At least not until the very end of the movie.



Subjective narration is similar to unrestricted narration, except with subjective narration one character alone is the '*centre of consciousness*', as Henry James once put it. But pure subjective narration is very rare in movies simply because by definition pure subjective narration would also mean subjective camera or POV (point-of-view) throughout the film. *LADY IN THE LAKE* and the opening sequence of *HALLOWEEN* are examples. Subjective camera can occasionally be found in objective narrations, for example, when we see the red images from the red-eyed Model 101 in *THE TERMINATOR*. But this technique is only used in a few scenes.

Some more thoughts on subjective narration...

“We have the right, and the obligation, to tell old stories in our own ways, because they are our stories.”

Neil Gaiman, writer

“I think generally I'm kind of interested in subjective experience, what goes on inside someone's head, that being all they really know of the world.”

Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director



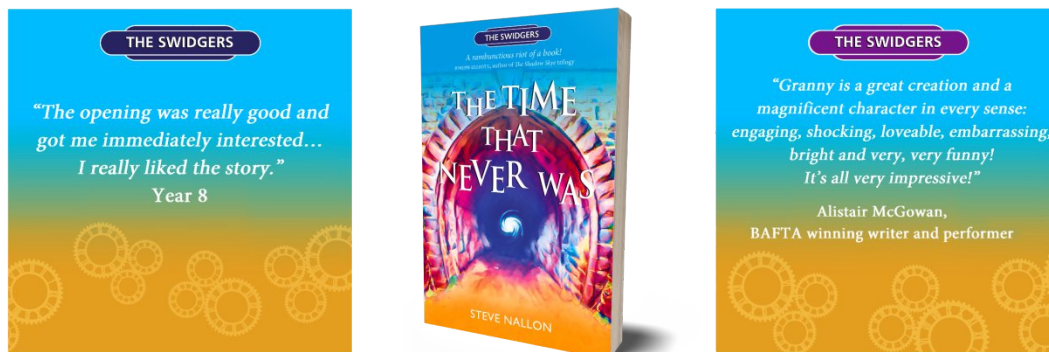
“Streams of consciousness... for the reader, it’s rather like wearing earphones plugged into someone’s brain, and monitoring an endless tape-recording of the subject’s impressions, reflections, questions, memories and fantasies, as they are triggered either by physical sensations or the association of ideas.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

Stream of Consciousness

The ultimate subjective narration is stream-of-consciousness or ‘Mindscreen’, as it’s sometimes referred to in cinema, and this subjective narration can include dreams, memories and interior

monologues. In subjective narration internal thoughts are often a central part of the narrative, plus any subjective sound that only that one character is hearing. Or believe they are hearing.



‘Stream of consciousness’ was actually a phrase coined by William James, psychologist brother of the novelist Henry James. It describes in a psychological sense the continuous flow of thought and feeling in the human mind. Literary critics then picked up the phrase and started to use it to sum up a particular type of narrative which tries to imitate this process in literary form. And obvious examples of this in literature can be in the work of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

Samuel Beckett’s *NOT I* is a rare attempt at pure stream of consciousness in a stage play. *NOT I* raises in its very title the philosophical problem of the identity of the self. Suppose there is no ‘I’? Suppose there only is stream of consciousness with no ‘I’ even producing those thoughts. Think of it as saying, ‘It’s raining.’ There’s rain, there’s clouds, but there’s no ‘it’ doing the raining. The same with continuous thoughts and stream of consciousness – there is no

‘it’ or ‘I’ producing them because ultimately that’s all we are. Just thoughts and no ‘it’ or ‘me’ or ‘I’ producing them.



As said, stream of consciousness is sometimes called mindscreen in the cinema. An example worth mentioning in this context is JACOB’S LADDER. It’s similar to THE JACKET, except in JACOB’S LADDER there is little consistency, for both time and reality are fractured. However, it is possible to think of it as pure subjective narration because it can ultimately be understood – apart from the scene where the protagonist is pronounced dead – as a narrative existing only in the mindscape of a confused and dying soldier. His memories are dream-like in that time and characters have all become mixed up in his thoughts in his dying moments. Which were true and which were invented in his state of delirium is never made clear. Which, in a way, now takes us on to what is commonly known as unreliable narration.

Some more thoughts on stream of consciousness...

“Suppose you turn your attention inward in search of this ‘I’. You may encounter nothing more than an ever changing stream of consciousness, a flow of thoughts and feelings in which there is no real self to be discovered.”

Jim Holt

“I’m in my mind a lot. I live there.”

Charlie Kaufman, movie director and screenwriter

“The worst thing you can do is censor yourself as the pencil hits the paper. You must not edit until you get it all on paper. If you can put everything down, stream-of-consciousness, you’ll do yourself a service.”

Stephen Sondheim

“The stream-of-conscious novel lingers over every moment, however banal.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

“Continuous present is all we have, and stream of consciousness – which in a novel is arguably just as artificial as the stilted dialogue that you get in most conventional novels. They’re all stratagems to try to get closer to the texture of lived life.”

Will Self

“When people use that ‘stream of consciousness’, it’s kind of just a term they use for anything that looks slightly different on the page.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist



“Unreliable narrators are invariably invented characters who are part of the stories they tell. An unreliable ‘omniscient’ narrator is almost a contradiction in terms, and could only occur in a very deviant, experimental text. Even the character-narrator cannot be a hundred per cent unreliable. If everything he or she says is palpably false, that only tells us what we already know, namely that a novel is a work of fiction... The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort and conceal the latter.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

Unreliable Narration

Some people think of unreliable narration as a relatively modern form of narrative, but this isn't necessarily the case. You can find the unreliable narrator in Homer's THE ODYSSEY, where Odysseus is a 'Trickster' figure who can't always be relied on to tell the whole truth – especially if being economical with the truth is to his advantage. Anyway, an unreliable narration is usually defined as a narration (or a narrator) that is not being entirely honest in what is being told or presented. And, as in JACOB'S LADDER, this can include tales of dreams that are not at first revealed to be dreams and memories that are later discovered to be false.

A famous example of an unreliable narration would be SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE. Billy Pilgrim is suffering from what used to be called 'shell-shock' or 'battle-fatigue' but is now classified as PTSD or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Patients with this condition lose the ability to discriminate between past and present experiences or TO correctly interpret environmental contexts. They become, as it were, unhooked and unglued from Time. Almost outside of it sometimes. Are the Tralfamadorians in the story real? Who truly knows? And this includes even Billy Pilgrim himself.

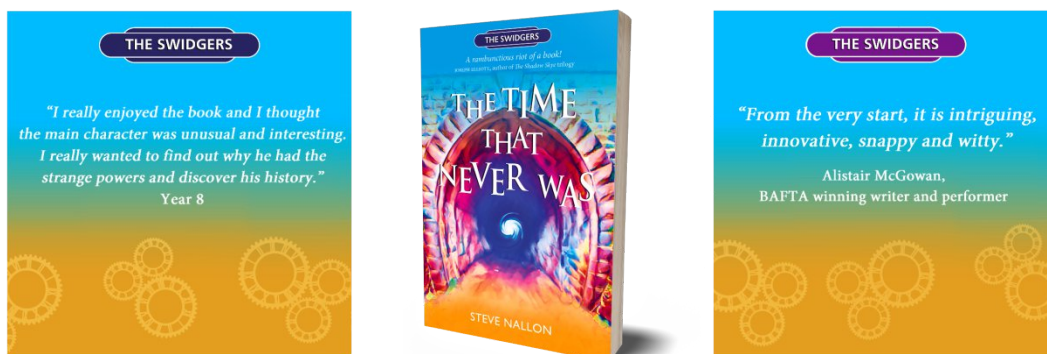


It is also possible to have an unreliable narrator telling a story within the story or *diegesis* (meaning the story world). What is told by Prairie Johnson in THE OA and also by Eduard in IF I HADN'T MET YOU could be said to be examples of this, or at least it is suggested that the stories they tell aren't exactly truthful. And all this makes the narrative more interesting, for seeding doubt in a narrative can be, if used guardedly, a very useful dramatic technique.

An unreliable narrative offers the opportunity for a degree of irony, for the unreliable narrator usually have their flaws, short-

comings and blind spots. Sue Townsend's Adrian Mole (aged 13¾) is unreliable in the sense that he's not quite as clever as he thinks he is, and Adrian, not realising that, constantly gets things wrong, believing, for example, that Evelyn Waugh is a woman. But, of course, that's where the humour lies.

Another type of unreliable narrator is Winston Groom's Forrest Gump. Perhaps unreliable is too strong a term but Forrest Gump is certainly a teller of tall tales, and so could be called at the very least an embellisher. But we forgive him that because of his likable personality. Besides, in way there is always a truth in a lie, for when someone who tells you what they want to be the case that can often reveal much about who they are and what they long for in life.



Strictly speaking, an unreliable narration requires, rather obviously, a 'narration'. Theatre is usually seen as pure *mimesis*, with no narration or *diegesis* as such, but the exception is the dramatic monologue. In fact, many of Alan Bennett's monologues in his popular series TALKING HEADS depend on an unreliable narrator for their dramatic effect. Susan in *Bed Among the Lentils* is an alcoholic

in denial, Muriel in *Soldiering On* is blind to her son's financial dishonesty and Lesley in *Her Big Chance* thinks of herself as a serious actress but in reality she's doing little more than playing a side character in an exploitive soft porn movie. And the reason these carefully constructed monologues work so well is precisely because we, the audience, can see the disparity between what the characters believe to be the case and what truly is.



But what of plays with interacting characters and dialogue? *THE FATHER*, by French playwright Florian Zeller, presents to us on stage a man with dementia and memory loss, has as certain element of

unreliable narration within it as what we see is from the point of view of the father whose mind is slowly deteriorating. Likewise, Susan in Alan Ayckbourn's *WOMAN IN MIND* is an unreliable source.

As Ayckbourn says of his drama:

I had dreamt up a play that was essentially seen through one woman's eyes. What she saw, the audience saw. What's more, what she imagined she saw, so did we. The problem was that her imagination, as we discover as the play goes on, is unreliable. Lakes, houses, tree, all shift location. Increasingly, too, her grasp of the real and the imagined becomes shakier and shakier, till we become as confused as she does as to what is real and what isn't.

The key idea here is perspective. But exactly where in theatre 'perspective' and 'narration' crossover or merge is a moot point.

Some more thoughts on unreliable narration...

"The unreliable narrator is an odd concept. The way I see it, we're all unreliable narrators of our lives who usually have absolute trust in our self-told stories. Any truth is, after all, just a matter of perspective."

Sarah Pinborough

"I think every narrator is an unreliable narrator. In its classic definition – an unreliable narrator is one who reveals something they don't know themselves to be revealing. We all do that."

Rob Roberge

"The so-called unreliable narrator favoured in much contemporary fiction is not a violation of the contract. It is not the storyteller but the fictitious narrator, a character, that we must watch and learn to

distrust. If the storyteller himself is unreliable, we avoid him as we would a mad sea captain or axe murder."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



"I have a strong propensity in me to begin this chapter very nonsensically, and I will not balk my fancy. Accordingly I set off thus:"

Laurence Sterne, THE LIFE AND OPINIONS OF TRISTRAM SHANDY, GENTLEMAN

Intrusive Narrative

‘Intrusive Narrative’ is basically a narration with some sort of outsider commentary, for example an educational film, travelogue or newsreel. Intrusive narration can also include intrusive subtitles or inter-titles. A basic example of this would be the words *Makeshift British Headquarter* suddenly appearing at the bottom of the screen in AUSTIN POWERS. Such intrusive subtitles are mainly put there for expositional and explanatory reasons, usually what year it is, or where we are geographically in a story, but sometimes they are added for humorous or even didactic purposes.

Subtitles are sometimes referred to in the academics world of Film Studies as ‘Non-diegetic intrusions’ because they come, as it were, from outside the world of the Story (or what they would call the *diegesis*). Music that accompanies the movies can be included as

non-diegetic intrusions, but not of course any music in a scene that comes from a radio on the table or is heard through car speakers or whatever, for the radio and the car are both part of the *diegesis*.

Those intercut musical ‘stings’ in AUSTIN POWERS are most definitely not part of the *diegesis*. Not that you’d ever want to cut them.

Because they’re groovy, baby.

“Oh, behave!”

Austin Powers in AUSTIN POWERS: INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY



“For most of human history, ‘literature,’ both fiction and poetry, has been narrated, not written – heard, not read. So fairy tales, folk tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labour created our world.”

Angela Carter

Combinations of Narrative Forms

Many of these narrative forms discussed so far are not mutually exclusive. There’s no reason why a restrictive narration might not include some intrusive narration in the form of subtitles, as DARK sometimes does in explaining where and when we are on the

timeline. And there's no reason why a subjective narration might not also be an unreliable narration, as we've seen with JACOB'S LADDER. That said, a pure subjective narration shouldn't be able to relate first hand those events or scenes where the character narrating the tale wasn't present as happens in a typical objective narration.

"If you have a good story idea, don't assume it must form a prose narrative. It may work better as a play, a screenplay or a poem. Be flexible."

Hilary Mantel



"Meta-fiction is fiction about fiction: novels and stories that called attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures."

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

Meta-fiction

The storyteller or writer is just one side of the equation – let's not forget the reader or the spectator too. Theatre, of course, can break what actors call 'the fourth wall' and so draw attention to the fictional nature of what is being presented. This is traditionally found in pantomime but actually it's a convention that goes back to the days of Aristophanes and early Greek comedy. It's rarer in movies but breaking from the fictionality to remind the watching audience

that the movie is a fiction can be found in WAYNE'S WORLD (1992) and HELLZAPOPPIN' (1941).



Perhaps the most famous example of breaking 'the fourth wall' in terms of fiction is Laurence Sterne's THE LIFE AND OPINIONS OF TRISTRAM SHANDY, GENTLEMAN. Here is Shandy at the beginning of Chapter XX telling one of his readers to go back and re-read the previous chapter:

How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter? I told you in it, That my mother was not a papist. – Papist! You told me no such thing, Sir. – Madam, I beg leave to repeat it over again, that I told you as plain, at least, as words, by direct inference, could tell you such a thing. – Then, Sir, I must have miss'd a page. – No, Madam, you have not miss'd a word. – Then I was asleep, Sir. – My pride, Madam, cannot allow you that refuge. – Then, I declare, I know nothing at all about the matter.—That, Madam, is the very fault I lay to your charge; and as a punishment for it, I do insist upon it, that you immediately turn back, that is as soon as you get to the next full stop, and read the whole chapter over again. I have imposed this penance upon the lady, neither out of wantonness nor cruelty; but from the best of motives; and therefore shall make her no apology for it when she returns back:— 'Tis to rebuke a vicious taste,

which has crept into thousands besides herself, – of reading straight forwards, more in quest of the adventures, than of the deep erudition and knowledge which a book of this cast, if read over as it should be, would infallibly impart with them – – The mind should be accustomed to make wise reflections, and draw curious conclusions as it goes along; the habitude of which made Pliny the younger affirm, “That he never read a book so bad, but he drew some profit from it.” The stories of Greece and Rome, run over without this turn and application, – do less service, I affirm it, than the history of Parismus and Parismenus, or of the Seven Champions of England, read with it. – – But here comes my fair lady. Have you read over again the chapter, Madam, as I desired you? – You have: And did you not observe the passage, upon the second reading, which admits the inference? – Not a word like it! Then, Madam, be pleased to ponder well the last line but one of the chapter, where I take upon me to say, “It was necessary I should be born before I was christen’d.” Had my mother, Madam, been a Papist, that consequence did not follow.

