

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

To become better writers, we need to fully understand fiction from the perspective of readers. A good place to begin is to examine our own reading preferences. If you're like me, you love to get so deeply into a story that you become the main character. You see, hear, smell, taste, and feel what the protagonist senses, and you experience what he thinks as if you're inside his mind. In effect, you possess the character, living the story as it unfolds.

Whenever I'm considering a work of fiction, I look for five things:

1. A plot that grabs me in the first paragraphs, propels me on a journey with exciting twists and turns, and holds my attention until the end
2. An intriguing main character who, though he or she may have faults and weaknesses, learns something as the story progresses, growing into a stronger individual by the end of the story
3. An interesting time and place intertwined with the story in a manner that creates additional challenges for the character, possibly to the extent that the setting seems to be an antagonist
4. A resonance of meaning that not only leaves me with new insight into how the universe works but also echoes back to me, causing me to think about the story long after I've read it
5. A writing style that allows me to slip so deeply into the story that I become one with the main character, experiencing the story as if I were living it

By the time I peek inside a novel for the first time, I already know quite a bit about it. The genre, the title, and the author are usually apparent from the book's front cover. From the book description (on the back cover, dust jacket, or elsewhere), I already have a feel for the character, plot, and setting, all of which must interest me before I look deeper. The resonating meaning is unlikely to be stated in the book description, but it might be hinted at. So, before I read the first line of a story, I know a lot about the plot, the main character, the setting, and the theme, and I use that information to reject dozens of novels before selecting one that's worth a closer look.

I suspect that you go through a similar process. Whether you're considering a book at a library, in a bookstore, or online, you bypass dozens of novels before you open one, even if you focus on books in your favorite genre or in a bestseller category. We all have our own reading preferences, and if the plot, character, setting, or theme don't suit our taste, we move on to something else.

But my selection process doesn't end there, and I bet yours doesn't, either. After I open a book and read a few lines or maybe a few paragraphs, I reject the vast majority of the novels I consider. Why is that so? The factor that tips the balance comes down to one aspect of writing. By the time I'm ready to take a closer look, the single most important issue I'm evaluating when I read the first sentence, paragraph, or page of a work of fiction is its *style*.

When I read the first lines of chapter one, I'm not looking for some gimmick to hook me, although I always appreciate an intriguing opening. When I read the first few lines, I'm checking the author's *style*—how he or she writes. Like many readers today, I don't have the patience to slog through a poorly crafted, cumbersome novel. If reading is a chore, it's a bore. I don't read to be bored, and I suspect you don't either.

What I'm looking for in writing style is what John Gardner referred to as *profluence*,<sup>i</sup> the quality of fiction that keeps it moving ahead.<sup>ii</sup> The ultimate in profluence occurs when the reader eagerly flips through a book's pages to find out what happens next. Today, that's called "page-turning fiction."

Most fiction is written in either first person (using *I* a lot) or third person (*he* or *she*). First person has a distinct advantage because you can easily imagine yourself being the *I* in the story. Third person, on the other hand, is often written in a manner that makes it difficult for the reader to feel as if he's one with the character. To eliminate that problem, I've identified a specific set of techniques for writing third person in a way that allows the reader to consistently experience the story as if he is inside the character's mind and body. I mean more than having mere empathy with the point-of-view character and even more than reader identification with that character. This style is called "intimate third person." I take the style deeper and more consistently into the character, using a style I call "third-person possessed."

The key to writing this way is making a commitment to gain reader involvement. The writer must understand that readers are not just a passive audience; they are critical participants. Reader involvement can range from unengaged to highly engaged, depending on the skill of the writer. Writing a story in a manner that encourages the reader to be involved means:

- Writing with respect for the reader
- Giving the reader credit for being intelligent
- Assuming the reader is an experienced reader who understands the conventions of fiction
- Using techniques that allow the reader to "get into" the story and stay there
- Avoiding writing in a way that distracts, annoys, or insults the reader

Highly engaged readers can get the most enjoyment out of a story. The author benefits because he can make assumptions about the reader, essentially treating the reader as an ally in successfully presenting the story. The author involves the reader in the presentation, which in turn helps the reader engage with the story. At its best, this dynamic creates a virtuous cycle, a partnership, where both the author and the reader benefit.

Isn't that style already used today, you might ask, especially in bestselling novels? In most cases the answer to that question is *no*. Many novels, of course, are written in first person, which has its own advantages and disadvantages. Of novels written in third person, some are written with omniscient narration (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling, for example) and some with objective narration (many hard-boiled detective stories). Of the remaining novels written in third person, the vast majority are written in a style I call "third-person inconsistent." As the term implies, the hallmark of this style is inconsistent narration, a subject I will address later. As good as many of these novels are (I've enjoyed many of them), they don't live up to the potential of third-person possessed as a means of engaging readers. That provides an opportunity for writers of the future to differentiate themselves by providing a superior product. Showing how to exploit that opportunity is the purpose of this book.

Today's publishing world is largely dominated by relatively few authors with such firmly established brands that readers eagerly buy their new books as soon as they are released. That presents formidable competition for lesser-known writers. On top of that, a gazillion self-published novels are printed each year, and the number is growing. If you're not already a famous author with an established fan base, how can you stand out from the crowd?

Most of today's bestselling authors built their reputation during the final decades of the last century, and they wrote in a style that was the state of the art at that time. The next

generation of bestsellers will need to be written in a state-of-the-art way for the twenty-first century.

We should all adopt the attitude that writing as well as today's bestsellers is not good enough. We need to write better than they do, using a style appropriate for the *next* century. This book explains how to do that.

This book does not offer a quick fix for writing compelling fiction, because there are no magic solutions in writing. What this book will do is save you the time, money, and frustration required to gather information from dozens of other sources, each of which reveals only a portion of what is presented here. This book also contains insights I have developed from my own experience and research, information that is not available anywhere else.

If you're a beginning novelist, this book will help you build a foundation of practical knowledge that might otherwise take many years of self-study or trial and error to accumulate. If you are an experienced writer, the information in this book may provide you with information that helps you take your writing to new heights in the face of ever-increasing competition.

Most of us will never be bestselling authors. Novels attain bestseller status for a variety of reasons, some of which are beyond the author's control, but there is one thing over which we, as authors, have absolute control, and that is the quality of our writing.

This book is like no other. No matter how familiar you are with writing in intimate third person, this book will provide you with a greater understanding of the craft. You will learn how to troubleshoot your manuscript, which will help make it the best that it can be, and you will see how to put all the pieces together to write page-turning fiction. My goal is to present to you the most comprehensive and concise analysis of writing in intimate third person available anywhere.

Throughout this book, I define concepts and terms within the text. Where appropriate, I provide examples. You'll also find an index in the back.

This book is organized with general concepts up front, and then I address specifics, with an example of how to use the concepts presented. Reading this book from beginning to end is the most beneficial thing to do. If you're most interested in a particular writing issue, look at the table of contents or the index to locate that specific subject. This book may also serve as a handy desk reference.

Are you settling for a twentieth century writing style, or are you writing for the next generation? Join me now in learning how to write in third-person possessed.

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<sup>i</sup> Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, 48.

<sup>ii</sup> *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, s.v. "profluence."