Perfect the Word
LESLEY JONES: FICTION EDITOR

Going the distance with your readers by holding point of view

This is the first of an occasional series for new and not-so-new authors, based on actual advice I have given to actual human writers, who have then acted upon said advice. The majority of the content is lifted (almost) directly from my editorial letters (plus a few sneaky add-ins), with references to the particular books and authors redacted. Each article will concentrate on one subject (say, showing vs telling) but, as with anything writing-related, there will be other topics that overlap. The articles are an accurate example of the sort of editorial letter you will receive from me after the first pass of a developmental or deep line edit. Most of the novels I edit are crime/thriller and sci fi/fantasy, but I also edit historical novels, romance and other commercial fiction, so you may notice references to particular genres in the posts. However, the advice given is usually transferrable across genres.

The first topic is narrative **point of view** (POV) – from whose perspective are you writing this story? Authors and editors who know me will be aware that this is a subject I tend to harp on about, but this is because it is vital to get it right if you want your reader to stay with you for the entire journey and not get off at the next stop.

- I'll begin by summarising what we mean by point of view. The novel in the form we recognise today emerged from a background of historical and epistolary prose in the eighteenth century and has been developing ever since. In the nineteenth and for most of the twentieth century the trend was to write in an omniscient POV, with a definite narrator who had access to the thoughts (on a superficial level) of all the characters. Whilst this is still used for some fantasies (e.g. by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett) and in children's books, the trend now – especially for thrillers and crime novels – is to use close-third-person or first-person POV. What this means is that the reader can only experience what the POV character experiences (sees, hears, smells, tastes, feels, thinks, surmises etc.), and, in addition, can't know anything the POV character doesn't know. There isn't a separate, distinct narrator, and if the author takes it upon themselves to add some commentary, that is a breach of POV and is known as authorial intrusion (this will be covered in a later post).

- I'm not going to say much here about omniscient POV. Having once been regarded as standard, the writing of a true omniscient POV is today becoming a lost art, with authors who intend to write it, having been influenced by their reading of more modern third-person-close novels, ending up writing a third-person-close POV with head hops (see below). Someone asked me recently how to spot omniscient, and my best answer was to read a book by Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett (or both – my recommendation would be *Good Omens*), or Charles Dickens, and all will become clear.

- There is an even more difficult (to write) type of narration known as cinematic. This is where the author describes the events of the story but impartially and without entering into the minds of the characters at all. You might see this executed to perfection by Ernest Hemingway, but writing it is not for the faint-hearted.

- In this part of the twenty-first century, if you're not writing your novel in first person, it's likely you'll be writing from the perspective of your main character(s) in third-person POV: **third-person limited** (with one POV character throughout – not dissimilar in feel, apart from the pronouns, to first-person POV), or **third-person multiple**, which means that you have more than one POV character. This is fine as long as you don't have too many. In an average-length crime story, for example (say 80,000 words), six POV characters would be about the maximum. In a longer book probably ten is plenty, unless you want to confuse your reader.

- Where there is a change of POV character this should be signalled to the reader by a section break: a single-line break, sometimes with a centred asterisk, where the next section begins full out (no indent). Some authors are stricter and stick to one POV per chapter, such as George RR Martin in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of books.

- If the narrative jumps out of the POV character's mind into that of another character, it's known as a **head hop.** Other **breaches of POV** occur when the reader is told something the POV character cannot know, or in a 'little did he know' sentence, which telegraphs something the POV character cannot know in the 'now' of the book, or something happens in a location where the POV character is not, or when the author intrudes into the story with their own thoughts. These result in a confused read and a less than ideal appreciation of the story.

- It's vital to have a solid POV in commercial fiction these days, and where it's dropped it grates like chalk squeaking on a blackboard. All mainstream-published authors hold point of view, and they're the people you are no doubt inspired by, so it's important to get it right. If you have a look at some of them you'll see the author creates tension and conflict where necessary without jumping between characters' heads mid-scene. The last thing you need is a reader buying your book and then putting it down because they're getting whiplash from so many head hops.

- Two of the greatest exponents in the thriller genre today are Andy McNab and Clive Cussler. The first chapter of McNab's *War Torn* is told in the POV of Sergeant Dave Henley (although his full name and title are not mentioned). The chapter is full of action and different characters, but not once does the narrative drop out of Dave's POV – everything is told from his perspective. Another McNab story, *Fortress*: chapter 6 is told from the POV of SAS trooper Tom Buckingham. This is a relatively short chapter, again with a lot of action and several characters, but the POV is never dropped. One more example: chapter 29 of Clive Cussler's *Sea of Greed*. This is told in the POV of Gamay, who has to speak to several other characters as she moves around the launch. Again, no drop in POV. You get the idea; you've probably read many books in this genre and picked up on different pieces of action and characters' moods, without realising that all these are being shown from one POV at a time.

