



# The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

## So What I Told You Was True... From A Certain Point of View

By Bret Funk

With so many facets of writing, it's hard to pick a starting point for any kind of comprehensive study. Begin with the dry technical aspects (grammar, punctuation, etc.) and move to more subjective stylistic elements? Focus on common criticisms of today's writing, then examine what makes classics so permanent? Cite counterexamples for fun (such as J. K. Rowling's excessive use of dialogue attribution) then explain why such works should be the exception and not the rule? What's considered the most important aspect of good writing isn't constant; it depends on the reader's point of view.

Point of View. Essential to good writing, not as hotly debated as many subjects, and made doubly important by the fact that it affects both how a writer writes and what a reader interprets, I doubt a better topic exists for me to test the waters of the literary ocean I've determined to swim.

The majority of readers don't recognize grammar (or spelling) mistakes when they see them. Editors

or other writers can forgive the occasional technical misstep, and the human mind—even minds specifically trained to identify such flaws—is adept at glossing over such mistakes, especially when reading a book for pleasure. Weak constructions are ignored by readers because the text has the same flow as spoken conversation; and if they finish a weakly written book without loving it, most couldn't tell you why. Stylistic shortcuts (adverb overuse, clichés, anachronisms) bother critics more than

readers, and as with weak constructions, readers can rarely identify those elements as specific items that detracted from the work.

Point of view, however, represents a vital clause in the contract made between writer and reader. It establishes the guidelines for storytelling, provides the scaffold upon which the writer relays information about his characters and world, determines the level of suspense inherent in the work, and allows readers to become emotionally invested in characters. While true that there is no one, proper point of view for a telling story, it is equally true that a violation of the chosen PoV will drastically weaken a work. It's a breach of contract that most readers cannot forgive, even if they don't understand what happened.

There are three main classes of PoV: first person, second person, and third person. Unless you plan on writing *Choose Your Own Adventure Books*, ignore the second person. It is disharmonious to the eyes, ironically impossible to invest yourself in a fictional character that you are told is you, and people don't like to be told what they're doing and saying all the time anyway. (Besides, *If you scowl and tell your frightened friend you have more important things to do, turn to page 78*, was never an option.)

Of the remaining two PoVs, third person is estimated to account for more than 90% of all modern fiction. I have no hard data to confirm that number, but my experiences with SF books certainly support the statement, and even in genres where first person has a stronger foothold (such as Mystery), the preponderance of works appear to be written in third person.

To further complicate matters, PoV can be objective and subjective, purely omniscient, limited omniscient, or fixed omniscient. Objective PoVs, most often used in screenplays or very dry biographical sketches, show only the actions of the characters. The narrator is confined to a fly-on-the-wall perspective, witnessing events and reporting them. Readers are given no insights

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# University of Sci-Fi: Main Campus

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

The essential component in my education at University of Sci-Fi is Scott Maehner—Mentor/instructor/GameMaster and friend. With only faded and outdated or hastily posted notifications on community bulletin boards and no real campus roadmap to steer by, it is unlikely I'd ever explore much on my own. Safety-sense warns me to stay in the Student Center with its 24/7 cinema, computer lab and bookstore/lending library, rubbing elbows with costumed and other normal students, sharing broad topics and learning a few names of fellow fandom. Instead, Scott insists there are landscapes, just as safe, I need to see for myself and leads, often dragging me in my own best interest, to lesser buildings with sagging porches or gothic spires hinting of secrets few realized existed. With Scott, I am a dabbler in everything the curriculum offers—safe, inspired and semi-satiated.

About to enroll in a new class, I check my mail to discover an alteration of my education. I had to leave the main campus; I was moving. Independent study at rural satellite locations would throw me back to standby activities: cinema, cyber and codex. No more would Scott and I tumble through obscure halls and in classrooms sporting provocative student projects, semi-secret societies, and backstage planning sessions. I might never hear questionable strains of parodied music mixing with the slightly stale odor of Cheesy-Poufs wafting deliciously overhead. Somehow, before I move off-campus, I need to discover why I attend USF at all. My time is now spent in frantic activity, gathering information and memory. In the process, I discover the secret door to the roof of the Student Center.

