



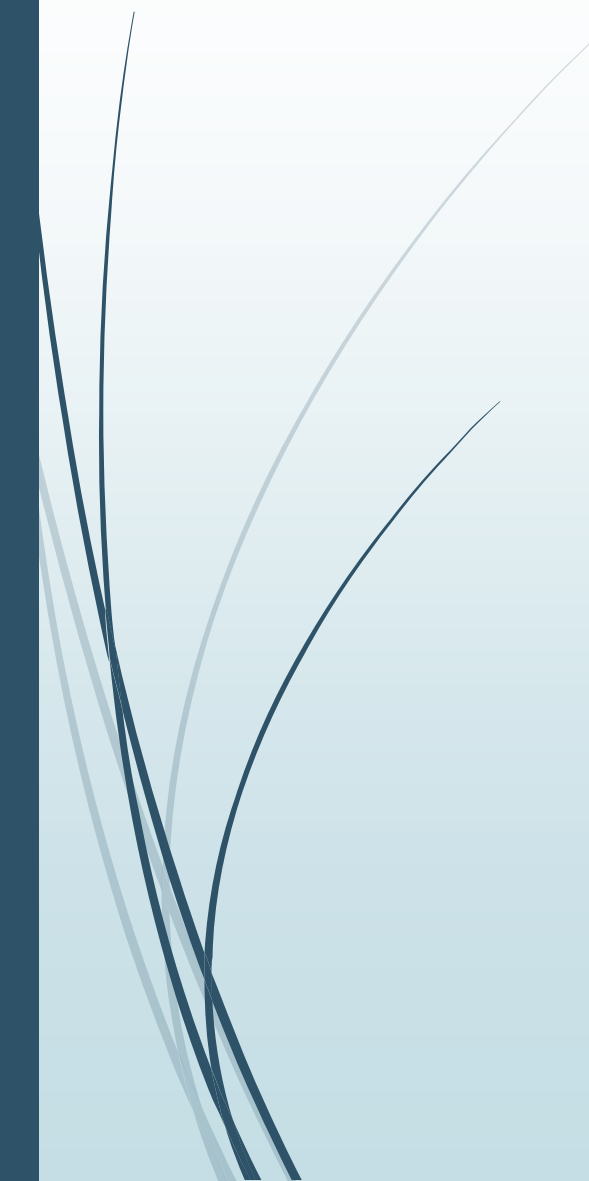
It's (Almost) All in the Voice

David Rodeback



Who is this guy?

- ▶ CMTO of a West Valley City manufacturing firm, where I write stuff: C#.Net code, SQL queries, marketing copy, video scripts, company policies, etc.
- ▶ In a former life taught writing, Russian language, and Russian literature at BYU, Cornell, and elsewhere
- ▶ Husband of one, parent of four, grandparent of two, uncle of 18
- ▶ Novel forthcoming in ~~2024~~ **2025**
- ▶ Short stories in several print anthologies and online.
- ▶ Two collections of short fiction in print . . .



2024 BRONZE QUILL
2024 IN
David Rodeback
Producer
International Workers' Day
Poor Asme! Am
and other stories at Christmas
DAVID RODEBACK

2024 SILVER QUILL
Awards
David Rodeback
Writer | Producer
General-Corporate Image
The Dad Who Stayed
and other stories
DAVID RODEBACK

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Disclaimer

We're focusing on fiction here, but some of the same thoughts apply to verse and nonfiction.



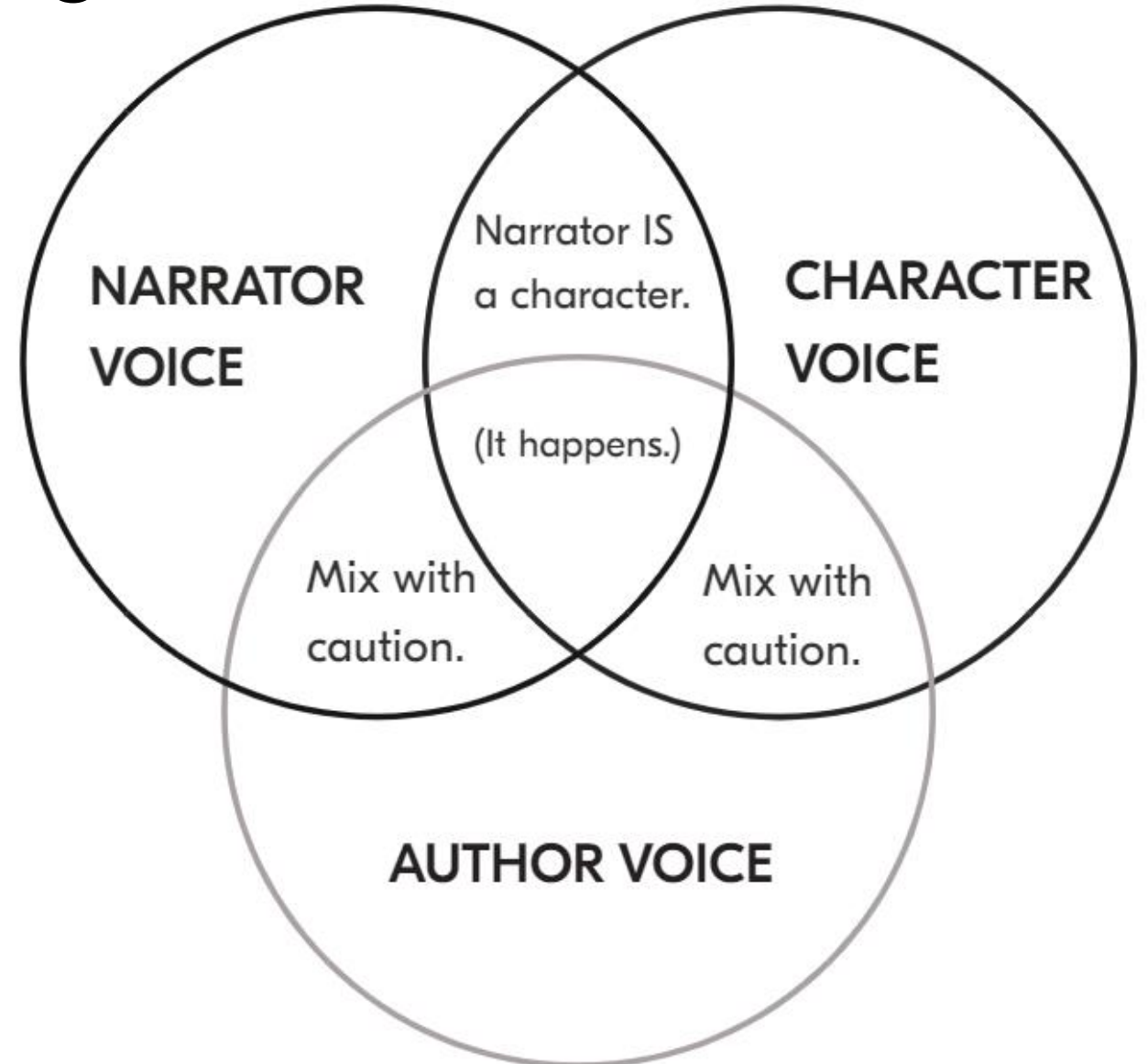
What do I mean by “it”?

(when I say **it**'s almost all in the voice)

- 
- ▶ I've heard editors and agents say **voice** is what stands out in the slush pile.
 - ▶ I've heard my readers say **voice** draws them into – and through – my stories.
 - ▶ I will read almost anything, even if I don't love the genre, if I enjoy the **voice**.

The overlapping voices

- ▶ **Authorial** voice
- ▶ **Narrative** voice
- ▶ **Character** voices





Authorial voice

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Authorial voice

- ▶ Vladimir Nabokov said the “good, admirable reader” identifies with the author, not the boy or girl in the book.
- ▶ The books I *enjoy* most tend to be the ones where I identify with characters. The books I *admire* most tend to be the ones where I somehow identify with the author.
- ▶ You can't judge what is narrative voice and what is authorial voice in a story until you've read more than one story by the same author, with different narrators.

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Authorial voice, cont.

- ▶ Authorial voice develops organically as you write and write and write – and revise and revise and revise.
- ▶ It's easier for others to see and analyze than for you.
- ▶ It's the voice that's left when you finally learn to write as yourself, without being imitative or derivative.
- ▶ *It's who you are* – therefore be yourself.
- ▶ Donald Maass: "Your voice is your self in the story."