What we’re dealing with here is what is called Meta-fiction, a narrative that not only knows it’s a fiction, but constantly reminds you of the fact.

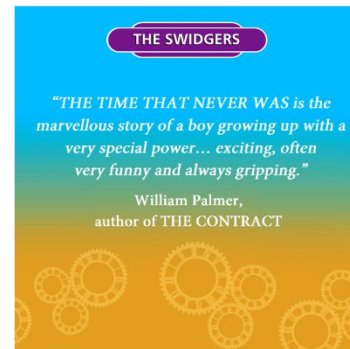
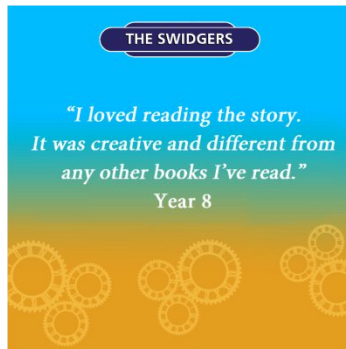
Some more thoughts of meta-fiction....

“Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus ad infinitum! Who doesn’t prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes?”

Tom Wolfe

“Meta-fictional writers have a sneaky habit of incorporating potential criticism into their text and thus ‘fictionalising’ it. They also like to undermine the credibility of more orthodox fiction by means of parody.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)



NARRATIVE DESIGN

First Person Narrations

“After four thousand years we can’t even prove that reality exists beyond the mind of the first-person dreamer.”

Peter Watts

What is a First Person Narration?

A ‘First Person Narration’, putting it as simply as possible, is a narrative that uses the word ‘I’ a lot. If a novel begins “I journeyed back in time and I am now going to tell you what I saw...” then it would be a first person narration. And so what we have is a character narrator telling you, the reader, the story.

The main advantage of first person narration (sometimes also called the ‘Autobiographical Voice’) is its accessibility, in that you get to know the character doing the telling. And as a result, the decisions the narrator makes throughout the story are usually clearly understood by you the reader, for the narrator and reader develop a sort of bond. First person narration then allows for a form of storytelling that is very direct, intimate and immersive – you’re

always right there inside the narrator's mind, after all. The style of speech or writing can also be very conversational and relaxed. First person narration needn't have the formality of third person narration (or the 'Assumed Narrator' as writing theorists sometimes call that type of author).



It is true that first person narration is by definition restricted narration – the narrator cannot know what is going on in someone else's mind or how they are feeling – but, as we all do in real life, they can interpret looks and tone of voice. And, as said previously, restricted narration can be an advantage when it comes to mystery tales. In the mystery time adventures of SWIDGERS, the reader essentially sees what William sees and discovers the tale's many secrets at the same time as William does. It's possible the reader might even work things out before William, for all the clues are there.

Classic examples of a first person narrations that have a mystery at their heart are the Canon Doyle *Sherlock Holmes* stories, where most, but not all, are told by Dr Watson. Watson is not stupid

but he's not quite as clever as Holmes and never knows (or at least never reveals) what it is that Holmes himself has worked out. We the reader aren't quite as slow as Watson but we're nowhere near the genius of Holmes either. We're somewhere in between. And Agatha Christie, of course, used essentially the same technique with Hastings and Poirot.

As said, first person narration allows for personal interpretation of events by the narrator. However, this construal of what happened may or may not be correct. And we mustn't forget either that a first person narrator may not be telling us the whole truth, as readers of Agatha Christie's *THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD*, who have throughout put their trust in the narrator Dr Jack Sheppard, discover. Audible gasps can still be heard on buses when readers reach the page where... well, perhaps it's best if you read that part yourself.

First person narration has other advantages. The narrator can be an outsider, as it were, looking in. This is famously the case in Harper Lee's *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* and, to a degree, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *THE GREAT GATSBY*.

If telling the tale retrospectively, the first person narrator can move back and forth in the story's plotline or, indeed, cleverly use foreshadowing to hint at what is to come without actually giving the whole game away. And the emotional stakes are always likely to be much higher for readers who have got to know the narrator as a friend as a result of living inside their head for hours at a time. Yes,

there is the disadvantage that the narrator can't describe himself or herself objectively, but on the other hand the narrator is constantly revealing who they are through their thoughts, and anyway they can ultimately be judged by their actions.



Interestingly, *THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE* by Audrey Niffenegger uses dual first person narratives, the time travelling husband and the non-time travelling wife. Clare's narrative not surprisingly is more linear and anchored than that of her time travelling time husband Henry, but the two very personal narratives are cleverly woven together, each shedding light on the other.

First person narration can sometimes be like one of those Russian dolls, for it's possible to have a first person narration within first person narration. That's the case with *THE TIME MACHINE* by H.G. Wells. The dinner guest is the narrator of the story (he is never named) who tells us what happened at the evening dinners with the time traveller (also unnamed). However, it's the time traveller himself who narrates in first person the story of his adventure. In effect it becomes a story-within-the story. Of course you could get

into an argument about how accurate the dinner guest is in relating every precise detail of the time traveller's tale – I mean, how could he possibly remember it word for word? – but, on the whole, readers accept the convention of this type of story-within-a-story in the novel form. Other famous examples of the 'Russian Doll' type narrative would be *THE ODYSSEY* by Homer, *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* by Emily Brontë and Joseph Conrad's *HEART OF DARKNESS* – tales within tales within tales where truth often lies in shadows.

A final point to make about first person narration is that the narrator doesn't actually have to be a person. There are numerous books narrated by animals, famously Anna Sewell's *BLACK BEAUTY*. And even if the narrator is a person that person doesn't have to be alive, as in the case of Alice Sebold's *THE LOVELY BONES*. And narrators can be abstract too, as in Markus's *THE BOOK THIEF*, where the narrator is Death.

"First person is always more hospitable in the beginning. You can give a sense of the immediate almost at once."

Norman Mailer, *THE SPOOKY ART*



“In the first person, you gain immediacy but lose insight, because you can hardly move into other people’s heads without using a few devices, usually dubious.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

Problems with First Person Narration

There are some potential problems and dangers with first person narration. An obvious one is the over use of ‘I’. If every sentence begins with ‘I did this...’ or ‘I did that...’ it can eventually become annoying. Linked to this is moral justification. Someone once described JANE EYRE as “Five hundred pages of ‘*Why I’m right!*’”. Perhaps that’s a little harsh on a great novel, but too much rectitude can be off putting. Also, the ‘I’ narrator can overuse saying ‘I thought this’ or ‘I thought that.’ The whole narrative is the thoughts of the narrator, there’s no need to keep saying so, though many first person narrations do just that.

And because the ‘I’ is telling the tale, there is as well the trap that the story ends up with too much ‘telling’ and too little ‘showing’. In other words, lengthy paragraphs of narrative and summary exposition and not enough direct action and dialogue. A further problem is, why is the narrator writing their story? How old are they when they are doing it? And where is the narrator anyway as they are writing their history? At home? In prison? Dead? It’s rare that the first person narration offers full context as to why, when and where. That said, this may be intentional on the part of the writer, who

prefers to leave the actual age of the writer and where they are writing as they write somewhat ambiguous.

However, the biggest practical problem the writer faces when using a first person narrator is accidentally and unintentionally slipping into moments of omniscience which leaves the reader asking, 'Yes, but how could she possibly know that?' Story gurus call this the 'over-powering' of your narrator. And occasionally this problem can also be found in movies which purport to be based on a first person narration. BRIEF ENCOUNTER, for example.



Much of the narrative of the movie BRIEF ENCOUNTER is ostensibly based on Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson) imagining herself telling the story of her liaison with Dr Alec Harvey (Trevor Howard) to her husband Fred Jesson (Cyril Raymond) as she sits at home listening to Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 on the wireless. Strictly speaking, the narrative she tells is not a flashback but rather mindscreen, as Laura goes through in her head all the events that led to the near affair. This means, incidentally, that the

music of Rachmaninoff is an integral part of the story rather than a non-diegetical accompanying score.



Anyway, Laura begins to go through all the events of her affair and, since Laura was present at all of them, can legitimately say what happened. Well, all except one. The liaison went as far as Dr Harvey taking Laura to a friend's flat, but then Alex's friend came back unexpectedly and discovered evidence that Dr Harvey had been entertaining a lady (Laura had escaped through the kitchen when they were disturbed). There then follows a scene between Dr Harvey and his friend, Stephen Lynn (Valentine Dyll), where Stephen makes some unkind remarks about both Alex and the lady who has made an embarrassingly quick exit via the back stairs. But there's no way Laura could know what was said in this scene because she wasn't there. And, given what was said, it seems highly unlikely that Dr Harvey would have related it to her afterwards. Stephen's words were somewhat ungallant to say the least. However, because the vast majority of the mindscreen is presented in a standard objective narration manner, this apparent anomaly is hardly noticed. You

could, of course, argue that Laura is imagining what might have been said, and although this is certainly possible, it's never suggested that that's what she's doing.

“Hemingway suffered from the honourable need to be the equal of his male characters, particularly since he used the first person so much. It is not easy to write in first person about a man who’s stronger or braver than yourself. It’s too close to self-serving. All the same, you have to be able to do it. Because if every one of your characters is kept down to your own level, you do not take on large subjects. You need people more heroic than yourself, more enterprising, less timid, sexier, more romantic, more tragic.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



“In the first person, the style has to be altogether tuned to the man who’s telling the story.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

Retrospective First Person Narration

There is as well a form of first person narration known as ‘Retrospective First Person Narration’. This often comes into play when telling a tale of a childhood experience where the incident itself took place some time ago. A famous example of this is Stephen King’s STAND BY ME. Yet, even though the events themselves may

have occurred years before, the author nevertheless tries to get inside the head of who they were at that age. This is certainly true of classic novels such as Charles Dickens' GREAT EXPECTATIONS and DAVID COPPERFIELD. In the childhood sections of the story, Dickens becomes, as it were, a boy again, and we are presented with the world from that point of view. That said, the distance in time can also offer a more mature perspective. And ultimately both GREAT EXPECTATIONS and DAVID COPPERFIELD offer a very grown-up outlook on life.

“The ‘I’ character in journalism is almost pure invention. Unlike the ‘I’ of autobiography, who is meant to be seen as a representation of the writer, the ‘I’ of journalism is connected to the writer only in a tenuous way—the way, say, that Superman is connected to Clark Kent. The journalistic ‘I’ is an over reliable narrator, a functionary to whom crucial tasks of narration and argument and tone have been entrusted, an ad hoc creation, like the chorus of Greek tragedy. He is an emblematic figure, an embodiment of the idea of the dispassionate observer of life.”

Janet Malcolm



THE SWIDGERS

“Like lightning. So sharp, fierce and bright it blinded. And it’s that flash where I must begin my story. I couldn’t tell at first where it came from... except I knew, somehow, it wasn’t the sky...”

The opening sentence of THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS written by its First Person Narrator William Arthur

THE SWIDGERS and First Person Narration

The overall arc of the SWIDGERS book series is that of a developing child who is on a quest of discovery about himself and the universe around him – and for that reason too it makes sense that he should tell his story himself. THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, the first book in the SWIDGERS book series, is essentially a mystery story, which, as in the novels and stories of, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christies, suits the first person narration.



The narrator in THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS is William, but there are hints even on the first page of book one that William is writing his story with some degree of hindsight:

I should say to you straightaway that our kind usually do what we do and then move on. Yet that day, something made me keep on following. Even after my task was complete. And that one thought changed everything. My whole life. And yours, too. This is what happened. I was standing outside the Crossed Keys pub. By the door. Well, they'd never let me into the bar. Not then. Too young. Besides, by the door is a good place to wait. So many people passing by, so many lives to change.

Notice the 'Not then' and the line 'And that one thought hanged everything. My whole life. And yours, too.' But William is careful not to reveal all he knows too early. And there's something else too, as he also explains himself early in his tale:

As I got dressed that morning, I had no answers, but there'd come a day when I would. Forgive me, I jump ahead again. Better to tell my tale as it happened and not as it came to be understood. And I do this as much for myself as for you. For isn't it sometimes in the very telling of our story that we come to understand it?

In a way then, the reason William is writing his tale is, at least in part, to fully understand it himself, for sometimes in life, it's as we are describing to a friend a strange happening that we suddenly understand its significance. It's a method of course that's also used in psychology, where it's simply called talking therapy. Talking it out, or indeed writing it out, can lead to suddenly seeing of yourself and others in a completely new light. Or, to put that another way, when

you write a story, you learn something by telling it and often the person you come to understand best is often yourself.



And there's a story craft point here too. The first person narrator, at least in most cases, already knows the outcome, but they, as with most people, wish to tell a good story. In this sense William in the SWIDGERS story is no different – he still wants, as it were, to tell you of his exciting adventure and to the very best effect. And no storyteller, even though they know how it all ends, is going to reveal that ending in chapter one of the first book or a three book series.

A further point is that although William wants to tell you exactly what happened, he occasionally struggles to do so because he was not always certain himself. Take this extract from the first scene where what William has been witnessing – the attack of what he calls 'cable-snakes' – has suddenly and inexplicably become frozen in time:

What was happening? Had the minutes and seconds somehow – I don't know – stopped? Or was I in some sort of Circle of Time?

I was so confused, I didn't know what to think. The reflections in the coffee shop window couldn't be true, yet they felt so real. None of this was happening and yet it was. All I knew for sure was that never had I been so afraid.

Perhaps, I thought, if I close my eyes it'll go away.

So I do. But now I feel an unearthly bitter cold more frightening than whatever was in front of me. I open them again and turn from the window.

The impossible has happened once more. The postman, back on his feet and alive. The little girl, still there, and still screaming. The only way I can describe all this is that it was as if The Now, the moment we live in, was ever changing. As if Time itself was somehow shifting between What Is and What Could Be. At least that's what I thought. I wish I could explain it better, but I can't. What I can tell you is it felt like the beginning of madness.

William isn't being an unreliable narrator, as such. In a way he's the opposite. He's honestly telling you that he didn't know what was going and being honest too in saying he finds it difficult to get across in words what he was witnessing and how he felt. And that perhaps makes it even more real as don't we all struggle sometimes in relating complex and confusing events?

There's a moment as well later in the story where William reads Echo's notes and gets a sense for the first time as to how he, William, as a Swidger, has made a difference:

Me. I had changed lives. And for the better. I think perhaps I smiled, not at what I had discovered but in realising that Echo had made a difference to at least one life. My own.