It is twilight. A warm breeze of Indian summer lifts my hair as I stand on my illegal overlook. The campus spreads before me and I pause in silent worship. Some buildings are modestly lit; some are completely dark, presumably empty. The Student Center blares like Vegas.

Streetlamps wink on and spread comforting circles of connect-the-dots over expansive boulevards and macadam mazes. Foot-worn labyrinths, brooding in growing shadows, lead to jumbled buildings and landmarks. From this perspective, I spy each building's guts, thrown haphazardly on pitched or asphalted rooftops. It's not as pretty as the horizon, but faculty and students like their comforts. This thought reminds me what I will miss about USF. I can learn on my own; I will miss the beating hearts. Some are pretty, some are plain—all are precious.

From this height, the panorama is endless and seductive. I memorize my surroundings to comfort me later in my solitude. Buildings I've never visited seem beyond the boundaries, like they are off-campus, not on. In the far distance, another Student Center glows like a lighthouse, inviting and safe. Brooding gothic spires are backlit by the rising moon. I shiver with the majesty of meaning, bow my head and weep. I am rich. But in a desert landscape, my wealth, my knowledge is meaningless.

Darkness falls and I wonder, why the interest in science fiction? After all the classes, seminars, and *conventions* I have attended, I have still not discovered this mystery. My Mentor has been strangely silent about this question.

Suddenly, synapses rearranged information. USF *has* no real boundaries. Silly me! I wanted finely delineated purposes with each activity that interwove for a reason only to be apparent when I was seasoned, one of the special people—*when I became magical*. Discovering this error made me pause. Science and fiction was fact and fantasy—slightly twisted dreamscapes crossing cultures and bumping boundaries. Faculty and fandom were now friends. I wasn't magical, but I thought I saw tiny bursts of pixy dust catching the evening light, floating, just out of sight. USF is a university without walls and all I must do is show up for class. And in this universe, a class started somewhere every moment. I am now armed with this fragile hope.

Over a year later, I find myself ill motivated to research without structure and a spirit guide, though the loss, the grief of leaving is tolerable. I speak with my Mentor weekly for at least an hour to catch up on campus activities and for long distance learning. Other students take part—not me. I'm happy for them, my fellow roll-players and cohorts. I live vicariously through Scott's report. I learn how gaming went that week, who took a critical hit or gained sanity points, what double-entendres I missed by my absence. I hang up and sigh. Life on campus ruined me. Or did it? I still hold carefully filed notebooks bulging with trivia and priceless caveats. I know the difference between miniature and gashapon, hentai and kissame—dubious information, but to me, priceless. No matter the location, size of class or if I am the only student, I must continue to explore. I finally unpack my school supplies and start making a list of classes I yet lack. To do that, I need to inventory what I already know... next month.

## Characters: The Best and the Rest

Recently, I've been having an online conversation with a group of writers about character in fiction, about what makes a "good" character and a "bad" one? And I don't mean in the sense of the hero or the villain. The question is, why do some characters work and others fail? I thought I might spend a column or two on such issues.

One thing we noticed when our group of writers began listing their *favorite* characters is that *most* were male. One commentator suggested that sexism played a role in that, but even women writers in our group had more male characters on their lists than female characters.

Does this mean that male characters are good ones and female characters bad? No. Most of the writers I've been communicating with are around my age, and most of us read adventure fiction in our formative years in the 1960s, 70's and 80's. I read primarily Science Fiction, fantasy, and westerns, largely written by men, but the fact is that *most* adventure fiction in those days was written by male authors. At that time, even female authors in my favorite genres tended to feature male heroes, as with Andre Norton or C. L. Moore with her Northwest Smith tales (although Moore also created a very fine female hero with Jirel of Joiry).

So, if male characters aren't necessarily better than female characters, can the preponderance of male favorites on our writers' lists tell us anything about good and bad characters? I believe it can. I believe we can extract Rule #1 of good characterization from our lists. That is, *good characters act*.

For whatever reason, and much of it was simply a reflection of the times in which our group's reading habits formed, male characters were seen as taking charge, as *doing* things, while females either had to be rescued or simply stayed at home.

Of course, there are many more powerful female characters in today's fiction, but the key point is that they *still* act. They never stay home, and if they need rescuing they rescue themselves. Good characters can never be passive.