Donald Maass

“I am looking for authors with a distinctive voice.” I hear that from editors over lunch. . . . What the heck is ‘voice’? By this, do editors mean ‘style’? I do not think so. By voice, I think they mean not only a unique way of putting words together, but a unique sensibility, **a distinctive way of looking at the world. . . .**

You can facilitate voice by giving yourself the freedom to say things in your own unique way. You do not talk exactly like anyone else, right? Why should you write like everyone else? . . .

To set your voice free, set your words free. Set your characters free. Most important, set your heart free. It is from the unknowable shadows of your subconscious that your stories will find their drive and from which they will draw their meaning. No one can loan you that or teach you that. **Your voice is your self in the story.**

Writing the Breakout Novel, Chapter 8

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My experiment

Last month I asked some writers who've read a lot of my fiction how they would describe my authorial voice. I included a couple of writers' earlier descriptions too.

Notice how many different topics they mention.

(Sorry if the next few slides seem like bragging.)



“[David’s fiction] deals with difficult subjects with grace and humor.”

Sean Jones

In style, conversational, like you’re telling a story to your friend or family member and doing all the voices. Smart but accessible. In tone, insightful and compassionate.

Gigi Lynn

“A lot of writers invent a fake world, maybe because the real world isn’t worthy of them. This writer focuses on the real world and allows the reader to lose herself in the beauty and breathtaking quality of real life. Because real life is beautiful, even if it has rough edges.”

Silvia O’Dwyer



Earlier: “a patchwork of relationships, emotions, and devotions”

David Rodeback’s authorial voice is earnest, seasoned with dry humor and a touch of poignant thought. He cleverly intermixes a sense of place with character-driven stories. He excels at word choice and sentence structure, usually erring on the side of brevity. He’s at his strongest when his stories teach us about ourselves, how we interact with others, and how we change through these interactions.

Cassandra Carlson



[My prose, he says:]

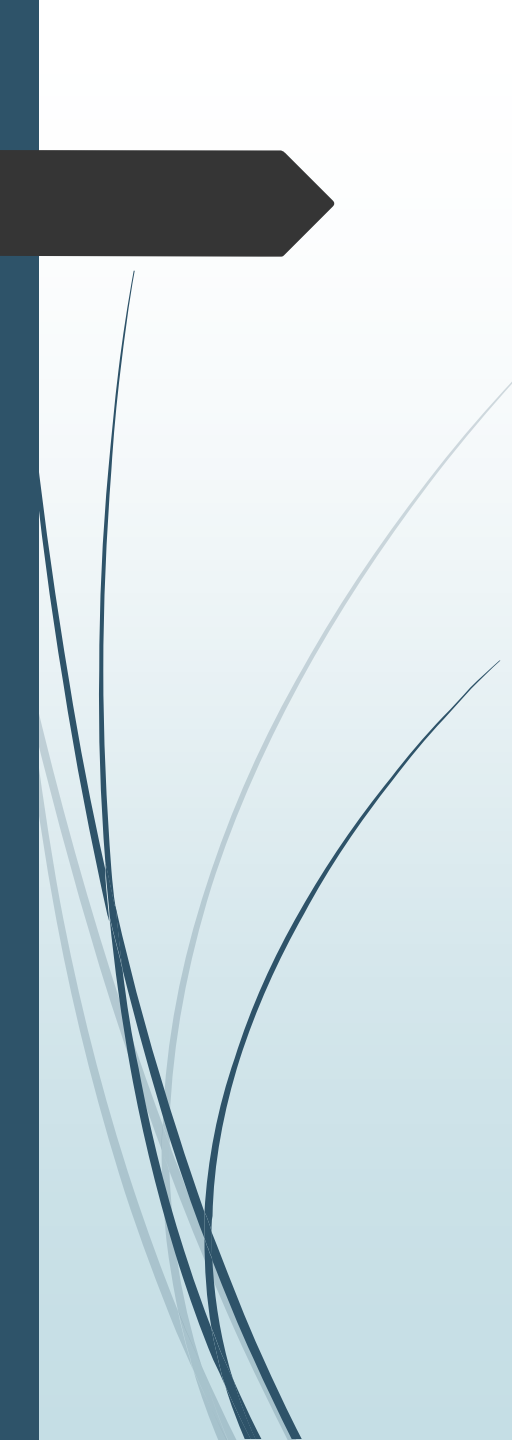
- ▶ Depicts “with hilarity and deep compassion” the inner world of characters who
 - ▶ are consistently worried and incorrigibly practical
 - ▶ are beginning – or struggling – to navigate the outer world
 - ▶ face loneliness and perplexity
 - ▶ must adapt emotionally even to experiences they do not fully comprehend

“Every emotional payoff, whether flash-of-lightning funny or tearfully joyful, is earned through a rich depth of honesty that is the polar opposite of sentimentalism.”

Darrin McGraw



“I just had a rush of blood to my ego.”
-- Hawkeye Pierce

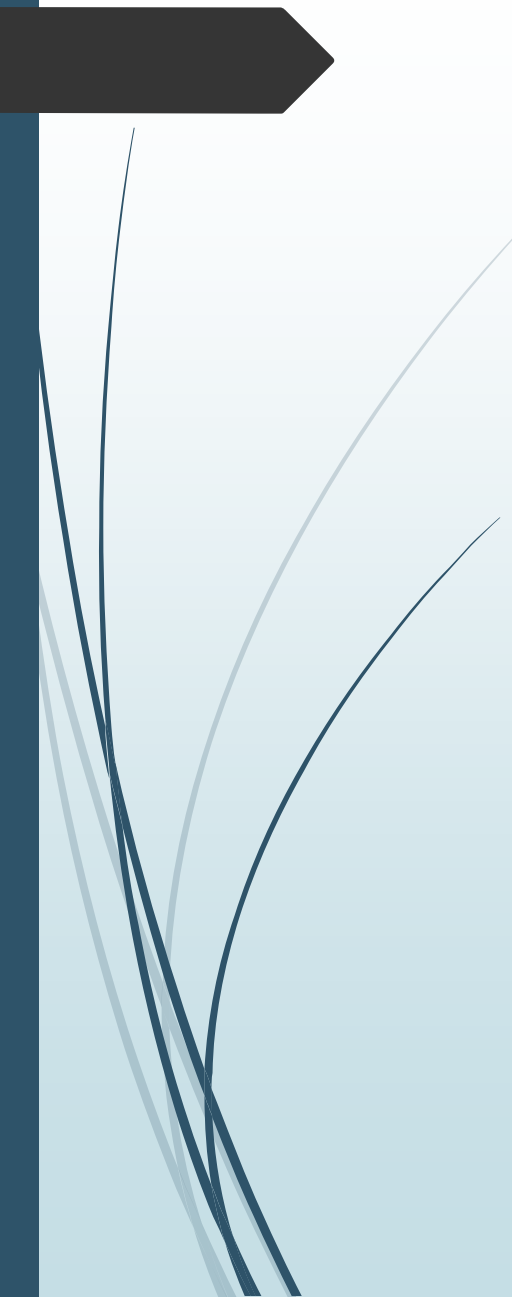


Authorial voice – bottom line(s)

- ▶ Don't worry about yours.
- ▶ Don't try to develop it or make it into what you think it should be, or what you like in someone else.
- ▶ Be yourself, the most authentic version of yourself you can be (especially when you revise).
- ▶ Tell *your* best stories the best way *you* can. Your voice will be there – and it will be *your* voice.
- ▶ It may grow and change as you grow and change, but it will still be *you*.