‘I think perhaps I smiled,’ he says. So absorbed and taken by what he has just read in the parchments under Echo’s railway carriage floor that William isn’t even sure how he physically reacted. Hence that word ‘perhaps’.



A quick words here about style of the SWIDGERS book series, particularly the use of metaphors. In the story William is telling, he’s a teenage boy. His actual age is never specified as such, but it’s clear in the narrative that he talking about a time when he’s coming of age. Yet, as a retrospective narration, William is clearly narrating his tale with a degree of hindsight and a certain maturity. That said, the metaphors, similes and imagery used by William, well, they are consistent with those a teenage boy would come up with, in that they are simple and come from everyday life. That said, although the range of metaphors is kept within what would be the experience of a

young lad, William isn't any ordinary young lad – he's a Swidger. And Swidgers by their nature are great observers. And this very much comes into play in the narrative style, especially when William is describing the inhabitants of the Old Coach Inn in the first book, *THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS*. And here a secret is eventually be revealed. Without giving too much of the plot away, what eventually becomes clear is that, although the inhabitants of the Old Coach Inn are grown men, they still have in many ways a childlike nature. And William hints at this with similes and metaphors which often compare the inhabitants to childlike toys or dolls or snowmen.

It's also worth saying while on the subject of style that William's punctuation is kept straightforward too. Literary novelists may write with correct punctuation such as full stops, comas and semi-colons, but people don't, I would say, *think* in terms of semi-colons. And as William's narrative voice in the *SWIDGERS* book series is essentially his thoughts – William thinks as he writes and he writes as he thinks. And in that process William pauses – and for that there is a coma – and then when the thought ends there's a full stop. The semi-colon for this reason is, on the whole, avoided.

“Style is that which indicates how the writer takes himself and what he is saying. It is the mind skating circles around itself as it moves forward.”

Robert Frost



“An old-time star is involved. One of the biggest. But before you hear it all distorted and blown out of proportion. Before those Hollywood gossip columnists get their hands on it, maybe you’d like to hear the facts, the whole truth. If so, you’ve come to the right party. You see, the body of a young man was found floating in the pool of her mansion with two shots in his back and one in his stomach. Nobody important, really. Just a movie writer with a couple of ‘B’ pictures to his credit. The poor dope. He always wanted a pool.”

The opening voice-over of the movie SUNSET BLVD. written by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder

First Person Voice-over in the Movies

What of first person narrator as a voice-over in the movies? That’s a difficult one because the mediums of the novel and cinema are so very different in form. Of course it’s certainly possible to have a voice-over narration on the screen. These often begin as direction narration and then segue, usually by a fade or some other cinematic effect, to a more traditional objective narration mode. But the Narrator in written fiction can never be truly equivalent to a voice-over narrator in a movie as the latter also comes with an unrestricted visual presentation. Cinema, after all, is primarily concerned with what you see rather than what you imaginatively create through

words in your head. And what is seen in one shot in a movie could take a whole paragraph for a writer to describe. Or indeed an entire chapter if you're called Charles Dickens.

Narrating voice-overs are in fact very much frowned upon by screenwriting gurus. Cinema, they argue, is a show medium, not tell. Instead, they say, find a visual way of getting the narrative across, not the 'cheat' of a voice-over. That said, there are honourable exceptions which use the voice-over narrator in an inventive way, notably *SUNSET BOULEVARD* and *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*, both of the *film noir* genre which is often associated with the cynical and jaded narrator voice. There are other movies too that use voice-over in a creative way, notably *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE*, *THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION*, *MEMENTO* and *INHERENT VICE*.

Some more thoughts on voice-overs in the movies...

"God help you if you use voice-over in your work, my friends. God help you. That's flaccid, sloppy writing. Any idiot can write a voice-over narration to explain the thoughts of a character."

Robert McKee

"The gunfire around us makes it hard to hear. But the human voice is different from other sounds. It can be heard over noises that bury everything else. Even when it's not shouting. Even when it's just a whisper. Even the lowest whisper can be heard over armies... when it's telling the truth."

EARL CAMERON

“I was desperately unhappy with it [BLADE RUNNER]. I was compelled by contract to record five or six different versions of the narration, each of which was found wanting on a storytelling basis. The final version was something that I was completely unhappy with. The movie obviously has a very strong following, but it could have been more than a cult picture.”

Harrison Ford



“Human beings often claim to understand events when they manage to formulate a coherent story or narrative explaining what factors caused a specific incident to occur. Stories assist the human mind to remember and make decisions based on informative stories. Narrative writing also prompts periods of intense reflection that leads to more writing that is ruminative. Contemplative actions call for us to track the conscious mind at work rendering an accounting of our weaknesses and our strengths, folly and wisdom.”

Kilroy J. Oldster in DEAD TOAD SCROLLS

The Narration and Narrators of H.G. Wells’s THE TIME MACHINE

H.G. Wells’s THE TIME MACHINE is a ‘Retrospective Narration’. And, in a way, twice over a retrospective narration. First, there is the unnamed ‘Time Traveller’ himself. His retrospective narration, which is basically the Time Traveller telling the story of the experiences he

had in the future to his dinner guests, accounts for nearly eighty percent of the book. The second retrospective narration is from the unnamed narrator of the novel itself. Some critics believe this to be the character called Hillyer, who is mentioned briefly by the Time Traveller, but others assume that Hillyer is more probably a servant and nothing to do with the narration itself. Anyway, whatever our narrator's name is or isn't, like most of the other guests, we are told very little about him. We do know that he goes to the Linnaean Society, so he might have a scientific background, but our narrator also talks about having a meeting with his publisher, so he might be a writer. Or, of course, he could be both.



Whatever his occupation, the important point is that our narrator, before he wrote the story, clearly thought about its implications a great deal. And he's still thinking about as he writes the Epilogue, which is worth quoting in full:

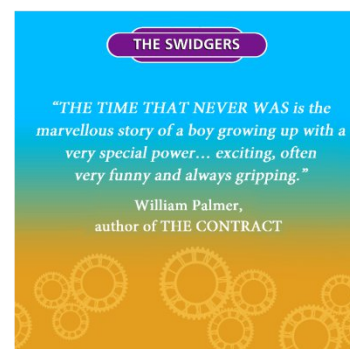
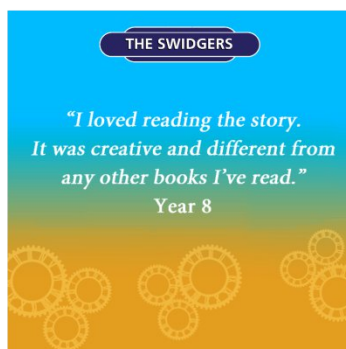
One cannot choose but wonder. Will he ever return? It may be that he swept back into the past, and fell among the blood-drinking, hairy savages of the Age of Unpolished Stone; into the abysses of the Cretaceous Sea; or among the grotesque saurians, the huge reptilian brutes of the Jurassic times. He may even now – if I may use the phrase – be wandering on some plesiosaurus-haunted Oolitic coral reef, or beside the lonely saline lakes of the Triassic Age. Or did he go forward, into one of the nearer ages, in which men are still men, but with the riddles of our own time answered and its wearisome problems solved? Into the manhood of the race: for I, for my own part cannot think that these latter days of weak experiment, fragmentary theory, and mutual discord are indeed man's culminating time! I say, for my own part. He, I know – or the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made – thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so. But to me the future is still black and blank – is a vast ignorance, lit at a few casual places by the memory of his story. And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers – shrivelled now, and brown and flat and brittle – to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man.

Our narrator is open to the possibility of time travel and, in part at least, believes the story the Time Traveller has told. A narrator who was sceptical, as some dinner guests are, would naturally have given the novel an entirely different feel. It should be said, however, that our narrator doesn't share the philosophical pessimism of the

Time Traveller, but, compared to some of the guests, our narrator is, thankfully, a thoughtful and deep thinker. And an optimistic one, for the narrator offers the hope that even now the Time Traveller, as he writes these words, may be “wandering on some plesiosaurus-haunted Oolitic coral reef, or beside the lonely saline lakes of the Triassic Age.” Plus the narrator has by him a symbol of hope, namely those strange flowers.

“We all have our time machines, don’t we. Those that take us back are memories... And those that carry us forward, are dreams.”

H.G. Wells



NARRATIVE DESIGN

Second and Third Person Narrations

“Third person and first person at least as different as major and minor keys in music.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

Third Person Narration

What then of ‘Third Person Narration’ or the so-called ‘Assumed Narrator’ or ‘Implied Narrator’? The main advantages of third person narration are that it allows for omniscience across the whole story and potentially insights into a range of multiple characters. It also gives the writer the opportunity to impart information unknown to the characters. That said, most authors don’t like to reveal too much to us, the reader. Keep the twists and the secrets of the story until the right time. Or, put another, the implied author, as with any good storyteller, strategically waits for the best possible moment to do the unveiling.

A key advantage of third person narration that is often pointed to is its objectivity. Well, the third person narration usually does aim for objective narration, John le Carré being a good case in point, but

there can be many extremes too, from Henry James, as distanced and as detached as they come, to Henry Fielding, gossipy and opinionated.



What certainly can't be argued with is the ability of a third person narration to move around in time and space. What we're talking about here is, as it were, omnipresence as well as their omniscience.

But what about going into the mind of the characters? Jane Austen certainly wrote in third person and yet throughout her novels Austen often slips into what academics call 'Free Indirect Speech' or 'Free Indirect Discourse'. What this means is that Austen's narration moves, often imperceptibly, into a character's consciousness while still maintaining the form of the third person narrator. And it may be that Miss Austen is all-knowing, but readers of *EMMA* only find out about the secret engagement of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill at the same time as Emma does. Yes, even gossipy Miss Austen knows how to keep a secret when the story suits it.

But there are greys. A narration that is objective yet keeps its central perspective to just one character, which is to say the story is essentially being told from their point of view, is called 'Third Person Limited' or 'Third Person Restrictive'. It has the obvious advantages of objectivity and, to a degree, omniscience, yet since you are following one particular person it is also a way of telling that remains very personal.

Some more thoughts on the Third Person narration...

"With a full use of third person, you are God – well, of course, not quite, but, one way or another, you are ready to see into everyone's mind. That is never routine. There is, of course, an easier approach – point-of-view third person, where you remain in one character's mind but are still viewing your protagonist from outside, and usually from above. In the classic vein of third person, however, where you enter each and everyone's consciousness, it is not routine to get over the embarrassment that you are able to accommodate certain characters' minds with considerably more skill than you can with others'. This Olympian third person, this Tolstoyan presence, needs experience, confidence, irony, insight, and lordly detachment. When it can be done, hurrah."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"She's talking about herself in the third person because the idea of being who she is, of acknowledging that she is herself, is more than her pride can take."

Sarah Kane, playwright

"It's harder to write in the third person but the advantage is you move around better."

Ernest Hemingway, American author

“In literary representation, the distinction between the genuinely erotic and the licentious is a distinction not of subject-matter, but of perspective. The genuinely erotic work is one which invites the reader to re-create in imagination the first-person point of view of someone party to an erotic encounter. The pornographic work retains as a rule the third-person perspective of the voyeuristic observer.”

Roger Scruton, British philosopher

“I don’t talk about myself in the third person, and I laugh at people who do.”

Ringo Starr, musician

“There is also the third person when used as a substitute for ‘I’ – for one, the character named Norman Mailer in THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT. Using the third person in this manner may be a special condition of first person but it is legitimate. There is a part of the ego that is superior to ourselves – that person who observes us carefully even as we’re doing bizarre things, that special persona, possessed of immaculate detachment, who is always saying, ‘Oh, are we really doing well right now?’ A wonderful voice. Because it enables you to treat yourself as one more character in a field of characters.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“The great majority of modern third-person narration is ‘I’ narration very thinly disguised.”

John Fowles, novelist

“The third person narrator, instead of being omniscient, is like a constantly running surveillance tape.”

Andrew Vachss, American crime fiction author

“First person cannot be as free as the separation between author and protagonist offered by the third person.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



“Every novel must have a narrator, however impersonal, but not necessarily a narratee. The narratee is any evocation of, or surrogate for, the reader of the novel within the text itself. This can be casual as the Victorian novelist’s familiar apostrophe, ‘Dear reader,’ or as elaborate as the frame of Kipling’s MRS BATHURST, in which the ‘I’ narrator is also the narratee of a story told by three other characters who themselves are constantly swapping the two roles... a narratee, however constituted, is always a rhetorical device, a means of controlling and complicating the responses of the real reader who remains outside the text.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

The Narratee

‘You’ is a second person pronoun and it can occasionally be used by the narrator to address the ‘Narratee’, that is the one to whom the story is being told, namely the ‘Reader’. Some academics call this ‘Dialogic Conscription’, others ‘Intrapolation’, and there’s even a special term for the ‘Reader’ in this context which is the ‘Intra-diegetic Reader’, though some might say that sounds more like a rather unpleasant complaint of the bowels.



Arguably the most famous direct address by a narrator in a novel to a Narratee is in Charlotte Brontë's *JANE EYRE*, where the heroine says, "Reader, I married him." There are instances in *SWIDGERS*, usually very personal moments, where the narrator and hero William speaks directly, as it were, to the reader using 'you'. For example, there's the time when William discovers, by looking under Echo's railway carriage floor how he, William, has changed lives. "I will not tell you what I read," he says, "It would not be right. These were the lives of others. Private lives that truly belonged only to themselves. Not me. Not you." On another occasion William even talks about the relationship he feels he has developed with the Reader – "I've already told you a lot about myself and I feel I can trust you now enough to say that I'd had these doubts and feelings too." Then there is the epistolary form where letters or whatever are addressed to a 'you'. But are any of these examples strictly speaking what you could call 'Second Person Narrations'? Well, the answer to that is not really, because in true a 'Second Person Narration', the

‘You’, the ‘Reader’, is a specific and actual character in the story. Indeed, ‘You’ is – or, to be grammatical, ‘you are’ – the protagonist.

“READER, I married him. A quiet wedding we had: he and I, the parson and clerk, were alone present. When we got back from church, I went into the kitchen of the manor-house, where Mary was cooking the dinner and John cleaning the knives, and I said “Mary, I have been married to Mr. Rochester this morning.” The housekeeper and her husband were both of that decent phlegmatic order of people, to whom one may at any time safely communicate a remarkable piece of news without incurring the danger of having one’s ears pierced by some shrill ejaculation, and subsequently stunned by a torrent of wordy wonderment. Mary did look up, and she did stare at me: the ladle with which she was basting a pair of chickens roasting at the fire, did for some three minutes hang suspended in air; and for the same space of time John’s knives also had rest from the polishing process: but Mary, bending again over the roast, said only ‘Have you, Miss? Well, for sure!’
Charlotte Brontë’s JANE EYRE, Chapter XII, Conclusion.



