

Some questions and 'answers' relating to voice, summer 2011:

Do writers speak in their own voices? After all we talk in creative writing circles, as tutors, about students who are developing their own voice or who have found their voice.

Answer: Sometimes there is a very close correspondence between an author's speaking voice and their writing one. But this needn't be the case. It's sometimes quite surprising to hear an author speak on the radio or at a festival because they sound nothing like the voice in their fiction.

Question: If a writer develops a voice, why are they doing so?

Answer: Partly because writing is a formal exercise. You can't just write a novel in the way you would tell the story down the pub. You have to bring greater formal organisation to your written work and to conform to certain conventions. Down the pub, you as narrator, might well use a lot of unstressed forms—he'll, she'd etc—hand gestures, laughter, slang, asides, swear words and so on. The pub story is performance and depends on close interaction with others. The story, repeated, will never be the same experience twice. Nor, incidentally, would a writer's witness statement, say, that was given after the writer witnessed a robbery, be done in the same voice as her/his pub story or her/his creative writing.

So, people can adopt different voices for different activities and occasions.

Question: What is a writer hoping to achieve with their writing voice?

Answer: The ability to work within the formal constraints set by the conventions by which fiction is written in a way that is individual, expressive and dynamic—to name but a few ways. Obviously, the word individual is very important here. Publishers and readers are looking for individual writers. They don't want to read bland stuff. Stuff that could have been written by just anyone. But often, being individual is very hard to do when you are unsure what the rules of creative writing are and are focusing on getting those right. Underconfidence and uncertainty show in a writing voice. And this is true of established writers just as it is of novices. Critics sometimes come across a work by an author—or part of a book, say—where the usually strong voice falters or seems unsure of what it is trying to do, or is unduly careful and flat, perhaps because the writer simply hasn't mastered the particular techniques s/he is experimenting with.

Question: How do you find your voice?

Answer: Write: write a lot. Write honestly, and in a way that 'feels' comfortable. Then put aside what you've written before coming back to it and reading it, preferably out loud. Try to notice technical shortcomings or things that bug you—is the voice repetitive, for example? Try to correct things you spot and work at the piece till you feel it works. By going through this process you will be adapting your writing voice, developing it. But I think it's important to always work with your own voice, not invent a voice because you believe it is what a reader wants to hear. You can make concessions to what readers need from a voice, yes, but be sure to adapt your voice and hold onto a sense of who you are as a writer in doing so.

I'll conclude this section on your voice by saying that my mentor, John Bayley, the husband of the novelist Iris Murdoch and Wharton Professor of English here at Oxford, once advised

me to try and imitate a writer I admired. He went on to say that I wouldn't end up writing like her/him but as myself. I would, however, learn a lot about the techniques the writer used.

Question: Is writing in your voice all there is to the subject of voice?

Answer: No, writers do a number of different things with their writing voice and also adopt the voices of characters and narrators.

Doing different things with their writing voice: Writers who establish themselves and develop a long career tend to have distinctive voices that evolve rather than change. By which I mean, they retain what is distinctive about the voice rather than reinventing themselves in ways that are unrecognisable from book to book. (Think, for example, of someone like Raymond Carver, whose voice develops significantly over the course of his career. The later story collections might be more discursive, prolix, even, but one continually has a sense of being spoken to by the same writer. Of course, this sense is not simply the result of language or style but of the kinds of characters and settings and so on that Carver chooses, but these things are inevitably components that contribute to the sense of what we call voice in creative writing. We might call voice personality, when attempting to define it in its broadest sense.) Of course, there is reinvention and development but this is, I would say, incremental rather than progressing in leaps and bounds (there are inevitably exceptions to every rule).

The process described above does not mean, however, that writers don't do different things with their voice, even when they write consistently in the third person. A writer is likely to want to vary the distance they put between reader and character, for example. This variation can be seen within scenes, chapters or books. The degree of the narrator's omniscience—the extent the narrator can see into the lives and minds of the characters—will affect this distance. Writers might choose to write in different tenses—the conventional past, or the 'historic' present—which will affect the quality of the narrative (the latter often making events seem especially immediate). Writers will choose different effects—dream sequences, action sequences, realism, surrealism, irony and so on (setting a story in a different time period from usual might also be considered here)—and these will also affect the tone and quality of the voice.

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