Narrative voice

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Things to consider

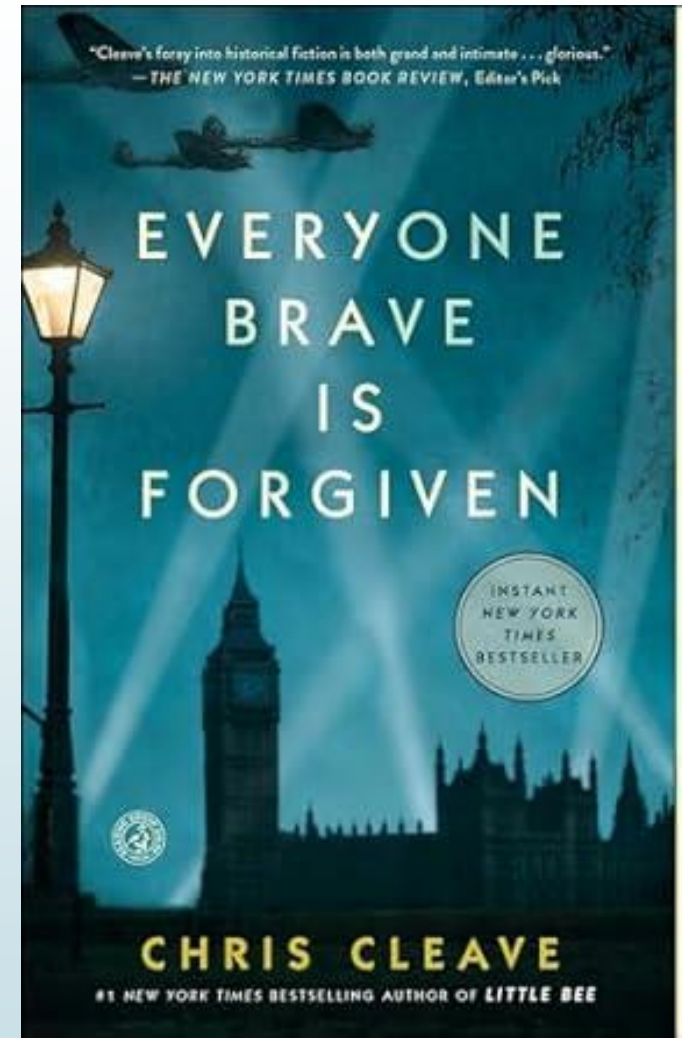
- ▶ What do you think of Mary? How would you describe her?
- ▶ What does the narrator think of Mary?
- ▶ How would you describe the narrator?

A beginning

War was declared at eleven-fifteen and Mary North signed up at noon. She did it at lunch, before telegrams came, in case her mother said no. She left finishing school unfinished. . . .

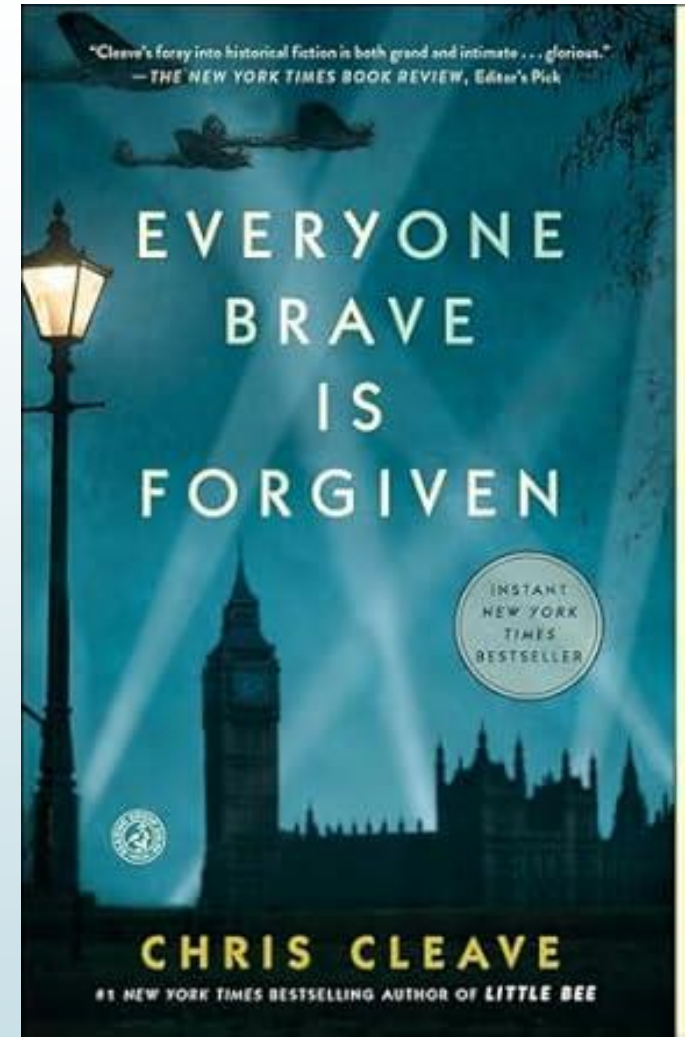
Any moment now it would start — this dreaded and wonderful thing — and could never be won without her.

What was war, after all, but morale in helmets and jeeps? And what was morale if not one hundred million little conversations, the sum of which might leave men brave enough to advance? The true heart of war was small talk, in which Mary was wonderfully expert.



... Mary gladly joined the great flow of the willing.

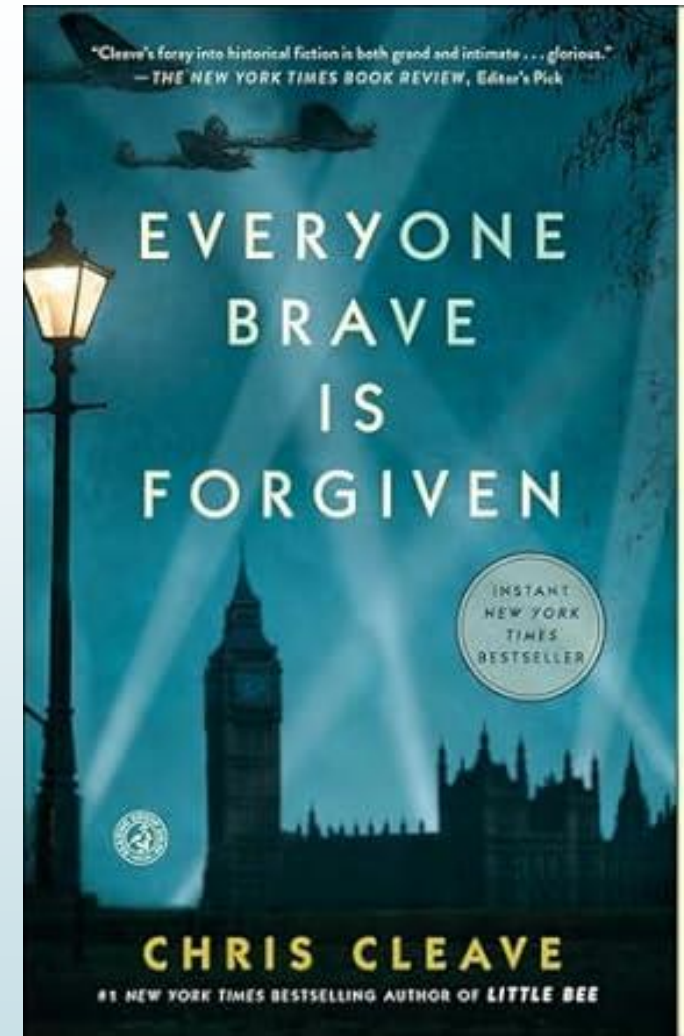
The War Office had given no further details, and this was a good sign. They would make her a liaison, or an attaché to a general's staff. All the speaking parts went to girls of good family. It was even rumored that they needed spies, which appealed most of all since one might be oneself twice over.



(They give her an address and tell her to report. She thinks she'll be a spy. When she gives the cabbie the address, he says it's a school.)