“You have friends who actually care about you and speak the language of the inner self. You have avoided them of late. Your soul is as dishevelled as your apartment, and until you can clean it up a little you don’t want to invite anyone inside.”
Second Person Narration taken from BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY BY Jay McInerney

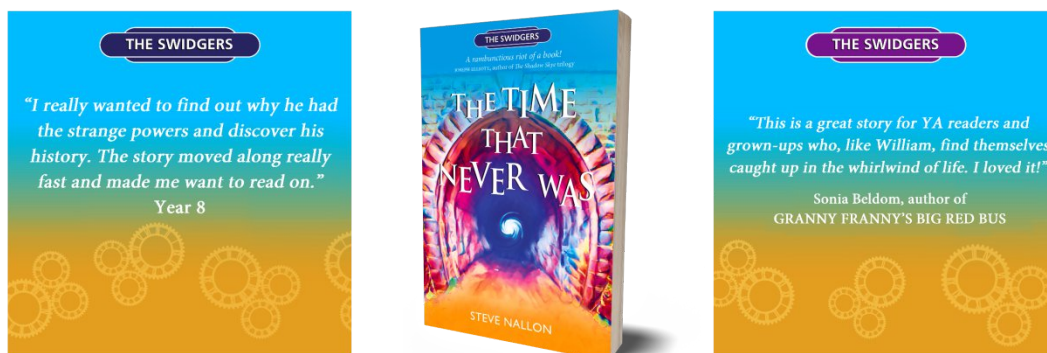
Second Person Narration

True 'Second Person Narration', where the second person pronoun 'You' is an actual character in the narrative, is incredibly rare in fiction. Jay McInerney's 1984 novel *BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY* is, however, a successful example of a story that is written entirely in second person. The 'You' in the story are/is, as the novel tells you, "not the kinda guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning". And that place is revealed to be a nightclub and 'you' have been behaving very out of character.



Of course, it's possible to argue that second person narration brings you even closer to the story than does first person narration because you *are* the story, because the 'you' of the narrative are the protagonist of the tale. And, in a way, it's possible to argue as well that second person narration avoids the so-called unreliability of the first person narration in that the second person narration tells the readers what they are or aren't feeling and thinking and so why would you doubt 'yourself'.

Another way of looking at second person narration is that if the real you isn't at all like the 'you' of the story, then that story allows you the reader, sat perhaps comfortably in their chair at home, to experience a life outside of themselves in themselves. Which is a curious literary paradox. And, of course, second person narration offers the possibility of humour in the juxtaposition of identities, plus there's potential fun to be had with the imperative or command form.



But there are obvious issues and problems with second person narration. For one thing not everyone likes being told who and what they are or what and how they are feeling. Second person narration is essentially a form of narration that makes the reader occupy, usually intimately, a space and character alien to them. And maybe the reader simply isn't the type of person who, like the shy and retiring aunt at Christmas, particularly enjoys playing charades or dressing up as a pirate. And it's the nature of second person narration – 'You did this', 'You did that' – that it inevitably becomes

accusatory, with the ‘you’ of story becoming complicit in whatever nefarious activities go on.

All that said, as with BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY, perhaps second person narration is the best way, perhaps even the only way, to tell ‘your’ story. And a few more examples of this relatively rare breed of narration include GHOST LIGHT by Joseph O’Connor, THE BOOK OF RAPTURE by Nikki Gemmell, MONTPELIER PARADE by Karl Geary, APPLE TREE YARD by Louise Doughty, HALF ASLEEP IN FROG PAJAMAS by Tom Robbins, IF ON A WINTER’S NIGHT A TRAVELLER by Italo Calvino, the short story THE EGG by Andy Weir, and SECOND THOUGHTS by Michel Butor. Sections of N. K. Jemisin’s THE FIFTH SEASON and its sequels are also narrated in the second person, as are parts of COMPLICITY by Iain Banks – “You hear the car after an hour and a half. During that time you’ve been here in darkness, sitting on the small telephone seat near the front door, waiting. You only moved once, after half an hour, when you went back through the kitchen to check on the maid.”

“Adding Carmel’s sections [of MR LOVERMAN] offered a perspective on the marriage that counterbalanced her husband’s. I decided not to write her in the first person because she would have had to compete with Barrington’s louder, more charismatic voice. Instead, I employed the second person, using a prose poetry that laid the ground work for the fusion fiction of GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER. The novel was thereby transformed from a simple structure with a first-person narrator into a parallel narrative that

illuminated how Barrington's deception impacted not only on his own life but also on that of his wife, a woman who has spent half a century living with a man she thinks she knows, but doesn't."

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP



NARRATIVE DESIGN

Retrospective Narration and *Praesens* *Historicum*

“It’s like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.”

Patrick Rothfuss

Retrospective Narration and *Praesens Historicum*

When you are telling any story concerning the past, the events of the past are usually over. And that is why most novels are told in the past tense. But in practice we often quite naturally fall into the present tense when telling a story. For example, when we’re relating the events that happened in the pub last night, we often slip into what is known as the ‘Historical Present’ (sometimes also referred to as the ‘Dramatic Present’, the ‘Narrative Present’ and the ‘Vernacular Present’). Historical present is a term from linguistics and rhetoric and simply means the employment of the present tense when narrating past events. Mrs Boffin famously uses it in Charles Dickens’ *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*:

‘Your exact words,’ said John, laying his hand on hers.

‘That’s a very good arrangement,’ cried Mrs Boffin. ‘Keep it there, John. And as we was all of us in it, Noddy you come and lay yours a top of his, and we won’t break the pile till the story’s done.’

Mr Boffin hitched up a chair, and added his broad brown right hand to the heap.

‘That’s capital!’ said Mrs Boffin, giving it a kiss. ‘Seems quite a family building; don’t it? But the horses is off. Well! When I cries out that night, “I know you now! you’re John!” John catches of me, it is true; but I ain’t a light weight, bless ye, and he’s forced to let me down. Noddy, he hears a noise, and in he trots, and as soon as I anyways comes to myself I calls to him, “Noddy, well I might say as I did say, that night at the Bower, for the Lord be thankful this is John!” On which he gives a heave, and down he goes likewise, with his head under the writing-table. This brings me round comfortable, and that brings him round comfortable, and then John and him and me we all fall a crying for joy.’

‘Yes! They cry for joy, my darling,’ her husband struck in. ‘You understand? These two, whom I come to life to disappoint and dispossess, cry for joy!’

Bella looked at him confusedly, and looked again at Mrs Boffin’s radiant face.

‘That’s right, my dear, don’t you mind him,’ said Mrs Boffin, ‘stick to me. Well! Then we sits down, gradually gets cool, and holds a confabulation. John, he tells us how he is despairing in his mind on accounts of a certain fair young person, and how, if I hadn’t found him out, he was going away to seek his fortune far and wide, and had fully meant never to come to life, but to leave the property as our wrongful inheritance forever and a day. At which you never see a man so frightened as my Noddy was. For to think that he should have come into the property wrongful, however

innocent, and – more than that – might have gone on keeping it to his dying day, turned him whiter than chalk.'

The historical present has been widely used in writing about history in Latin where it is sometimes referred to by its Latin name, *praesens historicum*. Well, not only Roman history but also, of course, when relating to friends the escapades of what happened to you last night. "There I am," you say, "I'm carrying four bags of crisps, two bottles and a pint of larger. What can go wrong?"



Praesens historicum then is a rhetorical style that naturally heightens the dramatic force of the narrative by describing events as if they were still unfolding. In a way, you could argue that a primarily past tense retrospective narration that occasionally drops into the historical present at the most dramatic moments takes advantage of the best of both worlds. Yes, it's right to use past tense because the past is past, but the occasional use of the present tense gives any narrative an immediacy and excitement.

“Imperative mood, present tense: Do not thou go home, let him not go home, let us not go home, do not ye or you go home, let not them go home. Then, potentially: I may not and I cannot go home; and I might not, could not, would not, and should not go home; until I felt that I was going distracted, and rolled over on the pillow, and looked at the staring rounds upon the wall again.”

Extract from Chapter forty-five of Charles Dickens’ GREAT EXPECTATIONS



“Screams come from all around. From a mother with an already crying child. From a little girl who, without thought, lets go of her balloon. From a man too drunk even to know why he is even screaming. The postman I bumped into earlier now stands beside me. He doesn’t scream, just stares ahead, a letter yet to be delivered in his hand.

People don’t know where to turn. And nor do I, but through the many cries I hear something only I could. Another strike of ice. Smaller than the first two but with it comes danger. . . No, more than danger: Death.

I can feel it. The Man is about to die and only I can save him.”

Extract from Chapter One of THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, the first in THE SWIDGERS Time Adventure book series

The Historical Present – SWIDGERS

All narrative forms and styles have their strengths. Ultimately the narrative method that is chosen by the writer should be the one

that best suits the author's purpose and intention.



The choice was made in the SWIDGERS Time Adventure book series for our hero William to be the narrator of his own story, which means the reader is always right there with William in the midst of the action as the pen hits the page. And William's first person narration makes it more natural for the reader to connect with William, plus it gives the events a real sense of immediacy and intimacy. Like most natural storytellers, William sometimes slips into the historical present as he's telling you about the most exciting or dramatic scenes, such as when he hides behind the hidden door, discovers the secret at the end of the passageway or is involved in that cliff edge battle to the death. William shouldn't then be

criticised for occasional tense confusion. The truth is, he simply can't help himself, for that's how he instinctively wants to tell his thrilling and very unusual Time Tale.

"I run from the dining room.

***Those together are the great secrets of this house. But how?
My thoughts carry me up the stairs. Clocks – hands – trees – wood.
So many thoughts at once that I again stumble on the knotted
wood where I fell that first night, but I get up quickly and soon
reach the top.***

***The landing is lit by an oil lamp hanging from a hook in the wood
panelling. Then I see it in the wood thin long gaps across and down
that together could be the outline of a door.***

I wonder...

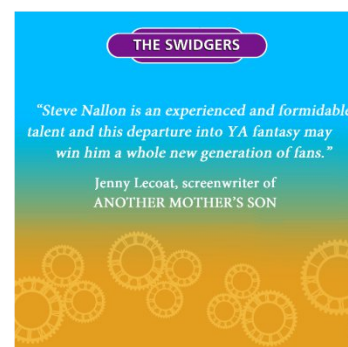
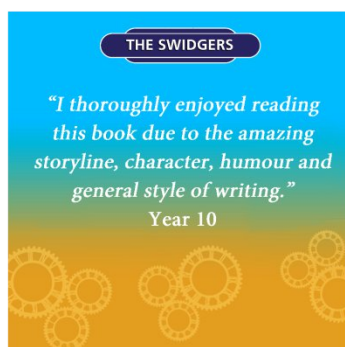
***I hold my breath for a second and listen for movement from
downstairs. Nothing.***

Good. No one has followed me.

***I remove the oil lamp from the hook and use it to find the hidden
handle. Wrought iron, just like the others. I tease it up and, yes, it
opens of its own accord.***

What more will it reveal?"

**Extract from Chapter Forty THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, the first in
THE SWIDGERS Time Adventure book series**



NARRATIVE DESIGN

Narrative Verb Tenses: Past, Present and Future

“The past is always tense, the future perfect.”

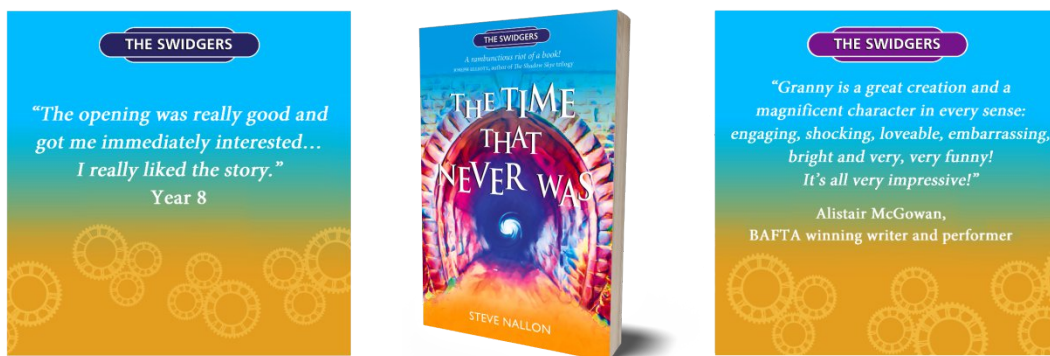
Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

Use of Tenses in Narratives – Past Tense

As said, when you are telling any story concerning the past, the events of the past are usually over. And that is why most novels are told in the past tense. You could argue that time travel tales are an exception, as here the past can be changed, but it's still likely that the story will be told only after those events have been altered. Which in effect still makes them past events.

Of course in a normal past tense story, the events have already happened within the story itself. And what's past is past. But in what some people call the 'Literary Past Tense' – the past tense used in the novel – things can at least feel slightly different. It's true the narrator, be it third person or first person, already knows how everything turned out, but in a 'Literary Past Tense' story, events are presented as though they have not yet happened. Even though the

past tense is used, events unfold from a viewpoint or perspective that tonally at least suggests that they are happening right now, in the present, and the narrator doesn't know what is about to occur next. This is especially the case in third person narration, where it is as if the future is not yet known, nor, as yet, has it come into existence. At least that's how such narratives read.



Anyway, the standard mode of the novel has traditionally been the past tense but, it should be said, there is a trend in modern fiction towards the use of the present tense.

“As soon as you have a language that has a past and future tense you’re going to say, ‘Where did we come from, what happens next?’ The ability to remember the past helps us plan the future.”

Margaret Atwood



“Peeta sighs. ‘Well, there is this one girl. I’ve had a crush on her ever since I can remember. But I’m pretty sure she didn’t know I was alive until the reaping.’

Sounds of sympathy from the crowd. Unrequited love they can relate to.”

From HUNGER GAMES by Suzanne Collins

Use of Tenses in Narratives – Present Tense

There are some obvious advantages to the use of the present tense. For one thing it gives a sense of pace and continuous forward motion and immediacy. If you are always living and writing in the *Now* then there’s no time to stop and reflect. Onward, onward, forever onwards. HUNGER GAMES, for example, is written in the present tense.

Present tense in first person narration can also offer a sense of intimacy which can lead the reader to believe in and trust the narrator. If that narrator is later proved to be unreliable then the effect of that can potentially be very dramatic.

But there can be problems with use of the present tense. First, you’re pretty much stuck with it. Then there’s the problem that the narrator has no ability to move through time in the same way a narrative told in the past tense, when all is usually known, is able to do. Also, if your perspective is only present tense, then all tension and suspense is essentially limited to the here and now. There is, as well, the issue that if you’re only living (and writing) in the moment,

from a consistency point of view, you should really include every moment, even the most banal and insignificant.

A further problem with first person narration written in the present tense is the niggly problem of where's the pen and paper when you're doing all that you are describing? And why would you still be writing this down when, for example, you may well be in some sort of danger? Which brings us on to a classic example of first person narration and how it was mocked by a fellow writer.



