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The Writer

* Writing A First Novel

Beginning a series by
this year's first novelists —

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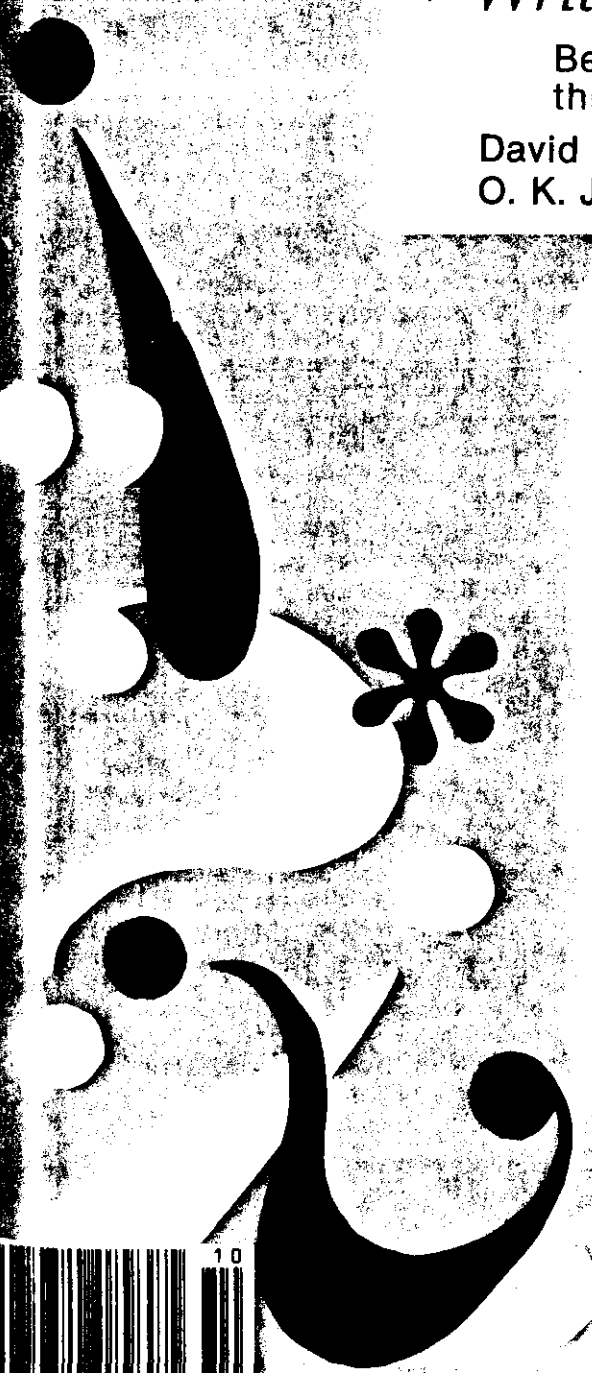

* ***Constructing science fiction novels***
— Roger Zelazny

* ***An inspiring testament to perseverance***
— Carol Amen

* ***Why first-person viewpoint?***
— Donald Hamilton

* ***Winners and losers: What makes the difference***
— Bebe Willoughby Slappey

* ***Which writing class — and why***
— Jasmina Wellinghoff

* ***On being a good boss***
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100 Best Fiction Markets

First Person Singular

by DONALD HAMILTON

"Write your novel in the first person, and you won't be tempted to let the viewpoint wander."

LET us now consider the case of Ethelbert Hackworthy, one of the country's foremost producers of unpublished novels. With unquenchable optimism, Ethelbert is commencing a new book. In the opening scene, carefully planned to seize the reader's attention in a grip of iron, he brings his proud but impecunious young hero, John Pennywhistle, into the music room of rich old Senator Silverbuck's mansion, where pretty Mary Silverbuck is seated at the piano.

Ethelbert is going strong now; he's right in the groove. He has John look at Mary and think she's quite a dish. He describes Mary, tenderly, down to the last ruffle on her fashionable gown and the last freckle on her piquantly upturned nose. So far, so good. But now Bert realizes that something is missing. Great Heavens, he hasn't described John yet! Well, that's easy to fix; and he has Mary look up from her music. She sees John in the doorway, and thinks him a fine tall figure of a man, which leads naturally to a detailed description of John. . . .

Do you like this? Do you feel free to jump from character to character and from viewpoint to viewpoint whenever the fancy takes you? Well, I suppose that's your privilege. Certainly you have lots of company. Many very good, or at least very successful, writers operate in just this way; and after all, it's the way most movie and television scripts are constructed, isn't it, with the cameras cutting freely from one character to another? So what, if anything, is wrong with it?

As far as I'm concerned, everything is wrong with it. The typewriter — or word processor, if you're modernized to that extent — is not a camera, capable of recording only the surface of things, and people. Why throw away your ability to penetrate character and personality by using it as a mere photographic instrument? As a matter of fact, I hate this floating-viewpoint technique; in treating the reader to brief glimpses of all the people in a novel, it really presents a good look at none of them.

As a writer, I disapprove of it, which is O.K., since nobody's forcing me to use it. But more important, as an omnivorous reader, I detest it, because it cheats me out of a great deal of literary entertainment. Why? Just as I'm getting interested in a certain character, male or female, the fickle author switches his attention — and tries to switch mine — to a different character, female or male. As far as I'm concerned, this kind of jumpy writing (we

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DONALD HAMILTON is the author of thirty novels — twenty featuring the tough, but popular, detective Matt Helm. These include *The Revengers*, *The Betrayers*, *The Annihilators*, and his most recent, *The Infiltrators* (all Fawcett). His magazine fiction and articles have been widely published, and he conducts a monthly column for a boating magazine. Seven of his novels have been made into motion pictures.