- One of the reasons writers have difficulty with POV is 'head-movie syndrome' (not to be confused with cinematic, above). The author tells the story as if they are watching a film playing in their own head. This is almost guaranteed to cause problems. The action in the author's head cannot be translated into words in the same way a film maker would shoot a movie, and the skill of the writer is to show what is happening through the POV character. You can't show multiple scenes as you can in a film, but you can go deeply into a character's thoughts, which a film can't. Constantly jump cutting in a thriller means constant breaks in the tension you have so carefully built up. Just as the reader becomes invested in one character, the narrative jumps to another and the tension is lost, almost giving the reader the impression that every time you jump, someone has pressed 'pause' on the previous scene.

  Novels don't work the same way as films. If you think of a 007 film, such as the intro to *Skyfall*, the director has all kinds of different media to build the tension: lots of different film angles, amazing scenery, brilliant music which in itself builds as the tension builds, a big scene the viewer can take in all at once. If you watch some TV thrillers, such as *CSI*, you can see that there are scene changes literally every second (or even less), achieved by different camera(s) angles and positions. The novelist doesn't have any of those tools, but writers sometimes subconsciously try to recreate them. The way to build tension in a novel is to stick close to one POV at a time.

- Head hopping can be the result of a desire to tell the reader every single tiny thing that's happening, rather than showing them in narrative and dialogue. You need to trust your reader to come to the right conclusions and infer the detail. For that reason many head hops are totally unnecessary and can be deleted. A minor scene in a thriller I edited recently involved someone calling their boss. As originally written there was a head hop to the receiver of the call, explaining how he had just had a shower and was eating breakfast, looking forward to the day ahead. This was my comment on the scene: 'Think of it this way: if you were watching this scene on TV, you'd see Fred walking into the breakfast room, eating, having coffee poured for

him, dialling a number and then speaking into the phone. You might hear Barney's muffled replies. But what if the filming suddenly stopped and showed a flashback to Barney in the shower and happily eating breakfast? And then suddenly back to Fred in the dining room? That would be very annoying to the viewer and would interrupt the natural flow of the narrative.'

- Try not to grant POV to minor characters who are only around for minutes or end up dead within a few lines; this confuses and sometimes irritates readers. It's great to give your reader the odd red herring, but too many and you almost literally lose the plot! I can see why some writers feel that's a good idea – partly variety, but probably mainly because that is often how a scene in a film would start. But, as you're probably bored of hearing me say now, a novel is not a film. Novels and films work in a different way. If you start in the head of a minor character, you trick the reader into thinking this person and what he's doing is going to be important, and readers for the most part don't like being tricked. These scenes can always be rejigged from the perspective of whichever of the main characters is the actual POV character in that scene, giving the minor character the (lack of) attention they deserve.

- It can help when writing to type in the name of the POV character at the start of each section to remind yourself to 'stay in character' – but don't forget to delete the reminders later!

- It will also help if, when you've decided who is your POV character, you place yourself firmly inside their head and write from that standpoint. Maybe even think of your character carrying

POV round in a bag on their back – it goes everywhere with them and nowhere without them, including other characters' backs. Having read my blog (mentioned below), you'll realise you're putting your whole world (which you have so carefully crafted) in danger if you come out of that character's head. You know what airport security always says about unattended luggage!

- Happy writing – pick up your POV rucksack and keep your reader with you for the whole trip!

Resources:
Beth Hill's blog: https://theeditorsblog.net/
The Power of Point of View, Alicia Rasley, Writers' Digest Books (2008)
My own blog: https://perfecttheword.co.uk/how-not-to-haunt-your-prose-with-head-hops/

War Torn, Andy McNab and Kim Jordan, Bantam Press, 2010
Fortress, Andy McNab, Bantam Press, 2014
Sea of Greed, Clive Cussler and Graham Brown, Michael Joseph, 2018
A Song of Ice and Fire, George RR Martin, HarperCollins, 2012
Skyfall, Sam Mendes, Sony/MGM, 2012
CSI, CBS, 2000–2015

Lesley Jones is a fiction editor specialising in (but not limited to) fantasy and sci fi, crime and thriller, whose mission it is to help independent authors on their publishing journey. She is an advanced professional member of SfEP, a member of ACES, and a partner member of ALLi.

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