From discussions with my colleagues, it seems to me that another rule of characterization, Rule #2, is that *good characters are multi-dimensional*. This means that heroes can't be perfect. Sherlock Holmes is brilliant, a virtuoso in almost everything he does, but he is also

arrogant and impatient, and a cocaine addict. Conan is brave and physically tough, but in his younger days he was a thief and—in the parlance of today—has "anger management" issues.

Even villains today can't be all evil. Hannibal Lecter is a serial killer and cannibal, but we find out in *Hannibal Rising* that he loved his younger sister and that as a kid he often protected weaker children from bullies. Thus, despite his murders the reader begins to develop sympathy for him. Heroes and villains need to have both positive and negative traits, especially to attract today's readers.

One point, however! Certain flaws will overwhelm any positive qualities that a character might possess. No one has yet featured a blatant child molester as a hero, and I hope they never will. Even Hannibal Lecter could not have been written as a child molester and still gain readers', or viewers', sympathy. A combination of positives and *reasonable* flaws make a character more human, more like us. That makes them someone we can root for.

Speaking of "someone like us," I believe that Rule #3 is that *good characters have the same kinds of wants and needs that the rest of us share*. Good (as in effective) characters love their children and want the best for them. Good characters want to be brave but sometimes are afraid. Good characters feel strong emotions, whether it be love or hate, sadness or joy. When they work best, even the coldest characters are emotional at the heart, although that emotion may only be the consuming need for vengeance.

I once read that good Science Fiction should take one trend of today's world and project it into the future to see where the trend was going. In a similar way, good characters intensify one element out of the many that we humans hold in common. But without *some* connection to humanity the character fails.

Consider the Star Trek Universe and the supposedly alien character of Spock, or the android character Data. Spock may have pointed ears, but his loyalty to his friends and his willingness to sacrifice himself for their welfare makes him the kind of "human" that we can all admire. Data wants to become *more* human, but that wish is ironic because the viewers can see just how human he, in fact, already is. We come to know and love such characters through the very humanity that they show. Their differences may attract us to them in the first place, but it's their *similarities* to us that keep us coming back for more.

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In many science fiction stories, there are electromechanical devices, robots and computers who are at least as smart as human beings and sometimes smarter. But, what is the reality? Is it possible to build a machine that “thinks” as well or better than a human being? Or is this simply an impossible dream and will never happen? If artificial intelligence (abbreviated AI) is possible, how close are the computers of today towards that goal?

Like most questions of this sort, it depends upon the definition of artificial intelligence. There is no consensus even within the AI scientific community. Elaine Rich in her book, *Artificial Intelligence*, defines it this way: “Artificial intelligence is the study of how to make computers do things at which, at the moment, people are better.” One good example of something that fits this definition is chess playing. Once it was thought that people who played darn good chess were such geniuses that no machine could ever beat them. Perhaps they are. But in 1997 the supercomputer Deep Blue beat the world chess champion, Gary Kasparov. Nonetheless, chess aside, Gary Kasparov can do many things that Deep Blue cannot. A chess program go only do one thing well, and that is play chess. It is like an idiot savant.

A better definition of what we would expect from an AI is as follows: “Artificial intelligence is the part of computer science concerned with designing intelligent computer systems, that is, systems that exhibit the characteristics we associate with intelligence in human behavior.” This quote is from Avron Barr and Edward A. Feigenbaum’s book, *The Handbook of Artificial Intelligence*. But what are these characteristics? In the book, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, by Douglas R. Hofstadter, Hofstadter gives the following “essential abilities for intelligence” (by the way, I highly recommend this book, which is entertaining as well as informative):

“To respond to situations very flexibly.”

“To make sense out of ambiguous or contradictory messages.”

“To recognize the relative importance of different elements of a situation.”

“To find similarities between situations despite differences which may separate them.”

“To draw distinctions between situations despite similarities which may link them.”

The problem is that the abilities, such as those listed above, that are easy for human beings, are very difficult to program into a computer. Nonetheless, progress has been made. Some areas of research where machine intelligence has come a long way are:

## **Expert Systems:**

Software designed to act as an expert in a particular area of expertise, for example, an income tax consultant. I happen to use one of these every year to do my taxes and believe me, it’s a lot better than trying to make sense of the U.S. Tax Code yourself.