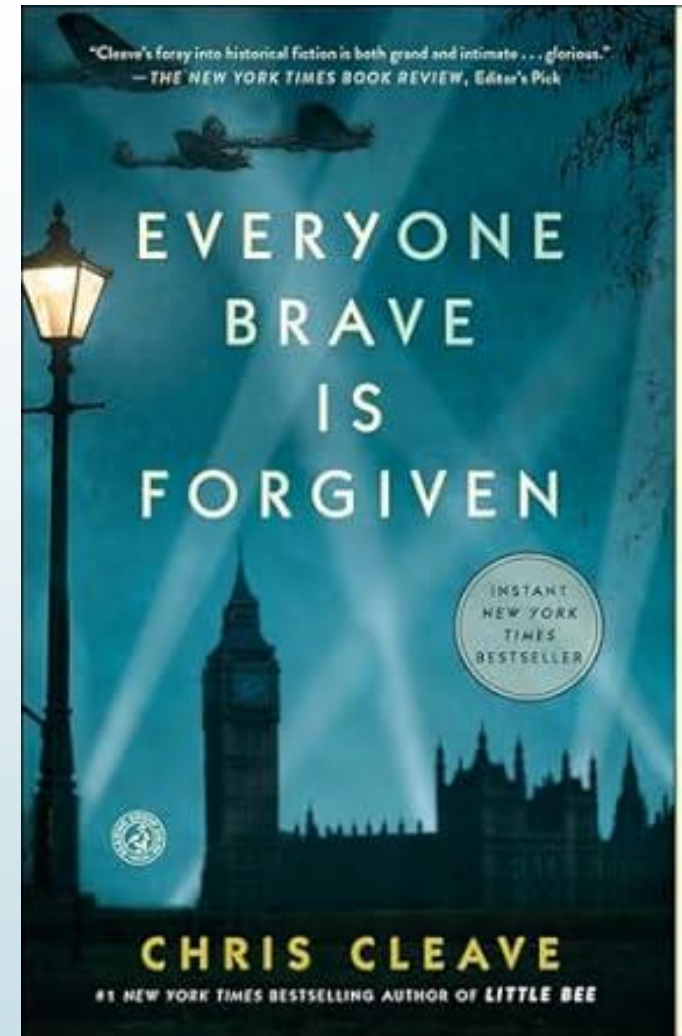
Mary opened her mouth to argue, then stopped and tugged at her gloves. Because of course they didn't have a glittering tower, just off Horse Guards, labeled **MINISTRY OF WILD INTRIGUE**. Naturally they would have her report somewhere innocuous.

The man drove them to Hawley Street with no more haste than the delivery of one more schoolmistress would merit. Mary was careful to adopt the expression an ordinary young woman might wear — a girl for whom the taxi ride would be an unaccustomed extravagance, and for whom the prospect of work as a schoolteacher would seem a thrill.



She made her face suggest the kind of sincere immersion in the present moment that she imagined dairy animals must also enjoy, or geese.

Arriving at the school, she felt observed. In character, she tipped the taxi driver a quarter of what she normally would have given him. This was her first test, after all. She put on the apologetic walk of an ordinary girl presenting for interview. As if the air resented being parted. As if the ground shrieked from the wound of each step.



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Those things we considered

- ▶ What do you think of Mary? How would you describe her?
- ▶ What does the narrator think of Mary?
- ▶ How would you describe the narrative voice?

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The narrator . . .

- ▶ Is not the author (at least in fiction), but may overlap
- ▶ Is a construct, an invention
- ▶ **Is a character**

. . . So let's talk about **character voices**.



Character voices



Know your characters

Everything you might know about characterization is relevant to voice – their backgrounds, desires, challenges, attitudes, etc. You could even map their personality types and make sure they're complementary (or antagonistic), but let's focus.

- ▶ How do they talk – how do they sound – when happy, giddy, discouraged, angry, tired, ill, hurt, amorous, working?
- ▶ How do they sound when they disagree? Do they go quiet? Argue? Try to persuade? Look for common ground and try to make peace? Try to intimidate? Change the subject?
- ▶ How do they talk when they want something? Are they direct? Quiet and gentle? Manipulative? Demanding?
- ▶ They may have different voices with different people or in different contexts.
- ▶ Make them plausible but give them quirks.

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Respect your characters

- ▶ Let them come to life, not just serve the plot
 - ▶ If they're heroes, show their faults and weaknesses too – in their voices.
 - ▶ If they're villains, show their strengths and virtues too – in their voices.
- ▶ Don't condescend. (Don't be Melvin Udall . . .)

Don't be Melvin Udall

(As Good As It Gets, 1997)

Receptionist: How do you write women so well?

Melvin Udall: I think of a man, and I take away reason and accountability.

- Sincere? Trying to be offensive?
- Is this any way to write women or anyone else?
- **This doesn't work for me.**





Differentiate your characters' voices

Among many possibilities:

- ▶ Distinctive words/phrases – including words they won't say
- ▶ Distinctive syntax
- ▶ Individualized approach to slang
- ▶ Big words (used correctly or not, self-consciously or not)
- ▶ Accents
- ▶ Different ways of approaching topics, figuring things out, talking things out.

I map these out in advance, sometimes – or after my first draft, before my first revision.



Troy – high school junior, raised in Texas

- ▶ Someone observes he has a very slight drawl, but I never portray it.
- ▶ Says “sir” and “ma’am” a lot when talking with adults
- ▶ Tends to drop the first person pronoun when he talks

“Came to see how you're doing.”

“Didn't ask,” he said. “Like to learn about people firsthand.”



Jenny – high school sophomore, raised in suburban Utah

- ▶ Better English than most (parents are writer and English professor)
- ▶ Rarely drops the pronouns Troy drops
- ▶ A syntactic quirk:

*“When they were done, I believed them. **Which** I guess was mostly the point.”*

(Not: . . . I believed them, which I guess was mostly the point.)

*“By the end he was smiling a little. **Which** made one of us.”*

(Not: . . . He was smiling a little. That made one of us.)

*“**Which** was too perfect, but at least he was a boy, and he was sitting and talking with me.”*

(Not: That was too perfect . . .)”



They start to rub off

People who spend a lot of time together begin to adopt some of each other's quirks (in speech and otherwise).

- ▶ Don't overdo it, and don't do it too soon.
- ▶ You can have some fun with it.

[Jenny:] We hadn't prepared for this one, but I thought I could handle it. "Sir," I said, sounding like Troy, "maybe you could leave that question open for a while, and decide later whether she's earned it?"



Use slang and accents like seasoning, not the pile of pastrami atop the patty in your Crown Burger

- ▶ You just need the flavor, not a linguistically accurate transcription.
- ▶ Don't make it hard to read.
- ▶ Example: Russian accent

American detective and Russian émigré in NYC:

"Why did your daughter come to New York?" asked Detective Poulson.

"To be student," said Nikolai.

"To be a student where?"

"At City College of New York." He pronounced *city* like *see tee* and *New* like *Nyoo*. His *o*'s were deep and rich. "Now she missing. Is missing." It came out *eez meesing*. "You will help to find her?"

"We'll do everything we can."

"*Spasibo*," he rumbled. "Thenk you."



Character voices in the wild

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Note:

- ▶ Most of these are minor characters, but they still have distinctive voices.
- ▶ They're not just persons of their particular age (2, 4, 14, 17, adult), with rigorously age-appropriate vocabularies. They have personalities, interests, goals, quirks.