PAMELA; OR, VIRTUE REWARDED by Samuel Richardson is an early epistolary novel that in part is written in the present tense – or ‘real time’ as some critics call it – when the events described are supposed to be happening in that very moment. Pamela is writing a letter to her father and in it she says she is as frightened as a mouse “at everything that stirs.” And yet, when she hears a threatening noise, she continues to write, “But I must break off; here’s somebody coming.” Next comes this:

‘Tis only our Hannah with a Message from Mrs. Jervis. – But, hold, here is somebody else. – Well, it is only Rachel.

I am as much frightened as were the City Mouse and the Country Mouse, in the same Book of Fables, at everything that stirs.

But does this really make sense? If Pamela is in danger, why does she continue to write? In a real life situation you would simply put your pen down. That said, if you ignore the logic, the present tense here does work for it's essentially being used as a dramatic device to excite the reader.

Henry Fielding, however, was not at all convinced by this artifice and mocked it in his satire *AN APOLOGY FOR THE LIFE OF MRS SHAMELA ANDREWS*, or simply *SHAMELA*. In a midnight letter to Henrietta Maria Honora Andrews, Fielding has his heroine continue to pen the missive even when her master comes into her bedroom and takes sexual advantage of her with Mrs Jervis in bed beside her:

Mrs. Jervis and I are just in Bed, and the Door unlocked; if my Master should come – Odsbobs! I hear him just coming in at the Door. You see I write in the Present Tense, as Parson Williams says. Well, he is in bed between us, we both shamming a sleep, he steals his hand into my bosom, which I, as if in my sleep, press close to me with mine, and then pretend to awake. I no sooner see him, but I scream out to Mrs. Jervis, she feigns likewise but just to come to herself; we both begin, she to becall, and I to bescratch very liberally. After having made a pretty free use of my fingers, without any great regard to the parts I attack'd, I counterfeit a Swoon. Mrs. Jervis then cries out, 'O, Sir, what have you

done, you have murdered poor Pamela: she is gone, she is gone.'

Of course, in most modern present tense narrations the reader can assume the writer isn't actually scribbling everything down on bits of paper as it's happening. Present tense narration is now simply an accepted writing convention.



But first person narration written in the present tense isn't a form that suits all stories. Or indeed all writers. In fact, some novelists don't like it one bit. Philip Pullman is a well-known critic of novels written in the first person and the use of the present tense.

“There’s a close parallel here with the increasing use of the hand-held camera in cinema,” he wrote in THE GUARDIAN. “Just like the present tense, the hand-held camera is an expressive device whose expressive power is being drained away by making it the only way of shooting a film. And I dislike that too, you won’t be surprised to hear.” Pullman isn’t against the use of present tense in a novel as such, and points to both Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens, writers, he argues, who employed it wisely. But his general advice to young writers is to follow those nineteenth century paths and not modern trends. “I want them to feel able to say what happened, what usually happened, what sometimes happened, what had happened before something else happened, what might happen later, what actually did happen later, and so on: to use the full range of English tenses.” And that is – or should we in deference to Pullman also say *was* – a point well made.

“When the literary historians of the year 3000 write about the fiction of our time, I believe they will consider our use of the present tense to be its most distinctive – and, perhaps, problematic – feature. Whereas present tense narration was once rare, it is now so common as to be commonplace. In 1987, Robie Macauley and George Lanning dubbed it ‘the most frequent cliché of technique in the new fiction,’ and since then, it’s appeared with even greater frequency. Although there are signs that its use is diminishing among established writers, it’s becoming the default choice for many younger writers.”

David Jauss in ON WRITING FICTION



***“I turn my head, and see it, in its beautiful serenity, beside me.
My lamp burns low, and I have written far into the night; but the
dear presence, without which I were nothing, bears me company.
O Agnes, O my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life
indeed; so may I, when realities are melting from me, like the
shadows which I now dismiss, still find thee near me, pointing
upward!”***

The final lines of DAVID COPPERFIELD (1849) by Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens and the use of the Present Tense

Here are some examples of the use of the present tense in the works of Charles Dickens:

Darkness rests upon Tom-All-Alone’s. Dilating and dilating since the sun went down last night, it has gradually swelled until it fills every void in the place. For a time there were some dungeon lights burning, as the lamp of life hums in Tom-all-Alone’s, heavily, heavily, in the nauseous air, and winking – as that lamp, too, winks in Tom-all-Alone’s – at many horrible things. But they are blotted out. The moon has eyed Tom with a dull cold stare, as admitting some puny emulation of herself in his desert region unfit for life and blasted by volcanic fires; but she has passed on and is gone. The blackest nightmare in the infernal stables grazes on Tom-all-Alone’s, and Tom is fast asleep.

(Extract from chapter forty-six of Charles Dickens’ BLEAK HOUSE)

Where the throng is thickest, where the lights are brightest, where all the senses are ministered to with the greatest delicacy and refinement, Lady Dedlock is. From the shining heights she has scaled and taken, she is never absent. Though the belief she of old reposed in herself as one able to reserve whatsoever she would under her mantle of pride is beaten down, though she has no assurance that what she is to those around her she will remain another day, it is not in her nature when envious eyes are looking on to yield or to droop... Mr. Tulkinghorn says nothing, looks nothing. Now, as heretofore, he is to be found in doorways of rooms, with his limp white cravat loosely twisted into its old-fashioned tie, receiving patronage from the peerage and making no sign. Of all men he is still the last who might be supposed to have any influence upon my Lady. Of all women she is still the last who might be supposed to have any dread of him.

(Extract from chapter forty-eight of Charles Dickens' BLEAK HOUSE)

Riderhood got into the boat accordingly. It appeared as if he had scarcely had a moment's time to touch the rope or look over the stern, when he came scrambling back, as pale as the morning, and gasped out:

'By the Lord, he's done me!'

'What do you mean?' they all demanded.

He pointed behind him at the boat, and gasped to that degree that he dropped upon the stones to get his breath.

'Gaffer's done me. It's Gaffer!'

They ran to the rope, leaving him gasping there. Soon, the form of the bird of prey, dead some hours, lay stretched upon the shore, with a new blast storming at it and clotting the wet hair with hail-stones.

Father, was that you calling me? Father! I thought I heard you call me twice before! Words never to be

answered, those, upon the earth-side of the grave. The wind sweeps jeeringly over Father, whips him with the frayed ends of his dress and his jagged hair, tries to turn him where he lies stark on his back, and force his face towards the rising sun, that he may be shamed the more. A lull, and the wind is secret and prying with him; lifts and lets falls a rag; hides palpitating under another rag; runs nimbly through his hair and beard. Then, in a rush, it cruelly taunts him. Father, was that you calling me? Was it you, the voiceless and the dead? Was it you, thus buffeted as you lie here in a heap? Was it you, thus baptized unto Death, with these flying impurities now flung upon your face? Why not speak, Father? Soaking into this filthy ground as you lie here, is your own shape. Did you never see such a shape soaked into your boat? Speak, Father. Speak to us, the winds, the only listeners left you!

‘Now see,’ said Mr Inspector, after mature deliberation: kneeling on one knee beside the body, when they had stood looking down on the drowned man, as he had many a time looked down on many another man: ‘the way of it was this. Of course you gentlemen hardly failed to observe that he was towing by the neck and arms.’

They had helped to release the rope, and of course not.

(Extract from chapter fourteen, Book the First of Charles Dickens’ OUR MUTUAL FRIEND)

Dawn with its passionless blank face, steals shivering to the church beneath which lies the dust of little Paul and his mother, and looks in at the windows. It is cold and dark. Night crouches yet, upon the pavement, and broods, sombre and heavy, in nooks and corners of the building. The steeple-clock, perched up above the houses, emerging from beneath another of the countless ripples in the tide of time that regularly roll and break on the eternal shore, is

greyly visible, like a stone beacon, recording how the sea flows on; but within doors, dawn, at first, can only peep at night, and see that it is there.

Hovering feebly round the church, and looking in, dawn moans and weeps for its short reign, and its tears trickle on the window-glass, and the trees against the church-wall bow their heads, and wring their many hands in sympathy. Night, growing pale before it, gradually fades out of the church, but lingers in the vaults below, and sits upon the coffins. And now comes bright day, burnishing the steeple-clock, and reddening the spire, and drying up the tears of dawn, and stifling its complaining; and the dawn, following the night, and chasing it from its last refuge, shrinks into the vaults itself and hides, with a frightened face, among the dead, until night returns, refreshed, to drive it out.

(Extract from chapter thirty-one of Charles Dickens' *DOMBEY AND SON*)

What is the proud man doing, while the days go by? Does he ever think of his daughter, or wonder where she is gone? Does he suppose she has come home, and is leading her old life in the weary house? No one can answer for him. He has never uttered her name, since. His household dread him too much to approach a subject on which he is resolutely dumb; and the only person who dares question him, he silences immediately... He goes on, without deviation, keeping his thoughts and feelings close within his own breast, and imparting them to no one. He makes no search for his daughter. He may think that she is with his sister, or that she is under his own roof. He may think of her constantly, or he may never think about her. It is all one for any sign he makes.

But this is sure; he does not think that he has lost her. He has no suspicion of the truth. He has lived too long shut

up in his towering supremacy, seeing her, a patient gentle creature, in the path below it, to have any fear of that. Shaken as he is by his disgrace, he is not yet humbled to the level earth. The root is broad and deep, and in the course of years its fibres have spread out and gathered nourishment from everything around it. The tree is struck, but not down.
(Extract from chapter fifty-one of Charles Dickens' DOMBEY AND SON)

The later part of the last extract comes to rest on Dombey contemplating the world's opinion of himself. The previous extract is from the beginning of chapter thirty-one and sets the scene for the wedding of Edith to Dombey. Chapter forty-eight of BLEAK HOUSE involves tensions in the relationship between Dedlock and Tulkinghorn, whereas the extract from chapter forty-six is more descriptive of the mood of the physical landscape as it eyes Tom asleep on the ground. However, the strangest use of the present tense is perhaps in chapter fourteen of OUR MUTUAL FRIEND. Gaffer is found dead, but his daughter, though not present, calls out to him in a kind of prayer in the present tense, followed by a continuation of the narrative in past tense. In rhetorical terms, the cry is an *apostrophe*, an apostrophe being an exclamatory speech or poem addressed to one who is usually dead or absent.

Dickens' non-standard use of the verb form is relatively rare, but as can be seen in these extracts it does exist – and of course in BLEAK HOUSE (1853), there is the famous opening section which, lacking any finite verb form, sweeps and captures the environment

and landscape like a floating camera in the cinema. Dickens is well-known for ending some of his novels in the present tense, but when it is used within the narrative itself, it is usually confined to a single chapter. The whole of *The Wedding*, chapter thirty-one of *DOMBEY AND SON* (1848), is in the present tense, though it shifts back to the past tense at the beginning of the next chapter. That said, by the time Dickens came to write *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND* (1865), his last complete novel, there is more of a blurring when it comes to verb transitions or tense shifts.

“Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another’s umbrellas in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foothold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if the day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.”

From the opening of chapter of Charles Dickens’ *BLEAK HOUSE* (1853)



“Michael Frayn’s A VERY PRIVATE LIFE (1968) starts in the future tense (‘Once upon a time there will be a little girl called Uncumber’) but he can’t keep it up for long. To enter into the imagined world of a novel we have to orient ourselves in space and time with characters, and the future tense makes that impossible. The past tense is ‘natural’ for narrative; even the use of present tense is somewhat paradoxical, since anything that has been written down has by inference already happened.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

Use of Tenses in Narratives – Future Tense

Narratives in the future tense are exceptionally rare, but AURA by the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes is an example. AURA concerns Felipe, the protagonist, who answers an advertisement in the paper to do a translation. It turns out that Consuelo wants Felipe to translate the journal of her dead husband, General Llorente. Felipe agrees and as he goes through the document he discovers some intimate details about both the elderly Consuelo and the General. During the work, Felipe falls in love with Aura, the niece of Consuelo, and, with the encouragement of Consuelo, he seduces Aura, only to find when he does that she, Aura, has become Consuelo, and he, Felipe, has transformed into General Llorente.

How this is all possible is never made clear but as Felipe reads the journal, he begins more and more to identify with the dead husband. Equally, Aura, though young, begins to appear older and wiser. And when they eventually consummate their mutual passion, the transformation becomes complete. Time is a theme of the novel.

It goes so quickly and there are no second chances. Except here there is.



All this is this very odd in itself but even more unusual as the narrative is presented in the future tense. But the theme of AURA is of course *Time*. As Consuelo says, ““You will not look at your watch again, that useless object that falsely measures the time agreed to human vanity, those little hands that tediously mark the long hours invented to deceive the true time, the time that runs with insulting, deadly speed, that no watch can measure. One life, one century, fifty years: it will no longer be possible for you to imagine these lying actions, you will no longer be able to take that bodiless powder in your hands.”

“Like the wild beasts, she lives without a future. She inhabits only the present tense, a fugue of the continuous, a world of sensual immediacy as without hope as it is without despair.”

Angela Carter



"Alice!" said the visitor's mild voice, "am I late to-night?"

"You always seem late, but are always early."

Charles Dickens, DOMBEY AND SON

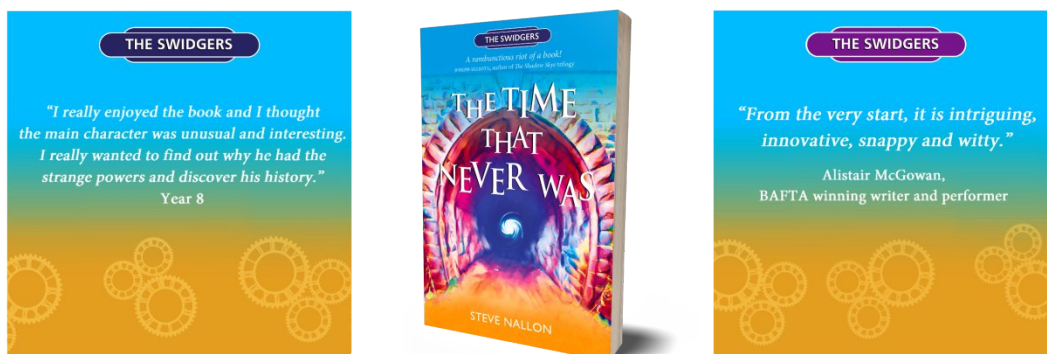
Tense-Shifts

As said, in DOMBEY AND SON (1848), Dickens kept his use of the present tense essentially confined within a particular chapter. However, by the time Dickens came to write OUR MUTUAL FRIEND (1865), Dickens's use of the present tense drifted beyond the historical present tense and narrative asides in the gnomic present tense (where the present tense verb is used to express a general truth without reference to time). For example, consider this description of those who frequent Covent Garden:

There is a swarm of young savages always flitting about this same place, creeping off with fragments of orange-chests, and mouldy litter – Heaven knows into what holes they can convey them, having no home ! – whose bare feet fell with a blunt dull softness on the pavement as the policeman hunts them, and who are (perhaps for that reason) little heard by the Powers that be, whereas in top-boots they would make a deafening clatter. These, delighting in the trembles and the horrors of Mr. Dolls, as in a gratuitous drama, flocked about him in his doorway, butted at him leaped at him, and pelted him.