"If your hero or heroine is 'I' instead of 'he' or 'she,' you'll never find yourself slipping into another viewpoint. . . ."

might call it kangaroo writing, considering the way the viewpoint leaps around) is strictly expendable.

The corny scene with which I opened this article is one I actually wrote years ago to illustrate a literary piece I never managed to sell. At that time, I was naive enough to think that everybody shared my prejudice against writers who flitted from viewpoint to viewpoint. I took for granted that every sensible reader much preferred writers who stuck to one character through thick and thin. But the years have brought resignation, if not humility. I'm now hardened to the fact that a lot of readers and editors actually *like* the wandering viewpoint, and that a lot of fairly skillful writers employ it profitably. I will even admit that a truly good writer can get away with it, even with a cantankerous reader like me. But then, a truly good writer can get away with anything.

Even if you think it's perfectly fine to switch protagonists as the fancy moves you, you should be aware of the fact that there is another school of writing that's been around for quite a while. I seem to recall that Fielding stuck pretty tightly to Tom Jones; and Daniel Defoe concentrated on Mr. Crusoe, and didn't bother us much with Mr. Friday's intimate hopes and aspirations. So let's consider the alternative to the omniscient spy-in-the-sky kind of viewpoint treatment that's so popular today.

Some years ago I was very flattered when, reviewing several mysteries for a rather highbrow publication, Jacques Barzun referred to one of my early suspense novels as a first-person story. It wasn't, but the fact that he'd come away from the book thinking that it was showed that I'd achieved my goal. I'd put the reader into the mind of my character — *one* character — so firmly that the reviewer had laid the book down at the end with the impression that it had been narrated by that character, not by me. Which was exactly the effect I'd been striving for. Now I understand that many writers consider other techniques of viewpoint perfectly proper. I understand; but I don't necessarily agree.

BUT enough of my literary preferences. Let's just consider the problems of a single-viewpoint novel, as opposed to one written from multiple viewpoints. The basic problem is discipline. As you write about your single character, treating the rest of the cast as peripheral to him, or her, you'll be subjected to continual temptations. The plotting can be tough, if everything has to be filtered through the consciousness of one individual.

You'll hear seductive little voices whispering that the creative life would be much less laborious if, instead of sticking grimly to the thoughts and experiences of "he," for example, you just slipped next door for a minute and let the reader know what "she" or "they" were thinking and doing. Resist! Stay with it, work it out from the hero's viewpoint, if that's what you started with, and figure out how to tell him, and the reader, what the heroine or the villains were up to, while he was struggling desperately to free himself from the cruel bonds securing him to the rusty ringbolts in the wall of the secret cavern soon to be flooded by the rising tide. You know nothing that the hero doesn't know, you see nothing he doesn't see, you feel nothing he doesn't feel.

The reward for such authorial self-discipline can be great: a kind of hypnotic intensity that leads the reader to identify himself completely with your character; an identification that can never be achieved if you spend two pages on this gent in Moscow followed by a couple of paragraphs about this lady in Washington followed by a whole

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chapter about this married couple — viewpoint shifting constantly between him and her, of course — in London.

There is a simple substitute for this difficult discipline: Just write your novel in the first person, and you won't be tempted to let the viewpoint wander. If your hero or heroine is "I" instead of "he" or "she," you'll never find yourself slipping into any other viewpoint accidentally, just because it makes the plot work out more easily. You're locked into one character for good or ill.

Many years ago when I asked an editor about the salability problem, I got the following answer: "I'd say there is no prejudice against first-person stories, but in general, first-person viewpoint is difficult to use successfully." The notion that first-person writing is tough in some mysterious way is held by many writers and editors, and that puzzles me tremendously. To me, it seems a very simple technique. It's self-policing. With only one viewpoint available to you, how can you goof? Of course, I've used it for well over twenty novels, so I should have mastered it by now; but I can't recall having any trouble with it even at the first.

THERE are just two hurdles to be surmounted when using first-person narrative. The first is the plotting, which, as I've already said, can be demanding whenever you stick to a single protagonist — whether you write in the first person or the third. Since your lone hero or heroine can't be everywhere, many things have to happen off stage, so to speak, and you have to avoid getting your book cluttered up with too many messages or messengers of doom, as your protagonist learns of dramatic disasters occurring elsewhere. But I've never found this a great handicap, and I don't see why you should.

More difficult to overcome for some writers is a second obstacle: If the story is to be narrated by the chief character in the novel, he or she has to be a fairly compelling character. An interesting author can write an interesting third-person novel about a dull character, enlivening the text with his own comments and observations; but a boring character is almost bound to tell a boring first-person story about himself. So consider your protagonist very carefully before you commit yourself to writing a whole book as told by or through him or her: Is he, or she, good enough, strong enough, entertaining enough, intriguing enough, exciting enough, to carry it off?

Please understand, I'm quite aware that the multiple-viewpoint technique has a place in the literary scheme of things: Tolstoy would have played hell trying to write *War and Peace* through the eyes of a single character. For a truly big book, a panorama novel, it's obviously the way to go. But my feeling is that a lot of lazy writers use it, not because their books are so tremendous in scope, but simply because they can't be bothered to work out how to tell the story from a single point of view. For these writers, and for the beginner learning how to master the tools of the trade, planning and writing a whole novel about *one* character should be a valuable exercise, teaching the student many new things about the profession of writing.

I have a hunch that a novel so written might well turn out to be the best thing that author ever wrote. Of course I'm prejudiced. □

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