## **Natural Language Processing:**

Software that understands and/or generates a natural language such as English. Translation software also fits into this category. I have more to say on this subject below.

## **Speech Recognition:**

Hardware and software that understands human speech. I’ve noticed that lately that many automatic phone answering services use this technology to a small extent.

## **Computer Vision:**

Hardware and software that can interpret visual images.

## **Robotics:**

A robot is a machine that can perform manual tasks that previously were performed by a human being, such as vacuuming a rug or assembling automobiles or dancing. I have Rhomba vacuum which does a tolerable job, but sometimes gets stuck under low hung furniture.

## **Computer Assisted Instruction:**

Teaching machines. This was kind a fad for a while, but doesn’t seem to be used much anymore.

## **Automatic Programming:**

Software that can create other software.

## **Planning and Decision Support:**

Software that aids planning.

“An expert system is a class of computer programs developed by researchers in artificial intelligence. In essence, they are made up of a set of rules that analyze information (usually supplied by the user of the system) about a specific class of problems, as well as provide analysis of the problem(s), and, depending

# Reviews

## **Night Rising** **Chris Marie Green**

Ace, Feb 2007

\$14.00

ISBN: 0441014674

Review by Harriet Klausner

Dawn Madison returns to California when private detective company Limpet & Co calls her, informing her that her dad vanished four days ago while working the Robby Pennybaker case. Robby died twenty-three years ago, but he appears in a scene of the new movie Diaper Derby; even stranger, he has not changed in the two plus decades. Dawn hires on with the agency and works with techno geek Breisi who loves Frank, and psychic midget Kiko, who believes his new partner has a key role to play in the upcoming war with the vampires.

When the trio arrives at the home of Robbie's mother, Guards, the lowest form of being in the vampiric hierarchy, surround the place. They barely escape with their lives and Dawn reassesses her belief system as she now knows that vampires exist and somehow are tied to her father's disappearance. The vampires hide in the Underground from mortals, and will go to any length to prevent outsiders from finding it or knowing they exist. Dawn and her companions learn about the lair during the first battle between humans and their predatory enemy, an omen of the bloody war that will soon follow.

Readers will want to obtain the next two books in the series and not just because this is an exciting action-packed vampire thriller. Fans will want to know who the mysterious Joseph Limpet is, why he never leaves his abode, how he gets inside Dawn's mind and makes love to her though he seems to have no physical body. The audience will also wonder whether Dawn will find her father, and if yes, in what condition. This is a fantastic tale that sets up the next entries, but also provides booklovers with plenty of adventure and a touch of romance.

## **Star Wars: Allegiance**

**Timothy Zahn**

Del Rey, Feb 2007

\$25.95, Hardcover

ISBN: 0345477383

Review by Harriet Klausner

The five imperial storm troopers are tired of the endless war in which the innocent die, but no one on their side seems to care. Their leader Daric LaRone believes the enemy Rebel Alliance is no different, though they cloak their efforts as freedom fighters. When a superior officer orders Daric and his four followers to commit an atrocity, they kill their leader instead, forcing them to go AWOL where they meet rebel leaders Han Solo, Princess Leia Organa, Luke Skywalker and Chewbacca.

Meanwhile Emperor Palpatine decides he needs a new apprentice, as Darth Vader may need some competition to keep him sharp after a recent unacceptable failure. He chooses amoral teenage beauty Countess Mara Jade Claria to become his "Emperor's Hand", angering the Sith Lord, though Vader takes out his rage on others and not his mentor or new rival.

Allegiance takes place between the events of A New Hope (the original 1977 movie) and the Empire Strikes Back, and Timothy Zahn seamlessly fills the gap by humanizing the storm troopers. The story line is action-packed but character driven by Daric and his men, and the renowned heroic four; but especially fascinating is the triangle between Vader, Mara Jade and Palpatine. Star War fans will enjoy this well written interlude.

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## **Illuminations Update**

Judging is still underway in the 2006 Illuminations Speculative Fiction Contest. The winning entry will be announced in the March edition of the Illuminata, and the creators of works that receive a high enough score to earn a place in the next Beacons of Tomorrow Anthology will be contacted after the final scores have been entered and tallied.