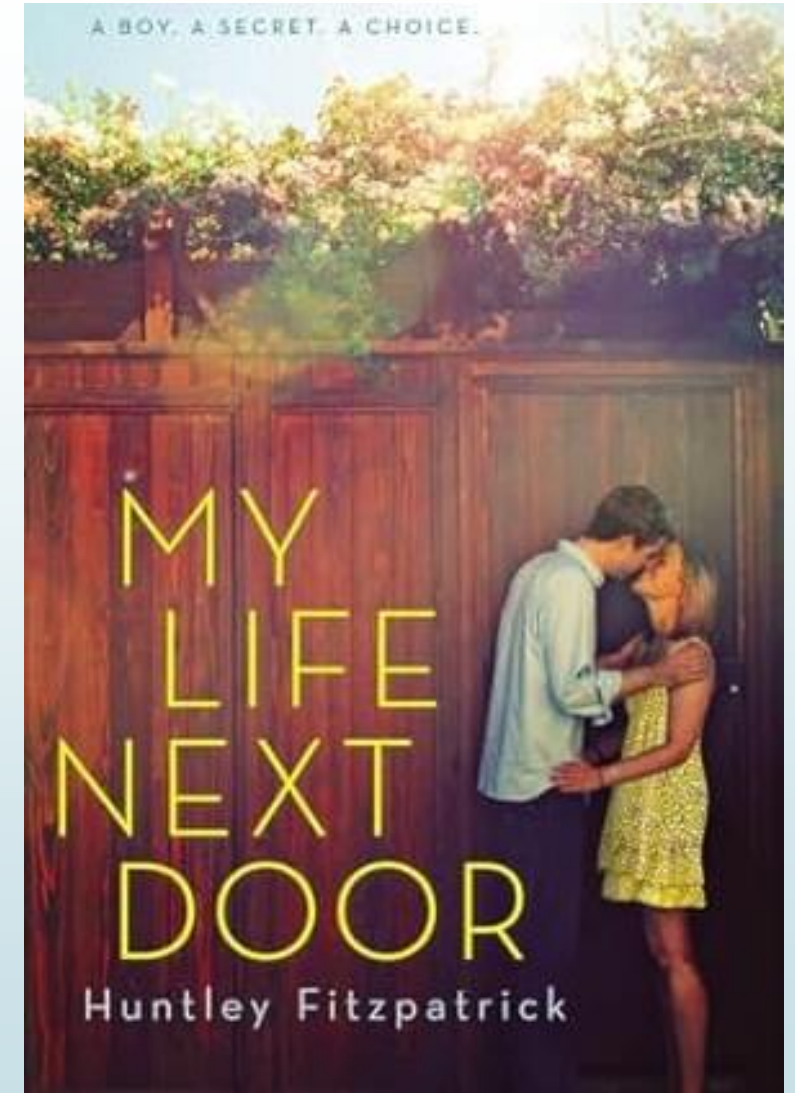
Patsy is almost two

At this point Patsy wanders in, having recently learned both to climb out of her crib and to remove her diaper, in whatever state it may be. In this case, fully loaded. She waves it triumphantly at me.

“Pooooooooooooop.”

...

Patsy watches me with detached curiosity as I clean up her wall (*ew*), change her sheets (again, *ew*), plunk her into a short bath, and re-diaper and clothe her in something sanitary. “Where poop?” she asks mournfully, craning her neck to examine her bottom.



George is 4

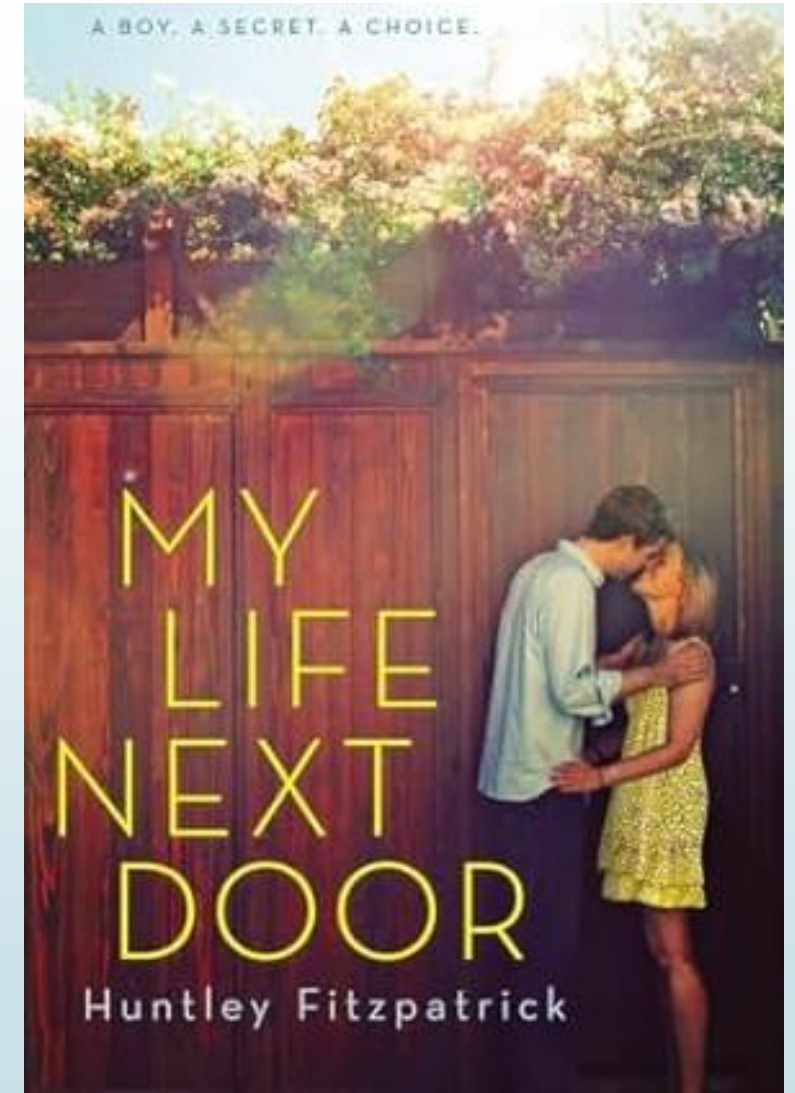
“I like eggs and bacon. But . . . did you know . . . bacon is . . . Wilbur?”

[Adult: No.]

“Then is bacon Babe, Mom? Is it Babe?”

[No, it's bad pigs, pigs with no souls]

“Oh. That's okay then. 'Cause I really like bacon.”

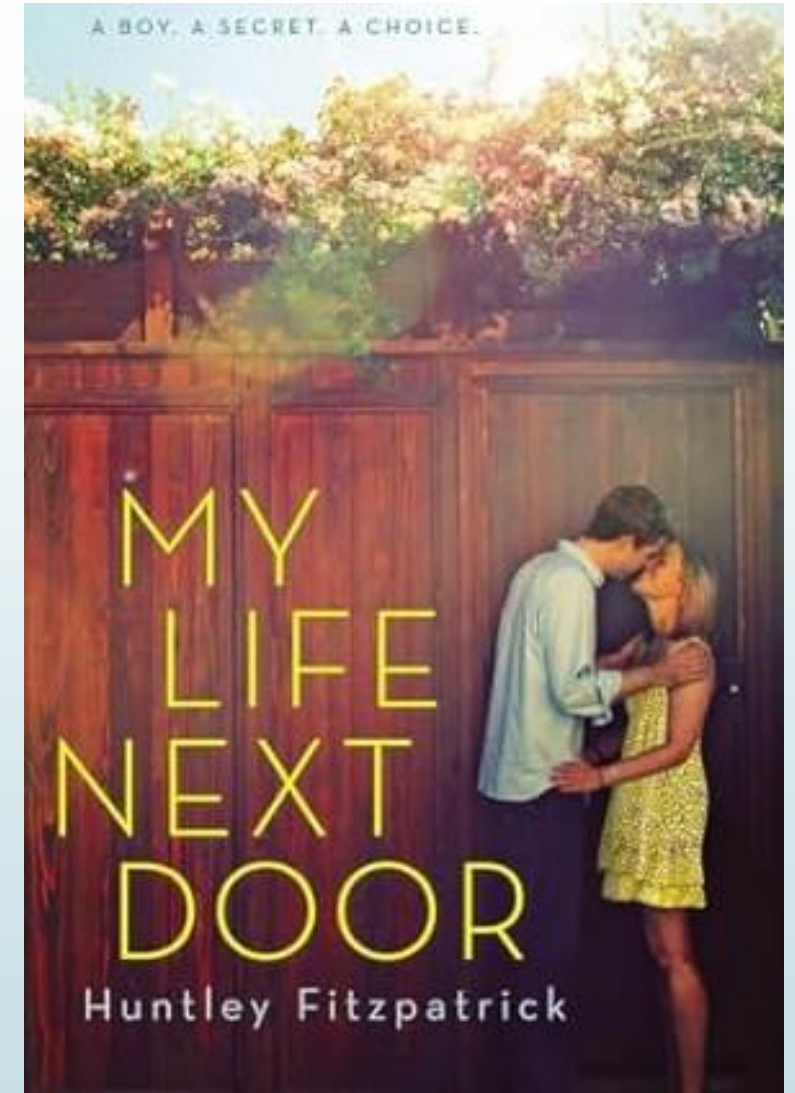


Harry is ... older than George

Harry, who's got green eyes but fairly straight dark brown hair and lots of freckles, looks at me challengingly. "Can you do a back dive?"

"Um. Yes."

"Will you teach me? Right now?"

