

Write With Prejudice

Flannery O'Connor employed a unique form of narrative bias to power her stories.



One of the greatest challenges in writing a story is to find the right point of view. It's tough: A purely omniscient narrative perspective can feel sterile, and a narrator who's completely likable often ends up being dull. One way to avoid those pitfalls is to purposefully build a bias into

your narrative, a slant that pulls your story in a certain direction from the beginning.

Flannery O'Connor, one of the great Southern writers of the 20th century, often incorporated into her stories a third-person narrative bias, with which she alternately revealed and hid the inner workings of her characters. Her story "Everything That Rises Must Converge," about the conflicting views of a Southern man and his elderly mother, is a good example of this technique.

The story's third-person narrative voice is cool and distant, but it's driven by the thoughts of the man, Julian, and it uses his biased perceptions as the basis for describing his mother. In a sense, it's a first-person perspective with a clever twist. Here, a description of Julian's mother's hat becomes much more:

It was a hideous hat. A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. He decided it was less comical than jaunty and pathetic. Everything that gave her pleasure was small and depressed him.

This could have been written in the first person. But a third-person narrator gives O'Connor the opportunity to provide distance, something a little closer to objectivity, rather than a son's full-on rant

about his mother's sense of style.

The majority of this story's descriptive sequences depict Julian's mother, not Julian. But we learn more about Julian because the narrative is tilted in his favor. Every description of Julian's mother is from his perspective, not hers; they all include a judgment of some sort, as in this example:

The presence of his mother was borne in upon him as she gave a pained sigh. He looked at her bleakly. She was holding herself very erect under the preposterous hat, wearing it like a banner of her imaginary dignity. There was in him an evil urge to break her spirit.

With this one-sided treatment, O'Connor plays with the reader's allegiances to her characters: In part, we want to believe Julian's perspective and sympathize with his frustration, but we also wonder if he shouldn't be going easier on his mom.

This biased method is similar to writing in the first person and using an unreliable narrator. A narrator who spouts subjective judgments in the first person arouses suspicion—the reader knows the narrator can't be trusted to recount a scene in good faith. A third-person narrative that depends on one character's viewpoint is equally unreliable, but it sounds less obviously biased because it

comes from an outside source.

As the story concludes, it becomes clear that despite Julian's mother's many flaws—antiquated, racist views; an irritating obliviousness to reality—she doesn't deserve the rancor he directs at her. But even Julian is caught off guard when, after a disturbing incident in the street, she suffers a stroke:

"Help, help!" he shouted, but his voice was thin, scarcely a thread of sound. The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere. The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.

This time, the detached perspective contributes to a complicated sense of tragedy. After waffling between feeling sympathy for Julian and his mother, the reader faces the unexpected death of a childlike, deluded woman and her son's sudden realization of his folly.

Incorporating narrative bias into your story can be tricky. Too often, authors use a heavy hand while favoring one character's point of view; this results in an imbalance that, to the reader, can feel contrived and predictable. (Think of bad detective novels.) Respect your reader's cliché radar by using a light touch. You'll find a way to make your writing fun and unconventional at the same time. **WD**

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