## Reviews

Of all the strange “crimes” that human beings have legislated of nothing, “blasphemy” is the most amazing, with “obscenity” and “indecent exposure” fighting it out for the second and third place.

— Robert A. Heinlein

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### **Time’s Child**

**Rebecca Ore**

Eos, Feb 2007

\$14.95

ISBN: 0380792524

Review by Harriet Klausner

By 2308, plagues swept across the earth killing most people and leaving many of the survivors sterile. People from the future send a time machine to the Philadelphia National Archive to gather humans from the past and bring them to the present as a library of human learning.

Benedetta, who knew Da Vinci, was one of those scooped away just prior to the French soldiers killing her. Not content to remain a prisoner in a gilded cage, she escapes, abetted by Jonah, another incarcerated soul. They free the other time travelers and along with Ivar the Viking steal the time machine. Once they have more machines they plan to scoop people out from different eras and places, but there are some with their own agendas who plan to manipulate the original people from down-time.

The premise of this paradoxical tale will fascinate readers as people from different times and cultures must overcome their Tower of Babel differences in order to save mankind. The twists are terrific, reminiscent of a classic EC comic (no more or the plot will be given away). The characters (especially the heroine and her closest allies) seem real as their dissimilarities are greater than their similarities except for core values. Rebecca Ore provides an exhilarating science fiction brave new world thriller.

### **Unshapely Things**

**Mark Del Franco**

Ace, February

\$7.99, Mass Market, 320 pp.

ISBN 0441014771

Review by Harriet Klausner

In 1900, the convergence happened and two worlds became one. The people of Faerie popped into the mortal world (with some of the pieces of their former realm), and humans had to adjust to a new environ. The Ward Guild is the policing agent for the fey and at one time Conner Grey, a powerful druid, was one of their rising stars. After tangling with an eco-terrorist elf with a power ring he didn’t know how to use, Conner ended up in the hospital, his power severely diminished and a dark mass in his head that nobody can identify.

Conner now spends his days as an advisor to the Boston P.D. on matters pertaining to the Fae, and he is helping his police officer friend Murdock with a serial killer case in which faeries of a certain type are murdered, their hearts ripped out, and a stone put in its place. When the Ward Guild takes jurisdiction, Conner can’t let the case go and decides to investigate on his own. In spite of the danger, he know that if the ritual killings are completed, the world as humans know it ends.

Mark Del Franco has written an enjoyable and entertaining urban fantasy that will thoroughly entertain readers who like Laurel K. Hamilton, Mercedes Lackey and Kim Harrison. The fey are well constructed characters and readers will find them fascinating because of their different values and culture. There is a lot of action in this tale, but it is the hero who holds the storyline together as a bridge between the human and fey community. The audience will look forward to other works starring this protagonist who like a former great athlete past his prime is trying to overcome the loss of much of his powers.

## AI (con't)

upon their design, recommend a course of user action in order to implement corrections."

I got this definition from Wikipedia in an article that gives a good introductory explanation of this branch of artificial intelligence. For a deeper understanding what is meant by an expert system, you may want to read the article. I'll try to summarize as briefly as I can.

The idea behind expert systems is to provide help usually provided by an expert in a particular field, such as software troubleshooting or diagnosing an illness in a medical patient. Three features of expert systems are rules of thumb, fuzzy logic and a database of solutions. When an expert in a field, such a physician, goes about solving a problem, such a determining what ails a patient, he or she usually has several rules-of-thumb that he or she uses. Depending upon the answers to key questions about the problem, the expert knows what the solution is by applying a rule of thumb. For example, suppose a patient complains about frequent severe headaches. After asking questions about the headaches and other accompanying symptoms and perhaps performing some tests, the doctor may determine that the person is suffering from migraines and prescribe pills. In expert systems, these rules of thumb are coded into the software.

Fuzzy logic is logic based on approximations rather than formal logic. It takes into account such vague statements as "almost," "nearly," and so forth, and manipulates them to come up with an approximate answer. For example, if a patient asks how much pain he or she is in and replies "not so much," this is considered less pain than "it hurts terribly." Certain conclusion may be drawn by which answer is given.

Expert systems also usually have large databases which can be readily accessed using the rules of thumb and fuzzy logic.