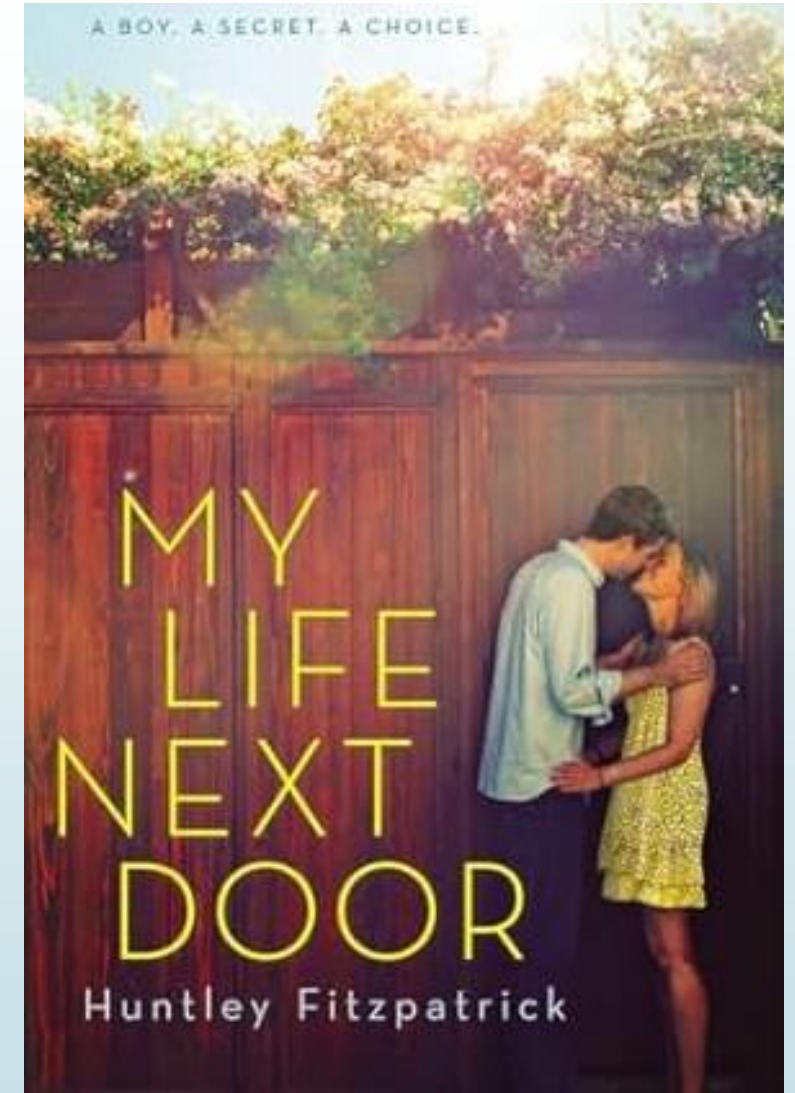


Andy is 14

(The boy who just broke up with her is Kyle. He likes Jade Whelan now.)

“My life is over. It's over. Everything's over. He broke up with me! By *Post-it note*. I've loved him for three years, ever since he taught me to make a slip knot on my first day of sailing camp, and he can't even say this to my face! . . .

“Jade Whelan? She used to take boys behind the piano in fourth-grade assembly and show them her bra! She didn't even need one. I hate her. I hate him.”



Samantha is 17 (POV); Mrs. Garrett is the younger kids' mom

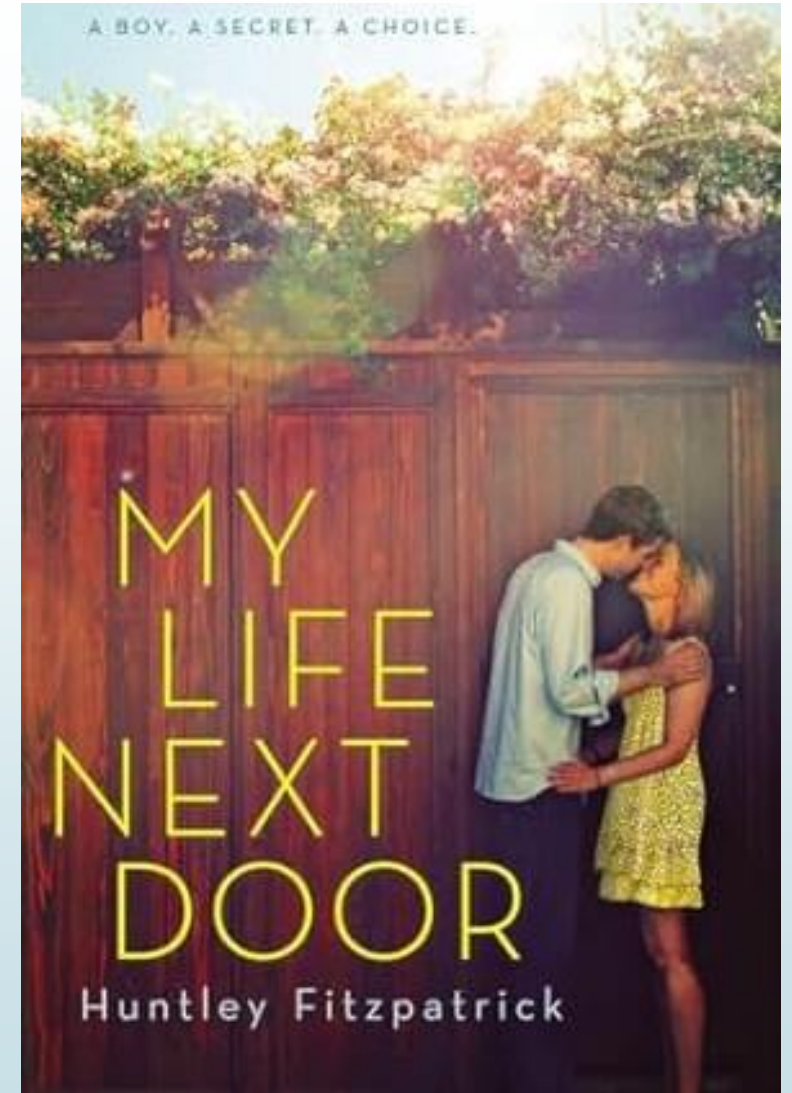
[Mrs. Garrett] stops suddenly, looking more closely at me, her eyes widening.

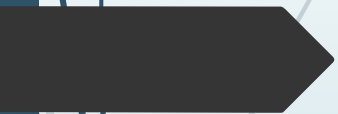
I look down. *Oh. The uniform.* “It’s my work outfit. My boss designed it.” I don’t know why I always add this, except to establish that there’s no way in hell I’d be caught dead in a blue miniskirt and a middy shirt.

“A man, I assume,” Mrs. Garrett says dryly.


I nod.

“Naturally. Anyway . . . I wondered if you might ever be interested in doing some babysitting?”





Exercise



Put three different POV characters (separately) in the same situation. **Write just a few lines of the beginning of each conversation.** It doesn't have to be all dialogue; add some narrative if you want. Use your imagination and define your character beyond these instructions. Use a first-person or close third-person narrator, as you wish.

Situation: The character bought something at the store (you decide what), got it home and opened the box, and it was broken. The objective is to exchange it. The other person in the scene is the **clerk** at the returns counter, who begins by asking, "How may I help you?"

The POV characters:

- Conversation 1: Customer is direct and plain-spoken, sometimes to a fault, struggles to be kind/diplomatic.
- Conversation 2: Customer is timid, normally prefers not to speak at all.
- Conversation 3: Customer is friendly and loquacious, but tends to beat around the bush.

In your toolbox are:

- What the characters say (including the narrator)
- What the POV character doesn't say
- How the POV character acts
- How the POV character feels



Use internal and external
character voices



I often write . . .

First-person POV dialogue involving **two characters**, where there are **three or more voices**.

1. What the POV character says (**external** voice)
2. What the other character says (**external** voice)
3. What the POV character thinks but does not say (**internal** voice; in first person, this is a narrative voice)

(We can't report the other character's internal voice without slipping into omniscience or changing POV.)



From my novel-in-progress

Jenny & Troy

[Troy:] “Are there warning signs before it happens? Before a seizure?”

I shook my head. “Not that we’ve found. No triggers either, unless you count skipping my meds, which I never do.”

“What else would they be? Flashing lights or something?”

“For some people. Or stress, lack of sleep, low blood sugar, something I ate,” **I said.** That time of the month, **I didn’t say.** “It’s different for everybody, and for me we just don’t know.”



[He said he saw her at a concert and thought she was pretty.]

Question: How many internal voices/viewpoints points in this excerpt?

“You really thought I was ... ?”

“Still do.”

He still looked and sounded serious, but I tried to turn my biggest reason for doubting him into a wry joke. “It couldn’t have been my hourglass figure. I was wearing a choir robe.”