So what do we think of such casual tense-shifts into the present tense in what is are mainly past tense narratives? Well, some people like this narrative style and some people don't. However, if the segues are managed well, perhaps with a few sentences either side without a finite verb, the sudden sense of pace and immediacy that the historical present offers a narrator can be very effective.

Another use that 'Present Tenses' sometimes have is... in timeless or generic statements, such as 'elephants have trunks.' Such statements are true in the past, present, and future – as long as elephants exist. The usual term for this meaning is gnomic present.'
THE EVOLUTION OF GRAMMAR by Joan Bybee, Revere Perkins and William Pagliuca

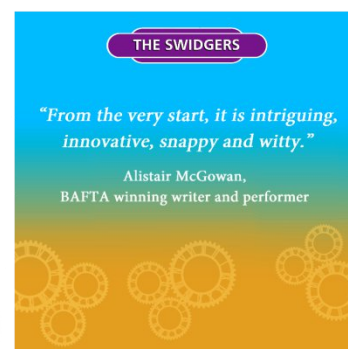
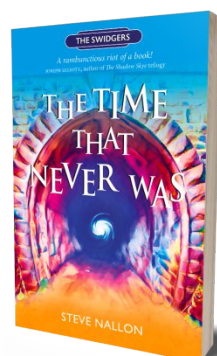
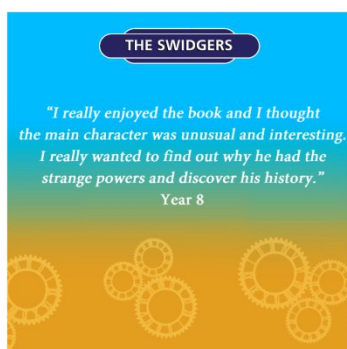


Time Tale Tenses

When in doubt about anything – including what tense to use – always consult THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY by Douglas

Adams. This invaluable book tells you that one of the main problems of time travel is not becoming you own father or mother but tenses:

The major problem is simply one of grammar, and the main work to consult in this matter is Dr. Dan Streetmentioner's TIME TRAVELLER'S HANDBOOK OF 1001 TENSE FORMATIONS. It will tell you, for instance, how to describe something that was about to happen to you in the past before you avoided it by time-jumping forward two days in order to avoid it. The event will be described differently according to whether you are talking about it from the standpoint of your own natural time, from a time in the further future, or a time in the further past and is further complicated by the possibility of conducting conversations while you are actually travelling from one time to another with the intention of becoming your own mother or father. Most readers get as far as the Future Semi-conditionally Modified Subinverted Plagal Past Subjunctive Intentional before giving up; and in fact in later additions of the book all pages beyond this point have been left blank to save on printing costs. THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY skips lightly over this tangle of academic abstraction, pausing only to note that the term "Future Perfect" has been abandoned since it was discovered not to be."



NARRATIVE DESIGN

Epistolary Tales

“It is a truism of epistolary psychology that, for example, a Christmas thank-you not written in December 26 can say any old thing, but if you wait until February, you are convinced that nothing less than MIDDLEMARCH will do.”

Anne Fadiman

Epistolary Tales

Epistolary tales based on letters, diaries or journals can of course be classified as first person narrations. Or indeed several first person narrations if there is more than one character writing the letters or diaries or whatever. However, there is an important difference between the epistolary tale and first person fiction. Novels written in first person tend to be autobiographical in that the life that has been lived – or at least most of it – is already known to the author. And this is certainly the case with a memoir, which tends to concentrate of episodes in lives that are now complete. However, this is not necessarily the case with an epistolary novel, as letters chronicling events are, by nature, part of an ongoing process.

From a storytelling point of view this is important because although diaries and journals are usually written in the past tense, the writer writing in book doesn't know what's going to happen tomorrow, in the next hour or indeed in the moment they scribbling down their thoughts. For example, *THE CAPTAIN OF THE POLESTAR* by Arthur Conan Doyle is a ghost story written in the form of a journal by one John McAlister Ray, a student of medicine, about his time on the *Polestar* and the strange behaviour and eventual fate of the captain. McAlister chronicles the captain's conversations and actions but as he is writing day to day there's no way he can say for certain what will occur next. And not knowing what happens next is one of the key aspects of storytelling. The writer of this journal also makes several references to the journal itself. One entry questions whether anyone will ever read it. This immediately raises the stakes as the *Polestar* is in a precarious ice-bound world. Another entry states that the journal "will serve to justify us in case we have to put him away under any sort of restraint." The purpose of any diary in real life may be just to record events, but in a narrative that purpose takes on a storytelling function – and here it is to raise the stakes and increase suspense and curiosity.

Letters it should be noted are of a slightly different character to journals. As said, letters can be written to more than one person, so an epistolary tale in the form of letters offers the reader a variety of perspectives and styles. After all, how one writes a note to a lover

will differ greatly to a letter written to a bank manager pleading for a loan. And letters, unlike a personal journal, often include requests, which in storytelling terms are similar to actions.



An advantage of the epistolary form from a plot point of view is that a diary, or letter or journal can on occasion come to an abrupt and dramatic stop. This technique was used very effectively by Wilkie Collins in his novel *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*, which is an epistolary novel made up of various first person narratives. As Collins says in his preamble, “the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness”. And there is one particular bloodcurdling moment that is worth quoting in full. It’s where the diary of Marian Halcombe comes a sudden stop and the pen is literally picked up by the spine-chillingly wicked Count Fosco:

“Oh, my god! Am I going to be ill?
Ill at such a time as this!

My head – I am sadly afraid of my head. I can write, but the lines all run together. I see the words. *Laura* – I can write *Laura*, and see I write it. Eight or nine – which was it?

So cold, so cold – oh that rain last night! – and the strokes of the clock, the strokes I can't count, keep striking in my head..."

NOTE

[At this place the entry in the Diary ceases to be legible. The two or three lines which follow, contain fragments of words only, mingled with blots and scratches of the pen. The last marks on the paper bear some resemblance to the first two letters (L and A) of the name of Lady Glynd. On the next page of the Diary, another entry appears. It is in a man's handwriting, large, bold, and firmly regular; and the date is "July 7th". It contains these lines:]

POSTSCRIPT BY A SINCERE FRIEND

"The illness of our excellent Miss Halcombe has afforded me the opportunity of enjoying an unexpected intellectual pleasure. I refer to the perusal (which I have just completed) of this interesting Diary. There are many hundreds pages here. I can lay my hand on my heart, and declare that every page has charmed, refreshed, delighted me. To a man of my sentiments it is unspeakably gratifying to be able to say this."

It's a brilliant a very creepy plot twist. Count Fosco is one of Collins' most fascinating and beguiling creations, and the way Fosco goes on to summarise Marian's diary, and especially what it says of him, is bloodcurdling indeed.



Without giving too much away, book two of the SWIDGERS Time Adventure series, *THE TIME THEY SAVED TOMORROW*, has a dramatic epistolary section which also ends abruptly. Not bloodcurdling in the Wilkie Collins mode, but as the journal suddenly comes to a stop where a vital piece of information is about to be revealed it is, in its own way, a very dramatic and unexpected plot turn.



Time Tales that have used the epistolary form include Max Gladstone's and Amal El-Mohtar's *THIS IS HOW YOU LOSE THE TIME WAR*, featuring transdimensional pen pals; Jack Finney's *THE LOVE LETTER*, where a second-hand writing desk with time defying

compartments allows lovers from different eras to exchange letters and Ian McDonald's *TIME WAS*, where communication across time becomes possible through a book of poetry.

"I would so hate to be a first-person character! Always on your guard, always having people read your thoughts!"

Jasper Fforde



"What a lot we lost when we stopped writing letters. You can't re-read a phone call."

Liz Carpenter

Epistolary Tales and the Movies

There are numerous books written in epistolary form that have been turned into movies. These have included *BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY* by Helen Fielding, *THE MARTIAN* by Andy Weir, *DRACULA* by Bram Stoker, in which the story is told not just through letters and diaries but also telegrams and newspaper articles, and the very charming and moving *84 CHARING CROSS ROAD*, featuring real life correspondence between American book collector Helen Hanff and English bookseller Frank Doe. Sometimes in these movie adaptations the source material of the correspondence or diary entry features

heavily, as in 84 CHARING CROSS ROAD and BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY, and on other occasions not at all, as is the case with most film versions of DRACULA.



The most famous epistolary Time Tale movie is arguably THE LAKE HOUSE, a remake of the South Korean film IL MARE, where a mailbox at a lake house allows a former inhabitant to communicate via letters across time with its new owner. However, if you allow the definition of epistolary to be broadened from the written form to include all modern forms of communication, including voice mail, texts and even recorded radio and video messages, then the number of movies and television episodes that might be classified as epistolary goes up substantially. They would then include DOCTOR WHO'S *Blink* episode, the movie FREQUENCY and the Japanese anime movie YOUR NAME, where young lovers in different time periods somehow communicate via their smart phone.

Some more thoughts on the epistolary form...

“There’s no way we could meet. But one thing is certain. If we see each other, we’ll know. That you were the one who was inside me. That I was the one who was inside you.”

Mitsuha Miyamizu in YOUR NAME written by Makoto Shinkai

“[In CARRIE] I did add a number of epistolary interludes (passages from fictional books, a diary entry, letters, teletype bulletins) between narratives segments. This was partly to inject a greater sense of realism (I was thinking of Orson Welles’ is radio adaptation of WAR OF THE WORLDS) but mostly because the first draught of the book was so damned short it barely seemed like a novel.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“The epistolary form is one of the hardest to write. It’s so hard to show something that’s bigger in a letter. Plus, you have to have the balance of how many letters are going to work to tell the story and how few are going to make it fall apart.”

Jacqueline Woodson

“Men and women have been collecting letters since letters began. Unlike other collecting hobbies, philately say, or beautiful antique cars, the collecting of letters has always been a wholly natural endeavor. If you treasured what was said in a letter you kept it, and once you have three, you had a correspondence, and no one would accuse you of being a nerd or obsessive.”

Simon Garfield, TO THE LETTER

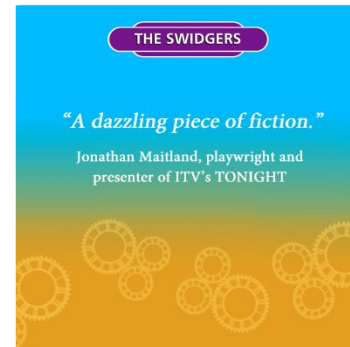
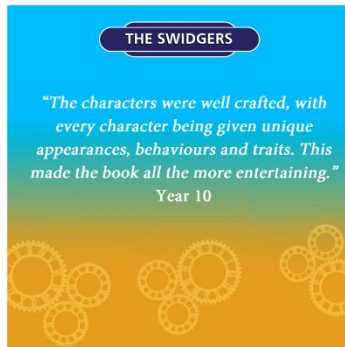
“The true character of epistolary style is playfulness and urbanity.”

Joseph Joubert

“Dear Friend, A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. Indebted in our talk to attitude and accent, there seems a spectral power in thought that

***walks alone - I would like to thank you for your great kindness but
never try to lift the words which I cannot hold."***

A letter from Emily Dickinson to Higginson, June 1869



NARRATIVE DESIGN

Narrative Style

Narrative Style can perhaps be defined as the manner in which a narrative is told, but that, of course, raises the question ‘What does *manner* mean?’ Well, instead of getting lost in semantics perhaps the easiest way to think of style is to see it in terms of the *choices made* – choices about language, metaphor and imagery.

Some thoughts and quotations on Style from writers...

“The most durable thing in writing is style, and style is the most valuable investment a writer can make with his time. It pays off slowly, your agent will sneer at it, your publisher will misunderstand it, and it will take people you have never heard of to convince them by slow degrees that the writer who puts his individual mark on the way he writes will always pay off.”

Raymond Chandler

“Style is to forget all styles.”

Jules Renard, French author and member of the Académie Goncourt

“It ain’t whatcha write, it’s the way atcha write it.”

Jack Kerouac, writer

“The conflation of the simple in style with the morally prescriptive in character, and the complex in style with the amoral or anarchic in character, seems to me one of the most persistently fallacious beliefs held by English students.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“Style, of course, is what every good young author looks to acquire. In lovemaking, its equivalent is grace. Everybody wants it, but who can find it by working directly towards the goal?”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“The traditional model of good literary prose requires ‘elegant variation’: if you have to refer to something more than once, you should try to find alternative ways of describing it; and you should give your syntax the same kind of variety.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

“Matisse painted in one recognisable vein, while Picasso entered a hundred before he was done. Style was the cutting tool by which he could delineate a reality. He saw it as a tool rather than as an extension of his identity. I’ve found this attitude to be useful for myself. It’s better if one’s writing is close to the material one is working with – a fairly formal prose for one occasion, casual for another.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

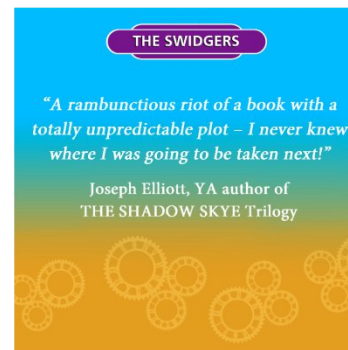
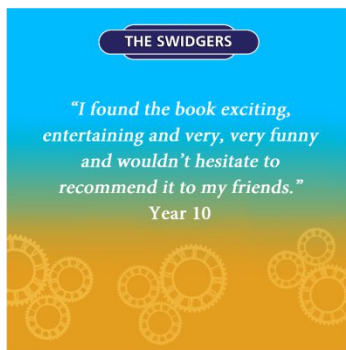
“To me, style is just the outside of content, and content the inside of style, like the outside and the inside of the human body. Both go together, they can’t be separated.”

Jean-Luc Godard

“It is comforting to argue that some major writers develop a style out of the very avoidance of their major weaknesses. Hemmingway was not capable of writing a long, complex sentence with good architecture in the syntax. But he turned that inability into his

personal skill at writing short declarative sentences or long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions. Faulkner, to the contrary, was not capable of writing simply, but his over-rich, congested sentences produced an extraordinary mood. In turn, Henry Miller could rarely tell a full story well. He preferred his excursions away from the story, and those asides are what make him exceptional."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



"The style of an author should be the image of his mind, but the choice and command of language is the fruit of exercise."

Edward Gibbo

"Proper words in proper places, make the true definition of style."

Jonathan Swift

"I've kind of come to the conclusion that what passes for realism in movies has nothing to do with reality and that my stuff is more realistic than that."

Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director

"Style is knowing who you are, what you want to say to say, and not giving a damn."