Anyone who has gone to a software web site and used their self troubleshooting system has used an expert system. Computer and video games also use expert systems.

In my novel, *The Isaac Project* (available at Delinger's Ltd, <http://www.thebookden.com>), the core software of the artificial intelligence being developed is an expert system.

## Natural Language Processing

If you were going to design a humanoid robot, one of the most important abilities it must have is the ability to understand human speech, at least to the point where it could understand the commands you

give it. It would also be nice if it would talk back to you. To be able to communicate with your computer in a normal conversational way would also be a good thing. You may have also noticed that lately, when you call certain businesses, you don't necessarily have to press buttons to enter information to their automated answering systems. Some allow you to speak the required information. All these artificial intelligence tasks fall under the province of natural language processing. Other tasks that require natural language processing are translation from one human language to another, transforming text to speech, answering questions, and retrieving information.

Natural language processing is the study and software development associated with the automatic generation and understanding of natural human languages. Natural language generation software converts information from computer data bases into normal human language. Natural language understanding software converts human language into forms that a computer can understand and manipulate.

One of the earliest systems, called SHRDLU, used a restricted world of blocks. It used a small restricted vocabulary to manipulate blocks of different shapes and sizes on a computer monitor screen. Because it worked extremely well, researchers were excessively optimistic about developing natural language software. However, it turned out that in the real world, language processing was much more difficult than supposed.

Some of the problems are: Ambiguity. For example when it is not clear which word in a sentence an adjective or adverb is modifying. Some strings of words can be interpreted in many ways. In spoken words, sounds that represent successive letters blend into each other. Some written languages, such as Chinese and Thai, do not signal word boundaries. Most words have several meanings. The grammar for natural languages is ambiguous. Typing errors, speech irregularities and OCR errors. Some sentences don't literally mean what they say.

Many of these problems have been partially or wholly solved, but artificial intelligence experts still have a long way to go before you can have an intelligent conversation with your computer or friendly robot.

I note with interest the various web sites with talking heads called chatbots. I urge you to visit one of these sites to learn what a natural language artificial intelligence artifact can do. A popular one is called The ALICE Chatbot Foundation.

## PoV (con't)

into the thoughts, feelings, or intentions of the characters. They are left to determine such things for themselves based entirely on empirical data. To write an objective PoV, you can never use statements like “Dick felt hungry” or “Jane was annoyed by the way Dick kept staring at the hot dog instead of her expensive new negligee.” To convey such internal processes in an objective narrative, one would have to write:

*Jane put her hands on her hips, watching Dick drool over the footlong ballpark frank on a tray at the foot of the bed. His eyes remained fixed on the hot dog even when she drew a deep breath and ran her hands along the silky material of her negligee. “Did you remember to buy mustard?” he asked.*

With subjective PoVs, on the other hand, a writer can directly express these internal processes. Depending on the degree of the narrator’s omniscience, the thoughts and feelings of one or all characters become apparent. This allows readers to become invested in characters in a way impossible to do with objective narrative. As is often the case, however, more is not necessarily better. Omniscience and suspense are inversely proportional. Take, for example, the following:

*“He’s dead,” McCreedy said, eyeing the twisted corpse, “and I know one of you did it.” His probing gaze moved from one to the next. They fidgeted under his scrutiny, but it was too early to tell which squirmed from guilt and which from the knowledge that they shared the room with a killer. One by one they professed their innocence, handing out laughable alibis while wiping their sweaty brows or clambering around the credenza, fighting for the Scotch.*

Compare this to:

*“He’s dead,” McCreedy said, eyeing the twisted corpse, “and I know one of you did it.” His probing gaze moved from one to the next. Miss Scarlett dabbed at her brow, wondering if McCreedy thought her nervousness was out of guilt when she was really thinking about how she had seen Professor Plum skulking about with that lead pipe. Mrs. White, Mrs. Peacock, and Colonel Mustard hastened to the credenza; the women to fetch a stiff drink and sooth their nerves, and the Colonel ostensibly to do the same, though in truth he wanted to brush the candlestick with his sleeve to remove any last vestiges of fingerprint.*

The first passage has far more power than the latter, and moreover, finding the body generally happens at the beginning of the mystery, so in the case of the second passage, the reader would have to go through the entire book with the riddle already solved.