I didn’t have an hourglass figure, and Regular Jenny was beside herself that Bold Jenny would mention my figure at all.

“Saw your face and your hair,” he said. “Watched you sing. Saw you smile. . . . That was all I needed to see.”

Be bold, Jenny.

“Seeing me up close tonight hasn’t changed your mind?” Seeing me without the choir robe, **I thought but didn’t say.**

Do I need to trust my reader more here?

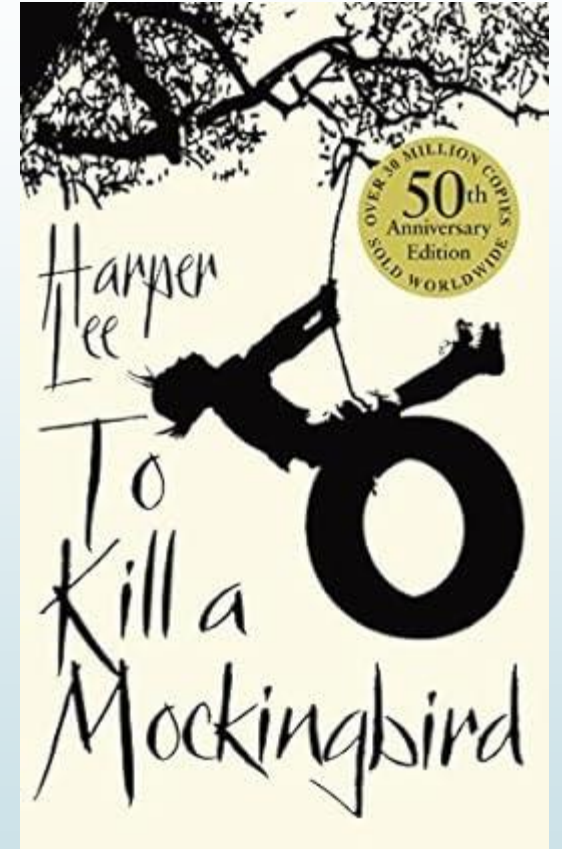


Case study from a classic:
1 character, 3 voices

(from Chapter 1)

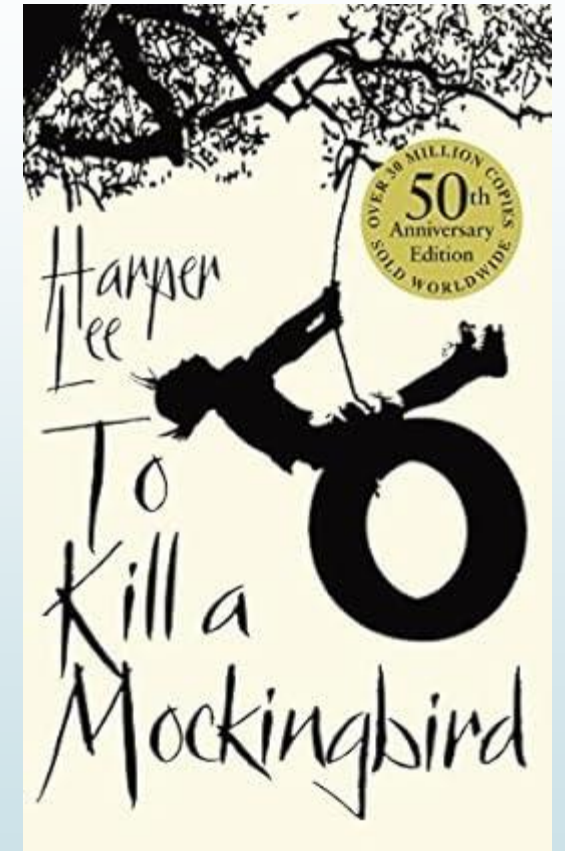
NARRATING THE BACK STORY

Atticus' office in the courthouse contained little more than a hat rack, a spittoon, a checkerboard and an unsullied Code of Alabama. His first two clients were the last two persons hanged in the Maycomb County jail. Atticus had urged them to accept the state's generosity in allowing them to plead Guilty to second-degree murder and escape with their lives, but they were Haverfords, in Maycomb County a name synonymous with jackass.



NARRATING THE MOMENT

Early one morning as we were beginning our day's play in the back yard, Jem and I heard something next door in Miss Rachel Haverford's collard patch. We went to the wire fence to see if there was a puppy— Miss Rachel's rat terrier was expecting—instead we found someone sitting looking at us. Sitting down, he wasn't much higher than the collards. We stared at him until he spoke:



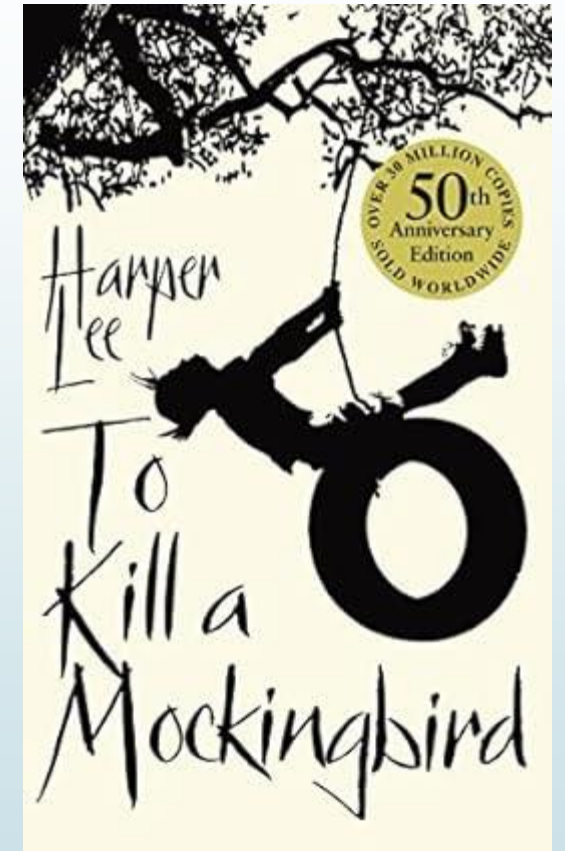
SPEECH (*Scout is almost six.*)

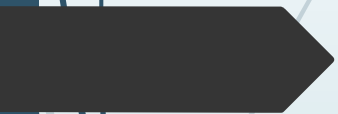
After making me read most of *My First Reader* and the stock-market quotations from *The Mobile Register* aloud, she discovered that I was literate and looked at me with more than faint distaste. Miss Caroline told me to tell my father not to teach me any more, it would interfere with my reading.

“Teach me?” I said in surprise. “He hasn’t taught me anything, Miss Caroline. Atticus ain’t got time to teach me anything,” I added, when Miss Caroline smiled and shook her head. “Why, he’s so tired at night he just sits in the living room and reads.”

“If he didn’t teach you, who did?” Miss Caroline asked good-naturedly. “Somebody did. You weren’t born reading *The Mobile Register*.”

“Jem says I was. He read in a book where I was a Bullfinch instead of a Finch. Jem says my name’s really Jean Louise Bullfinch, that I got swapped when I was born and I’m really a—”