Gore Vidal

"The style is the man himself."
George-Louis Leclerc de Buffon

"Hemingway's style affected whole generations of us, the way a room full of men are affected when a beautiful woman walks through – their night is turned for better or for worse."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"I find that by the time you have perfected any style of writing, you have always outgrown it."
George Orwell, WHY I WRITE

"Thought and speech are inseparable from each other. Matter and expression are parts of one; style is a thinking out into language."
Cardinal John Henry Newman

"No mise-en-scène has the right to be repeated, just as no two personalities are ever the same. As soon as a mise-en-scène turns into a sign, a cliché, a concept, however original it may be, then the whole thing – characters, situation, psychology – becomes schematic and false."
Andrei Tarkovsky

"Style and structure are the essence of a book; great ideas are hogwash. . . .All my stories are webs of style and none seems at first blush to contain much kinetic matter. . . . For me 'style' is matter."
Vladimir Nabokov

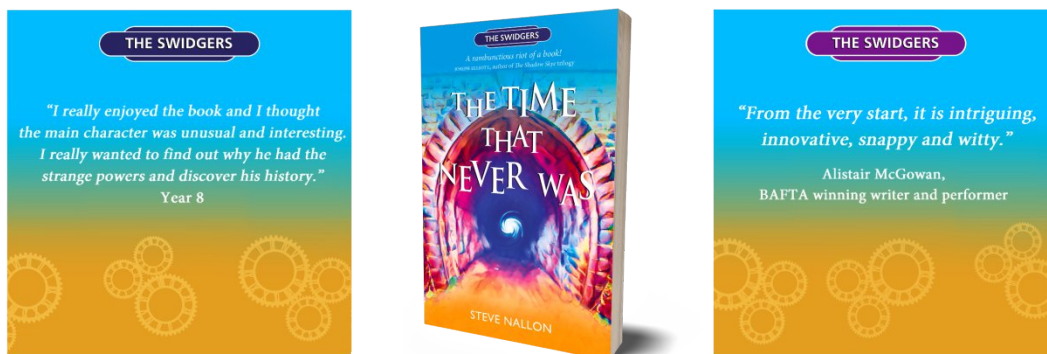
"Style is the perfection of a point of view."
Richard Eberhart

“When we see a natural style, we are astonished and delighted; for we expected to see an author, and we find a man.”

Blaise Pascal

“G.K. Chesterton’s THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY. It has an undeniably silly plot unless you invest a great deal into it. A worshipful right-wing critic can do a blitheringly wonderful thesis on the symbolic leaps and acrobatics of THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY, but actually, it’s about as silly as a Jules Verne novel. Yet the writing itself is fabulous. The style is extraordinary. The aperçus are marvellous. THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY proves the point: Style is half of a novel.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



“I don’t wish to sign my name, though I am afraid everyone will know who the writer is: one’s style is one’s signature always.”

Oscar Wilde

“Who cares what a man’s style is, so it is intelligible, as intelligible as his thought. Literally and really, the style is no more than the stylus, the pen he writes with, and it is not worth scraping and polishing, and gilding, unless it will write his thoughts the better for it. It is something for use, and not to look at.”

Henry David Thoreau

"I never know what the style of a book will be until I get into it. Sometimes you aim high and don't get it – you have to settle for a more functional tone. After all, style is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself. You have to be able to maintain it. In that sense, style is an offshoot of character. With all else, character is the wise or foolish estimate of your resources."

Norman Mailer, *THE SPOOKY ART*

"The web, then, or the pattern, a web at once sensuous and logical, an elegant and pregnant texture: that is style."

Robert Louis Stevenson

"Where there is no style, there is in effect no point of view. There is, essentially, no anger, no conviction, no self. Style is opinion, hung washing, the caliber of a bullet, teething beads."

Alexander Theroux

"One arrives at style only with atrocious effort, with fanatical and devoted stubbornness."

Gustave Flaubert

"In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing."

Gwendolen in *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNEST* by Oscar Wilde

"Every style is excellent if it is proper; and that style is most proper which can best convey the intentions of the author to his reader. And, after all, it is Style alone by which posterity will judge of a great work, for an author can have nothing truly his own but his style; facts, scientific discoveries, and every kind of information, may be seized by all, but an author's diction cannot be taken from him."

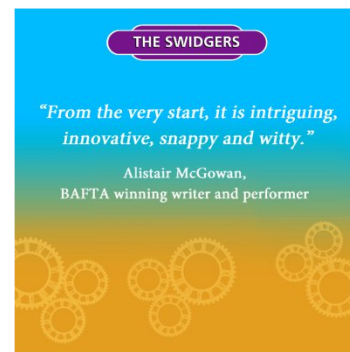
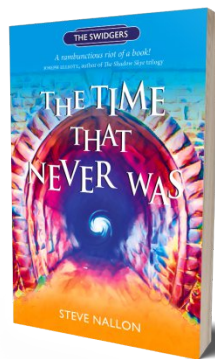
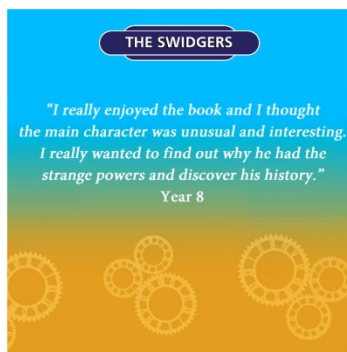
Isaac D'Israeli

“Style, in its finest sense, is the last acquirement of the educated mind; it is also the most useful. It pervades the whole being.”

Alfred North Whitehead

“Feeling I'd scarcely arrived at a style, I now find I'm near the end of it. I'm not quite sure what Late Style means except that it's some sort of licence, a permit for ageing practitioners to kick their heels up.”

Alan Bennett



NARRATIVE DESIGN

Story Information: Suspense, Dramatic Irony, Mystery and Anticipation

“You ask or imply a question at the beginning of the book and you absolutely self-consciously withhold the answer. It does feel cheap and meretricious but it absolutely works.”

Lee Child

Story Information

Story Information simply means the knowledge the audience, viewer or reader, is given or presented with as the telling of the story progresses. Well, that’s simple enough, but get the *When* and *Where* wrong and your story just won’t work. In fact, placement of story information is arguably the most important skill in the storyteller’s kitbag. No wonder authors as various as Wilkie Collins, David Lodge, Agatha Christie and Lee Child each in their own way place it so high on their agenda.

That said, the writer John Gardner in his seminal book *ON BECOMING A NOVELIST* offers a word of caution when he says, “One of the most common mistakes among young writers (those who

understand that fiction is storytelling) is the idea that a story gets its power from withheld information – that is, from the writer’s setting up the reader and then bushwhacking him. Ungenerous fiction is first and foremost fiction in which the writer is unwilling to take the reader as an equal partner.” ‘Ungenerous’ here essentially means don’t hold back too much for too long because that can lead to frustration. And worse, if you leave key information to the very last page, that is likely to make the reader very cross indeed. That *When* part of the story equation is crucial.



Some more thoughts on Story information...

“Storytellers don’t give away the story in the first paragraph the way news writers do. Instead they set up a situation, using suspense or the introduction of a compelling character to keep the reader turning pages. Rather than put the least important information at the end, the storyteller waits until the end to give the reader a ‘big payoff’ — a surprise, a twist, a consummation.”

Chip Scanlon, affiliate faculty member of The Poynter Institute

“On the most basic level, readers read to find out what will happen next. It’s like making a person scratch long and hard; before she’ll do that, she needs to feel an itch. Uncertainty is the itch.”

Nancy Kress, novelist and short story writer

“On some levels, all good narratives are mysteries – Will he get the girl? Will she find the strength to endure the ordeal? Will they stop the bad guys? – and the reason for that is that readers like the feeling of wanting to discover some sort of hidden truth. ... You could even write a compelling story around the mystery ‘What’s for dinner?’ though I don’t know that I want to tackle that one just yet.”

David Liss, author of THE COFFEE TRADER and other books of historical fiction

“In a good story, the audience is unable to predict the outcome, not because the story is unpredictable, but because the spectator lacks the knowledge of all the details making such a prediction possible.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)



“The suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.”

Gwendolen, in Oscar Wilde’s THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Suspense

In a typical ‘Suspense Story’ neither the characters nor the audience should know too much about what is happening, or what is about to happen, for a reader or audience to be gripped in suspense

depends on a feeling of trepidation – *‘What’s behind the door at the end of that dark passage?’* – and so tension and anticipation is what the suspense story aims to create. As Tom Clancy has observed, “Suspense is achieved by information control: What you know. What the reader knows. What the characters know.”



Another key feature of a suspense story is that from the first chapter to the last, the main character is rarely out of danger. The name given to these types of ‘low-brow’ suspense story in the United States was *Dime Novels*, whereas in Britain they were known as *Shockers*.

Some more thoughts on suspense stories...

“There is a distinct difference between ‘suspense’ and ‘surprise’, and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. I’ll explain what I mean. We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let’s suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, ‘Boom!’ – there is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table

and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions, the same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: 'You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There is a bomb beneath you and it is about to explode!' In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. Except when the surprise is a twist, that is, when the unexpected ending is, in itself, the highlight of the story."

Alfred Hitchcock

"Suspense is the doubt of the spectator as to the outcome of an intention of an actor in the story... as long as the spectator doubts the outcome of the intention, he experiences suspense... suspense is not blindness but uncertainty... Suspense becomes possible only with a strong and correct structure. It can never exist by itself, it cannot be added, and it can hardly be corrected or improved by itself, because it depends too much upon the other elements.

Suspense is not an element of the story, but a reaction of the spectator to the story. If it is said that a story has no suspense it is meant that the spectator is unable to feel suspense when the story is told to him."

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

"When the central character is a victim, not someone who does but someone who's done to, there can be no real suspense... In the final analysis, real suspense comes with the moral dilemma and the courage to make and act upon choices. False suspense comes from the accidental and meaningless occurrence of one damn thing after another. The wiser or more experienced writer gives the reader the

information he needs to understand the story moment by moment, with the result that instead of asking, as he reads, ‘What’s going to happen to the characters next?’ the reader asks, ‘What will Frank do next? What would Wanda say if Frank were to...’ and so on. Involving himself in the story in this way, the reader feels true suspense, which is to say, true concern for the characters.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



“When the reader is made aware of a disparity between the facts of a situation and the characters’ understanding of it, an effect called ‘dramatic irony’ is generated.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

Dramatic Irony

With ‘Dramatic Irony’, the audience knows far more story information than do the characters in the story, or at least more than some of the characters. The result of this is that the full significance of what someone says in a scene is understood by the audience to have a different meaning to the one intended. The effect is sometimes comic, notably in the movie GROUNDHOG DAY, which is pretty much pure dramatic (and comic) irony from the first repeated day onwards, but at other times it can lead to pathos, for example,

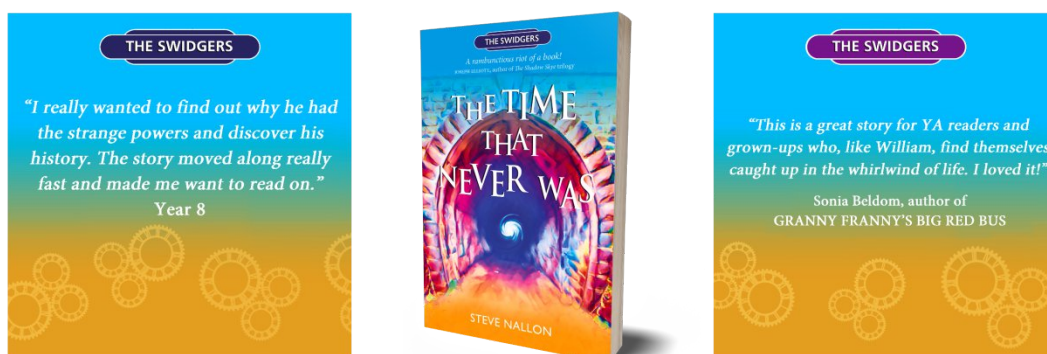
the end moments of LOOPER. In fact, time travel tales are often packed with dramatic irony for obvious reasons.



Certain time travel stories set in the near past create opportunities for dramatic irony and comic irony. *BACK TO THE FUTURE* establishes both the personal world of the McFly and the political world of 1985 before going back in time to 1955. There is, for example, that scene in the dining room in 1955 when Lorraine's mother asks Marty, "Why do you look so familiar to me? Do I know your mother?" Marty looks in Lorraine's direction and says, "Yeah, I think maybe you do." Lorraine's father later says of Marty, "He's an idiot. Comes from upbringing. His parents are probably idiots too. Lorraine, if you ever have a kid that acts that way I'll disown you." Then there is Goldie Wilson, the black busboy clearing tables in the 1955 diner who believes that he will make something of himself. Marty says that indeed he will, for Marty knows he will become mayor well before even 1985 because he's seen it for himself. The owner of the soda shop where Goldie works shakes his head in disbelief, but Marty and we, the audience, know better. Another

point here is that Marty's remark about being mayor may have been the encouragement Goldie needed to believe more in himself, which, in a causal loop sort of way, then leads to Goldie indeed becoming mayor.

In TRAVELERS (using the American spelling for the series), much of the comedy in the series comes from the travellers lack of knowledge or awareness of food. Or at least 21st century fast food. Grace, Traveller 0027, is given some French Fries while awaiting the outcome of her trial. She loves them and says that, "If they throw the book at me, I can say I've had 21st century French cuisine." But there are serious moments too. Grant MacLaren and his wife are discussing children and Kathryn suggests setting up a trust fund for college. "That's years from now," says Grant. "We need to learn to think of the future," replies Kat. "Oh, I have given that some thought," says the traveller from that very world.



Dramatic irony is, of course, a technique in story that goes way back to Greek theatre and OEDIPUS REX, which is essentially about a character finding out who he truly is when the Athenian audience

watching the drama already know. Shakespeare also used dramatic irony extensively. In ROMEO AND JULIET, the audience know that Juliet is only asleep and not dead but sadly Romeo is unaware of this and so kills himself. In OTHELLO, Iago tells us his plan and so when he manipulates and lies to Othello we, the audience, are aware of the deception. And in MACBETH, even as Duncan says that he trusts Macbeth – “he was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust” – we know that Macbeth is planning to kill him.

Some more thoughts on dramatic irony and other ironies of life...

“Dramatic irony is when the audience knows more about the plot than one or more of the characters in the scene. It helps us perceive Oedipus as a tragic figure because we understand, long before he does, that he is the cause of the plague on his city.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“It is sometimes easier to be happy if you don't know everything.”

Alexander McCall Smith, MORALITY FOR BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

“The sense of tragedy – according to Aristotle – comes, ironically enough, not from the protagonist's weak points but from his good qualities. Do you know what I'm getting at? People are drawn deeper into tragedy not by their defects but by their virtues... [But] we accept irony through a device called metaphor. And through that we grow and become deeper human beings.”

Haruki Murakami, KAFKA ON THE SHORE

“Irony is wasted on the stupid”

Oscar Wilde

“Dramatic irony is a cruel occurrence, one that is almost always upsetting and I’m sorry to have it appear in this story, but Violet, Klaus, and Sunny have such unfortunate lives that it was only a matter of time before dramatic irony would rear its ugly head.”