Increased omniscience, the ability to see inside more characters’ heads, also leads paradoxically to a reduced investment of the reader in the characters. Instead of heightening the reader’s awareness, multiple insights—especially when done concurrently—complicate the message at best, and drive readers insane at worst. A reader in subjective narratives is a consciousness traveling within the mind of one character, experiencing everything that character experiences: sights, sounds, tastes, emotions. The reader can be transported from one character to another, but not without cost, and too many transfers in too short a duration not only weakens the writing, but confuses the reader in regards to with whom and how they should empathize.

*Peter and Paul walked in to find Mary kissing Simon and Garfunkel. Peter wondered how Mary could do this to him, and his heart sank with utter dejection; just last night Mary had told him he was her one true love. Paul had similar thoughts, but directed at Simon, and a murderous rage filled him. Mary, guilt-ridden and shamed, wanted to tell Peter that she had been blackmailed into her betrayal, even though she had always harbored a secret love for Simon. Simon buried his head in Mary’s hair to hide a maniacal laugh. How he loved to tug the strings of his puppets. And Garfunkel... Garfunkel was just along for the ride.*

Who are we supposed to empathize with in the previous passage? I once read a book where a fight occurred on three levels of an inn, and each floor held at least two characters (of varying ages and gender) whose mind I had direct access to. To make matters worse, most of the characters were related, so I had a character referred to as “cousin” in once sentence, “brother” in the next, and a few paragraphs down that same character was telling the story. I couldn’t keep up, and I couldn’t recommend the work to anyone without at least three personalities of their own to help keep track. Limiting focus increases the reader’s ability to identify with the PoV character.

Third person limited omniscient dominates modern writing, while third person omniscient (total

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## PoV (con't)

omniscience) was more popular in bygone days. First person, by its very nature, is subjective and limited. Since we're dealing with SF, one could propose a story told in first person by a God, a psychic, or some other mind-reading being, where the thoughts, feelings, and motives of all characters were laid on the table. If such works do exist, they are rare enough that I have never seen one. One can also propose stories told from odd perspectives—one query I read claimed originality because it was the story of a sword, told from the sword's perspective from forging to breaking. Originality I will grant him, but I couldn't help wondering how the sword could see much when sheathed (making the sheathe a far better choice for focus character), or how the sword could comprehend human emotions and see inside the minds of characters. An objective PoV would have solved some of that problem, but not enough to make the work sellable.

Each PoV has its strengths and weaknesses, its proponents and opponents. Objective PoVs are rare, especially in fiction, because writers by and large want to paint a full picture, and that picture includes the internal struggle of at least one person. Conveying complex nuance and emotional upheaval through detailed description of action is not impossible, but it's not a walk in the park either. Unless one wants readers to view their characters antiseptically, like a scientist studying ants in an anthill, an objective PoV is probably not the best choice.

First person PoVs offer specific advantages to the writer, but they also suffer from limitations. With first person stories, it's easier for the author to remain rooted to the proper character. Since the narrator doubles as the PoV focus, keeping track of what is known and not known becomes a simple matter of "what has this character seen." The reader should have no direct access to the thoughts, emotions, and intentions of other characters. That doesn't mean the narrator can't speculate on those things: reading body language, interpreting ambiguous meanings, and guessing at motives. It does mean that whatever conclusions are drawn should be filtered through the narrator's preconceptions, prejudices, and experiences. The conclusions may or may not be right, and this fact can be used as a powerful tool by the accomplished writer. Whether or not this personal touch represents an asset or a liability to first person PoVs is a matter best left to the individual to decide.

Third person omniscient PoV remains popular, most especially among inexperienced writers. I can only speculate as to others' reasons for using it, but in my early writing, the use of full omniscience had to do with what I perceived as the best way to provide readers with a complete and non-misleading picture. I had a number of characters whose actions and motivations were clear to me, but in the telling of the story, the perception of the focus character and the other characters' true motivations did not match. Thus I'd waste words and weaken my prose by showing what the focus character saw, then explaining why it was or was not a correct interpretation.