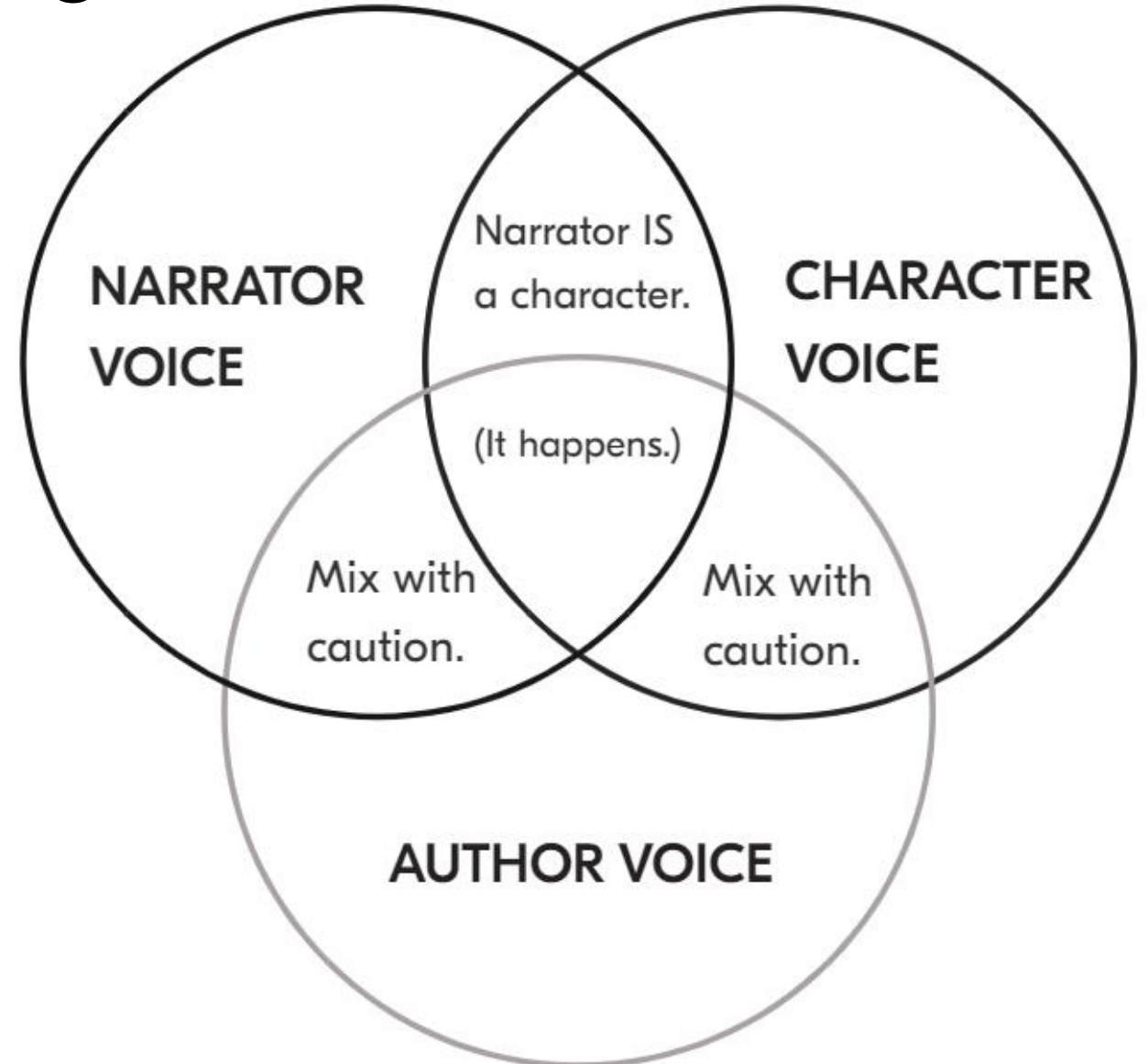




Q&A

The overlapping voices

- ▶ **Authorial** voice
- ▶ **Narrative** voice
- ▶ **Character** voices





One more example

... If there's time ...

Prologue has a narrator, then four character voices telling a story, each picking up where the other leaves off. (Amazon: can read the whole prologue as a sample, or listen to about half of it, the first minutes.)

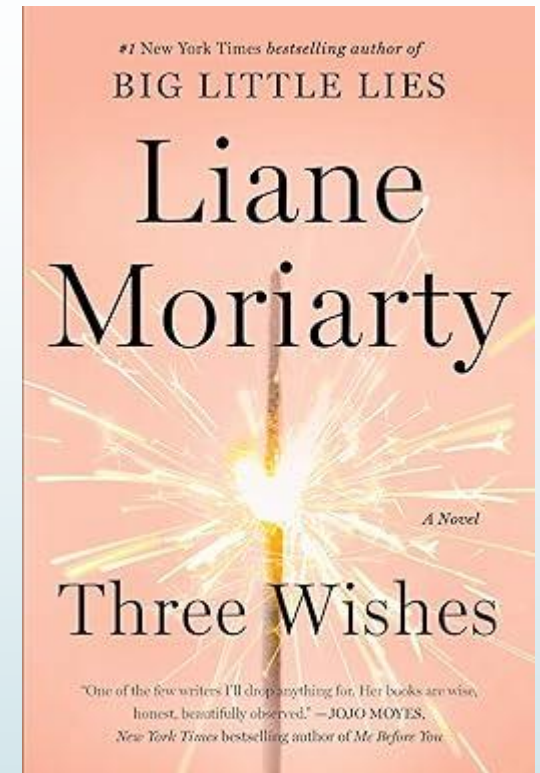
E-mail exchange in Chapter 1

(three triplets, sisters, age 33 – Lyn, Cat, and Gemma)

To: Lyn; Cat
From: Gemma
Subject: Cat

LYN! WARNING, WARNING! DANGER, DANGER! I just spoke to Cat and she is in a VERY, VERY bad mood. I would not recommend ringing her about minding Maddie for another twenty-four hours at least.

Love, Gemma



To: Gemma
From: Cat
Subject: ME

Warning, warning, if you're going to send e-mails about my bad mood at least make sure I don't get them. That could really put me in a bad mood.

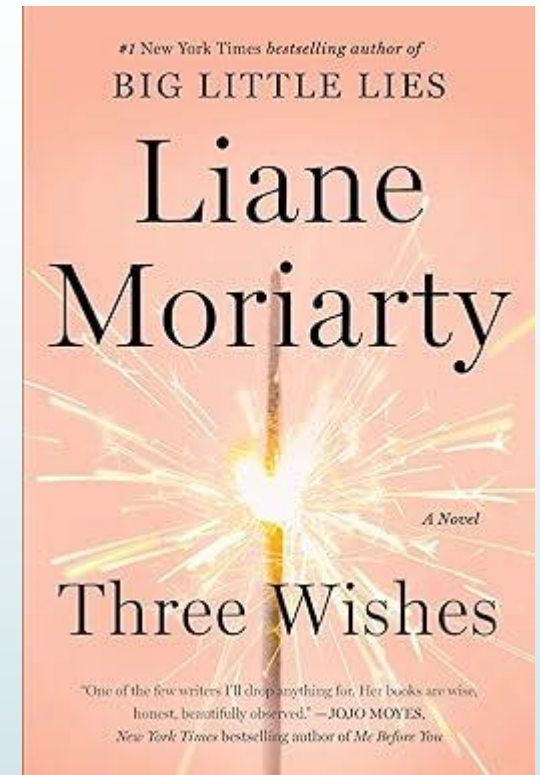
To: Gemma
From: Lyn
Subject: Cat

G. Need to be careful about hitting "reply all" instead of "reply to author" on old e-mails. Set up address book!! No doubt Cat v. impressed. Kara minding Maddie so no problem. L.

To: Lyn; Cat
From: Gemma
Subject: Kara

Dear Lyn,

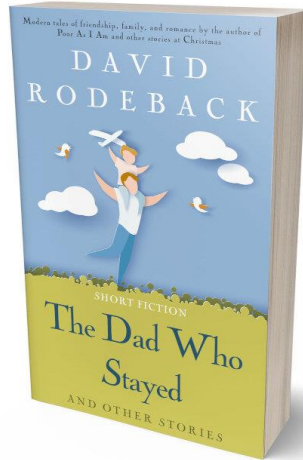
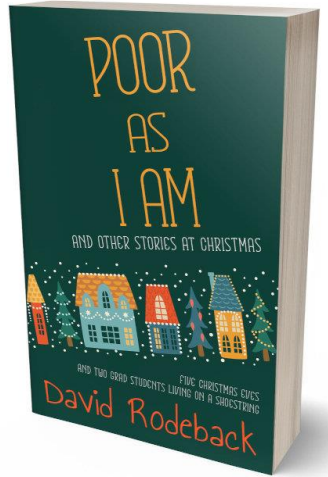
I don't know how to set up an address book but thank you for the thought. I don't mean to alarm you but have you heard of SHAKING BABY SYNDROME? I think leaving Maddie with Kara could be very dangerous. Once I saw her shaking a box of corn-flakes FURIOUSLY. She is a teenager and teenagers have problems with their hormones that cause them to be just a little insane. Can't you ask Cat, once she has finished her bad mood? Or else I could cancel my date with the luscious locksmith. I am prepared to do that to save Maddie's life. Let me know. Love, Gemma





Thank you!

Where to find me and my books



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books2read.com/david-rodeback/
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