Lemony Snicket, in THE REPTILE ROOM



“In comedy, the more information the audience has about a scene and the less information one or more of the other characters in the scene has, the funnier it will be.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

Comic Irony

As said, with dramatic irony, the audience knows far more than the characters in the story, or at least more than some of the characters. And comic irony works exactly the same way. There’s a scene, for example, in Roald Dahl’s THE TWITS where Mrs Twit sneaks out into the garden and digs up some worms and later mixes the worms in with the spaghetti, but only on her husband’s plate. The worms don’t show because everything is covered with tomato sauce and sprinkled with cheese.

‘Hey, my spaghetti’s moving!’ cried Mr Twit, poking around in it with his fork.

‘It’s a new kind,’ Mrs Twit said, taking a mouthful from her own plate which of course had no worms. ‘It’s called Squiggly Spaghetti. It’s delicious. Eat it up while it’s nice and hot.’

Mr Twit started eating, twisting the long tomato-covered strings around his fork and shovelling them into his mouth. Soon there was tomato sauce all over his hairy chin.

‘It’s not as good as the ordinary kind,’ he said talking with his mouth full. ‘It’s too squishy.’

I find it very tasty,’ Mrs Twit said. She was watching him from the other end of the table. It gave her great pleasure to watch him eating worms.

This is a scene which children love and laugh at loudly.



All farce has at least some element comic irony, for objects in farce, including food that is thought to be but which isn't, are rarely used for what they are really are. Plus, of course, disguise and misunderstandings are at the heart of a farce and the laughs often depend on something the audience knows and one of the character's does not.

“All ‘drag’ films and plays, for instance, from AS YOU LIKE IT and TWELFTH NIGHT to CHARLEY’S AUNT, SOME LIKE IT HOT, TOOTSIE, NUNS ON THE RUN and MRS DOUBTFIRE, depend on the audience knowing something that other characters do not: that the leading characters are not the sex that they appear to be.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES



“The mystery story is two stories in one: the story of what happened and the story of what appeared to happen.”

Mary Roberts Rinehart

Mystery

In a ‘Mystery Story’, often told from a first person point of view or as a restrictive narrative, there is usually one person who knows the secret of the mystery. In fact, the term ‘mystery’ comes from the Latin word *mysterium*, meaning ‘a secret thing’. However, it’s rarely the person who’s telling the story (except in the case of one very famous Agatha Christie novel) who is aware of the secret. And neither are the audience or reader. The appeal then of the mystery story is not so much suspense as curiosity – *‘What is the secret?’* or more usually *‘Who did the deed? And why did they do it?’*

Mysteries can be supernatural or non-supernatural. The mystery can revolve around a crime or murder, but any story with a

secret to uncover is essentially a mystery tale. And mystery tales have a particular appeal to the human mind simply because we are a species that is naturally curious and, further, doesn't like anything unexplained or unsolved. Hence the appeal of the Sherlock Holmes yarns where rationality and logic usually triumph.



Some more thoughts on mystery and mystery stories...

"There is always a pleasure in unravelling a mystery, in catching at the gossamer clue which will guide to certainty."

Elizabeth Gaskell

"The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible."

Oscar Wilde

"At least half the mystery novels published violate the law that the solution, once revealed, must seem to be inevitable."

Raymond Chandler

"Mysteries abound where most we seek for answers."

Ray Bradbury

“There are mysteries which men can only guess at, which age by age they may solve only in part.”

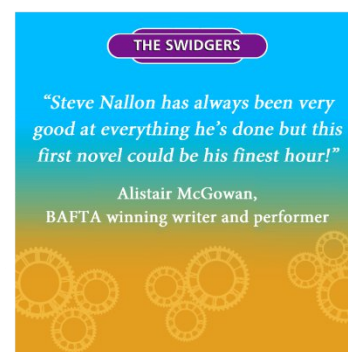
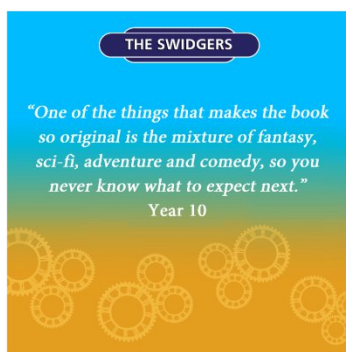
Bram Stoker

“The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science.”

Albert Einstein

“Mystery creates wonder and wonder is the basis for Man’s desire to understand.”

Neil Armstrong



THE SWIDGERS

THE SWIDGERS – Keeping the Mystery Going in a Mystery Adventure

Mystery is the key narrative drive in both book one (THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS) and book two (TIME THEY SAVED TOMORROW) of

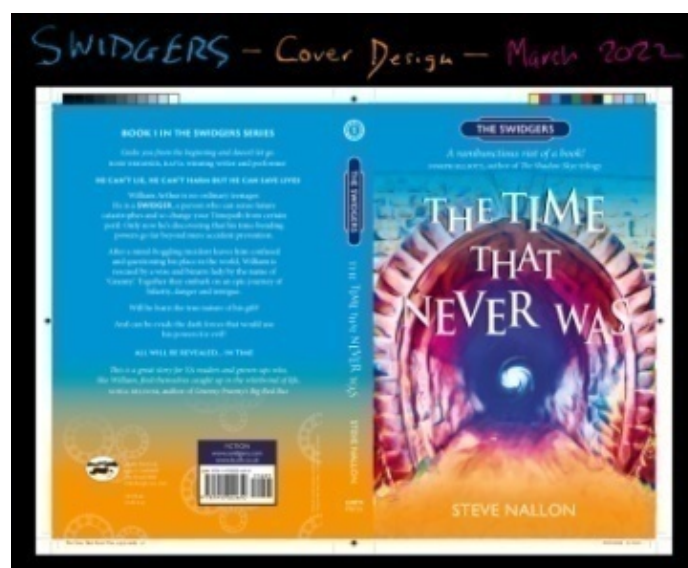
THE SWIDGERS Time Adventure series. In THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, the story begins with a mysterious attack on a seemingly normal Saturday morning in a north London high street. William is seems to be the focus of the attack, and yet when the strike comes it is not directed towards William but instead the man he was meant to save.



After this event William meets Granny who tells our young *Swidger* hero that his is going through what Granny refers to as ‘*Swidger* growing pains’. Granny informs William that he is not like other *Swidgers*, and that his gift, as yet unknown to William, is what the Dark Force now seeks. And therein lies the story’s ‘clock’, for as soon as William understands what it is that makes him different, well, that is when the next and final attack will come – discovery will in effect destroy this young *Swidger*. Granny of course knows more than she admits, but to tell what she knows would put William in danger.

Following a frightening incident with the Brownies on the train to Dungeness, Granny does at least offer William some explanation of what is going on, and later, before the journey to the Old Coach Inn, Granny reveals even more. That said, the true nature of this dark force and why it wants William remains a mystery.

But William is a curious *Swidger* and wants to know exactly what is going on and so does his best to find out the truth behind this Time mystery and his own special place in it. In plot terms this could be said to be a good thing because it means that before this Dark Force opponent force can be dealt with, it first has to be understood. And discovering why the force has attacked, and what it is that makes William different, are then the two central mysteries of the tale. To that end, in book one, THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, William does a lot of uncovering – literally uncovering when in Echo's railway carriage – and he discovers much about himself and the *Swidger* world.



However, William's ultimate objective is to find a way this force can be defeated, or at least tricked, and in a way Granny's overall plan is to somehow facilitate this. But the ultimate encounter between this mysterious force and our hero does not actually occur until about halfway through book two, *THE TIME THEY SAVED TOMORROW* – so how do you keep the drama and action going without revealing the secret of the mystery?

The answer in part lies in the many other forces of antagonism that William faces. And this is a storytelling technique which J.K. Rowling excelled in. The mystery of exactly what happened at Godric's Hollow is kept hidden not just for one book or two books but the entire *Harry Potter* series. But the dramatic power of the saga never drops or sags because Harry Potter is in each book faced with a new adversary, usually with their own secrets. And likewise in *THE SWIDGERS*.

To keep the drama and the action moving until the total mystery of this antagonistic Dark Force is finally revealed, William is presented with a series of adversaries and opponents. Very early on in *THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS* there's the Resource Services Manager at the hospital, then later there's the bully at school and after that the confrontation with the Headmaster in the staff room. And in each encounter William is, whether he is aware of it or not, learning to develop the skills he will need for the big battle to come.



The second half of *THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS* is set in the Old Coach Inn and here William meets a very powerful and singular antagonist: the very wicked Aloysius. In many ways Aloysius is William's 'Shadow', for they have more in common than one might at first think. And during William's time at the Old Coach Inn there is the new mystery as to how it is that Aloysius has control over those who live there, plus what is the secret of the house and why has Granny brought William to it?

Well, all these questions are answered in book one because, although the mystery of the attacking force continues on into book two, it's important in storytelling terms for the reader that some of the mysteries are at least partly resolved. William does uncover the

secret of the house and in doing so, without revealing too much of the plot, this discovery ultimately leads to end of Aloysius's reign.

But there's something else too. During this period at the Old Coach Inn, William gains an insight into himself (what story gurus call a 'self revelation') and the nature of what it is to be a *Swidger*. And this knowledge it seems to William may offer him a way out of the situation he has found himself in – and this leads us into the action of the second book in the series, *THE TIME THEY SAVED TOMORROW*. However, in storytelling, there are no easy options of escape, and, as book two reveals, little in life is ever what it seems or as straight forward as it might at first appear...

“Any narrative, whether it’s fiction or not, you have to approach it as though it really happened to you. I think that’s the only way to get inside the characters and make the narrative work. It’s a storytelling tradition, and I think to come off as genuine then you have to really approach it that way.”

Jason Isbell



“Anticipation is the ability of the spectator to foresee a happening which is to take place in the future. In order to enable him to anticipate an event which is to take place at a future moment, he must know of something that is intended or planned to happen... However, if nothing is intended or planned by persons or objects in the story, nothing can be anticipated. Notice that we said ‘intended or planned by persons or objects in the story’. In no event should the spectator anticipate the intentions of the author of the story. Such false anticipation has done much to discredit anticipation as a valuable reaction. Stories which ‘telegraph their ending,’ to use the technical term for false anticipation, are indeed devoid of merit. But true anticipation, which is caused by the intentions of the actor in the story, is a great value to the construction of the motion picture.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

Anticipation

Anticipation is one of the key dramatic devices in the toolbox of the writer. Knowing what is coming but not when can be edge of seat stuff. But too much waiting or anticipation has its drawbacks.

Remember the old joke: ‘A man is a woken in the middle of the night by the noise of someone coming home in the room above him. With disregard to the rest of the house, the man in the upper room throws one of his boots to the floor. Ten minutes go by. Then another ten minutes. Then another. Finally the man in the room below can bear it no longer and so knocks on the ceiling above him and shouts, “For God’s sake, throw the second boot down so I can go back to sleep.”’ Waiting for that other boot to drop is anticipation gone wrong and can be very frustrating indeed.

A word here about the custard pie in the hands of a clown. In the world of slapstick, the custard pie, ready and waiting in the palm of the clown, is pure comic anticipation. We know what, we knew who, but not when. ‘Shall I?’ says the clown. ‘Yes!’ screams the audience. ‘Shall I?’ repeats the clown. ‘Yes! Yes!’ screams the audience, now is a frenzy. But as every comedian is aware, comedy is in the timing. And for the anticipated custard pie in the face the length of the delay before the *splat!!!* must be just right. Or it won’t be funny.

Some more thoughts on anticipation...

“Anticipation is the greater part of pleasure.”

Angela Carter

“We anticipate a certain happening. The event occurs just as we anticipated. That is: fulfilled expectancy. We anticipate a certain happening. Another event takes its place instead. That is: surprise.... The anticipation which is left dangling in the air causes subconscious dissatisfaction on the part of the spectator.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING

(1944)



“The audience wants to be piqued, to be misled, to be disappointed at times, so that it can, finally, be fulfilled.”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

The Red Herring

In murder mysteries there is usually a suspect who lies. Yet often as not that suspect turns out not to be the killer, and the lie, though it is a lie, is not usually directly related to the murder. It is, however, very much connected to the structure of the mystery plot in that the false trail is what is known as a ‘red herring’.

The term ‘red herring’ was popularized in 1807 by William Cobbett, an English radical known for campaigning for Parliamentary reform, who told a story of having used a strong-smelling smoked fish to divert and distract hounds from chasing a rabbit to make a comparison with the politics of the day. In fact, historically, herrings were used by horse trainers to get horses to follow a hunt rather than be distracted from it. However, Cobbett used the story so often in his pamphlets and speeches that the figurative meaning of a ‘red herring’ soon took hold.



Red herrings of course abound in the murder mysteries of Agatha Christie. There's the red kimono in MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS, the suicide note in THE MOVING FINGER, the hidden letters in THREE ACT TRAGEDY, the map in THE ABC MURDERS and pretty much every single clue is a red herring in THE HOLLOW. But a red herring needn't always be a false trail or a lying suspect in murder mystery. In fact, any misleading story information or unreliable evidence or mistaken identity that leads you up the proverbial garden path to the equally proverbial dead-end can be a red herring. Think here of Miss Havisham. All along we are led to think that she is Pip's benefactor. But not so – it is Magwitch!

Sirius Black is the most famous red herring in the *Harry Potter* series. Harry believes Sirius to be a killer, but that turns out to be a false presumption. Another famous red herring is Norman's mother in PSYCHO. Yes, we hear the mother shout at Norman and see her in silhouette but the truth is that the voice of the mother belonged to Norman and it was Norman who dressed up as his mother to kill the woman in the shower. And discovering all this is one the great twists in cinema history – and at least in part that's down to the dramatic device of the 'red herring'.

Some more thoughts on the 'red herring'...

"Life is full of a thousand red herrings, and it takes the history of a civilisation to work out which are the red herrings and which aren't." Peter Greenaway

"Approach your lives as if they were novels, with their own heroes, villains, red herrings, and triumphs."
Mary Higgins Clark

"The most difficult part of any crime novel is the plotting. It all begins simply enough, but soon you're dealing with a multitude of linked characters, strands, themes and red herrings - and you need to try to control these unruly elements and weave them into a pattern."
Ian Rankin



Some more thoughts on story information and its placement...

"Make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em wait."
Usually ascribed now to the novelist Charles Reade. This maxim is also, however, still attributed to Wilkie Collins, who used it as the guiding principle of his novels

"The 'victim story'... can never work because the victim cannot know and, out of that knowledge, act."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“Novels are narratives, and narrative, whatever its medium – words, film, strip-cartoon – holds the interest of an audience by raising questions in their minds, and delaying the answers.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

“Curiosity is the most fleeting of pleasures; the moment is satisfied, it ceases to exist and it always proves very, very expensive.”

Angela Carter

“Curiosity... results from our lack of knowledge of what the actor wants, while suspense results from my lack of knowledge as to whether the actor’s intention will be fulfilled or frustrated. The resulting reaction from our side is similar but the causes for it are different.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

By Steve Nallon



THE SWIDGERS