*Ernie saw the knife in Bert's hand, the wild look in his eye, and he backed away, fearing for his life. Bert realized that Ernie had mistaken the zeal with which he had finally rid himself of those damnable argyle socks and sought to console his terrified friend.*

It took some time before I realized that the constant explanations weakened the prose, and that it would prove far more powerful to relay the secondary character's motives through description rather than insight.

*Ernie saw the knife in Bert's hand, the wild look in his eye, and he backed away, fearing for his life. Bert dropped the knife, his single eyebrow raised in mortification. Only then did Ernie see the tattered remnants of diamond-patterned material strewn about the room as if devoured by a beast.*

As an aside, I should note that my first attempt to address the PoV problem actually diluted my writing more. Instead of jumping inside each character's head, I used weak constructions to show that the main character believed something to be true, even though it was not necessarily true. *Ernie thought that Bert... Bert appeared to be... It seemed as if...* Weak constructions are the bane of good writing, and we will revisit the subject many times as I continue this series.

In my roles as editor and reader, I have yet to find a work that successfully utilized full omniscient PoV. My advice would be to avoid it.

But if leaping from head to head causes confusion, should writing remain fixed on one character throughout the entire work? Not necessarily. There are good reasons to show situations from the perspective of another character. Most notably, showing the main

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## PoV (con't)

character from another perspective can offer great insight into that character and to how he is perceived by those around him. Sometimes a writer wants to depict a scene from the villain's perspective, or from a secondary character watching the main characters in action. Tied to one character, such a thing is impossible, but in light of the weaknesses associated with total omniscience, what remains?

Limited omniscient third person, which accounts for the bulk of third person omniscient writing, allows readers inside one character's thought process at a time, with an emphasis on *at a time*. Using structural elements of the work (chapters, section breaks, etc.) the writer can shift focus characters without the confusion of mid-paragraph jumps. These clear cut delineations make the jumps easier for readers to assimilate, and they allow writers to paint a clearer, more complete picture of their world, one not biased by the foibles of a single character. This style of PoV is particularly popular and successfully applied in many epic fantasy works.

Limited omniscient PoVs are not without their challenges. Even with the breaks, increasing the number of characters that readers can identify with lessens the ability to empathize with any single character. Additionally, limited omniscient style requires far more attention to detail on the part of the writer. Great care must be taken to ensure that each focus character is allowed to express insights only into information that they know (or in the most stressed sense, could have been given off page). To relate the experiences of one character in another's mind, especially when those characters have been separated since before the event, requires a suspension of disbelief on the part of readers that most are not willing to give, and it constitutes a blatant violation of the PoV contract clause.

One final caveat when dealing with Point of View: the shorter a story is, the less time a reader has to become invested in characters. Thus it stands to reason that, to have as powerful an effect on readers, the number of focus characters must decrease as does the length of the work.

When properly implemented and rigorously checked for continuity, limited omniscient PoVs offer the perfect hybrid between fixed-focus and total omniscient points of view. It's overwhelming use and popularity among writers attests to its effectiveness.

At least, that's how I see it.

What is authentic about genuine science fiction, is that the science fiction writer should not stop with just saying: Well, the plot needs this to happen, therefore I'll just do it and I'll invent an excuse for it being able to be done. Proper science fiction ought to require people to begin to explore the consequences of what they've invented. And thus, I think that science fiction is, in a real sense, capable of being scientific. Not in the sense that it can foresee the future of science, but it can adopt a kind of variation of the scientific method itself, it does feel compelled to explore the consequences of hypotheses and the way things fit together.

— Brian Stableford

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## Writer's Block (con't)

For a final thought on character, if you want to write good ones then an excellent place to start is by reading biographies. I remember being disappointed in Ernest Hemingway when I found out that this "man's man" was not above cheating a little to win a fight, and that he could be as childish as a ten-year-old. I remember my disappointment when I found out that Martin Luther King, Jr. had a weakness for women other than his wife. And I was disappointed to learn that Bobby Fischer, the only American world chess champion, was something of an ass.

But disappointments aside, these three men's faults made them more interesting than any paragon of virtue could ever be. The faults showed them as human, because they are faults that are shared by the common people I see around me every day. What good fictional characters all three would make.

Biographers know what attracts readers to the characters they write about. Readers want to see personalities who are larger than life in some ways, and yet humanly flawed in others. Shouldn't *your* characters be the same?