

SAN FRANCISCO WRITERS CONFERENCE 2023

Saturday, Feb. 18, 2023

Fiction Track: PANEL: Crafting Reliable and Unreliable Narrators Kristen Tatroe, Jordan Rosenfeld, Martha Engber, Julia Vee. Moderator: Jackie Cangro

1. Martha Engberg - definitions and making conscious decisions for our characters,
2. Jordan Rosenfeld - tools and devices for setting up unreliable narrators
3. Kristen Tatroe - the different types of unreliable narrators (e.g., the outright liars who are trying to mislead the reader/gain their sympathy, child narrators, the "innocent" narrators, etc.) and why an author would choose one type over another.
4. Julia Vee - Strengthening your character development by understanding the reasons for being unreliable

Strengthen Your Character Development By Understanding The Reasons for Why the Narrator is Unreliable

By: Julia Vee

We love the unreliable narrator because we are solving a puzzle while we are reading. As we read, we are wondering in the background, "Why can't they be truthful even to themselves?" But sometimes, the unreliable nature of the character isn't obvious at first so we trust them initially but then begin to question if they are telling the truth.

Let's examine the reasons why the narrator may be unreliable. (It can be intentional or unintentional):

- How old are they? Maybe they are young.
- What is their view of life? Maybe they are a vampire. Maybe they are a robot. Maybe they are extremely tall, or were hiding under a bed and could only see parts.
- What if they need to justify their bad acts? (Lolita by Nabokov)

This is a nice article about being a lawyer and how witness statements often can be challenging to corroborate, and background on use of unreliable narrators in fiction:

<https://michaelakahn.com/mysteries-and-the-unreliable-narrator/>

Witness counts vary wildly and it isn't because all the witnesses are lying—it's because the witnesses all had different vantage points. As a writer, you can use this as reason for why the POV of a character may not give the whole picture.

Here is a good resource here on the types of unreliable narrators if you want to classify them: <https://theurbanwriters.com/blogs/publishing/taking-inspiration-from-gone-girl-unreliable-narrator-write-novel#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20best%20unreliable,is%20the%20initial%20unreliable%20narrator>. I especially liked the "clown" and "pizaro" category of unreliable narrator. Possibly

Kvothe from Name of the Wind could fall into the picaresque category if the reader finds him to be an unreliable narrator. This is from puffery or exaggeration of the events that occurred.

Examples of Unreliable Narrators in Fiction and Film: spoilers ahead!

**Wonderful List Library Catalog Here: <https://catalog.freelibrary.org/Community/lists/23907/>

Here's what struck me when I started going through this catalog. Most of these had been made into movies. This tells me that there is something about this type of story (mystery, suspense, or thriller), where there is a big reveal or twist at the end, is uniquely suited to film. The novels themselves though all use different techniques to build the suspense for the reader.

- a. **Gone Girl, Gillian Flynn** - dual POV of Amy and Nick. We are suspicious of Nick. He's not a great guy. But then in the second half, we start to read Amy's POV (who we thought was dead) and now the reader cues in that Amy's not an innocent victim either. By the end, we see that as bad as Nick seemed, his conduct pales in comparison to Amy's misdeeds.
- b. **Fight Club by Chuck Palahniuk** - Narrator is having trouble distinguishing reality from dreams, due to his insomnia. Tyler Durden and Narrator (Edward Norton's character) are alter egos of each other but we don't know this until the end. The ending is brilliant because then Marla's behavior starts to make sense!

"Marla's behavior around the Narrator, which is often confused and angry, particularly after a night of sex with Tyler. Of course, knowing that the Narrator and Tyler are the same person recontextualizes these scenes and makes Marla's confusion understandable, but they also reveal to us something about the value of the film's only major female character in her suspicions. She is the only person with any inkling that the Narrator and Tyler are disparate personalities..."<https://birthmoviesdeath.com/2019/10/15/fight-club-at-20-masculinity-is-an-unreliable-narrator>

"(1) Tyler gets me a job as a waiter, after that Tyler's pushing a gun in my mouth and saying, the first step to eternal life is you have to die. For a long time though, Tyler and I were best friends. People are always asking, did I know about Tyler Durden. (Fight Club, p. 11)

The novel is structured as a present-tense/first-person narrative with a narrator who remains unnamed throughout the story.

<https://www.grin.com/document/302168>

Narrator is an "overt" unreliable narrator.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=currentnarratives>

- c. **Girl on the Train** - “The narrator who doesn't know all of the truth
Rachel in *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins is an example of this type of unreliable narrator due to her frequent alcohol-induced blackouts and her lies to other characters. Her explanation of her whereabouts is unreliable and her connection to the mystery of the novel is questioned due to her loss of memory due to drinking. In this sense, she doesn't quite fall into Riggan's category of *The Naïf*, but her perspective and memory are indeed limited.”
<https://www.servicescape.com/blog/the-unreliable-narrator-definition-examples-and-how-to-make-it-work#:~:text=The%20narrator%20who%20evades%20the,orangutan%2C%20hyena%2C%20and%20tiger>.
- d. **American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis**
Audiences split on whether Patrick Bateman is unreliable or just a narcissist. One paper posited that Bateman was a “covert” unreliable narrator.
- e. **Life of Pi** - “The narrator who evades the truth out of self-preservation
A good example of this type of unreliable narrator is Pi Patel, the narrator of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. He tells a story of being adrift at sea and sharing his lifeboat with a zebra, orangutan, hyena, and tiger. When his story is questioned for its implausibility, his rescuers (and thus, the reader) learns of another version of the story in which he is adrift at sea with his mother, a sailor, and the ship's cook. The rescuers find connections between the two versions of the story and choose to accept the version with the animals, understanding that the alternative (and more likely version) would have been extremely traumatic for the boy.”
<https://www.servicescape.com/blog/the-unreliable-narrator-definition-examples-and-how-to-make-it-work#:~:text=The%20narrator%20who%20evades%20the,orangutan%2C%20hyena%2C%20and%20tiger>.
- f. **This is How You Lose the Time War Amal El-Mohtar & Max Gladstone** - Told in epistolary fashion. Blue and Red, they are at war, not a traditional unreliable narrator but you wonder if Blue is telling the truth when reading Red's letters and vice versa. You know they both have reason to have bias. At some point, they each take a leap of faith and maybe for me as a reader, that was when I started believing them too.
- g. **The Thief** by Megan Whalen Turner
i. “It's not that *Eugenides lies*, it is more about the way that he tells the truth.”
Told in first person, engaging, likable and still manages to surprise the reader.
Almost playful way to engage with the reader.
- h. **Memento** by Christopher Nolan
The movie is told in reverse and Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) doubts his own reliability. Of course, he has no short term memory so this impairment is what prevents the narrative from giving the audience the whole picture.

i. Presumed Innocent by Scott Turow

“...Turow’s narrator Rusty Sabich, who is both a colleague of Carolyn’s in the prosecutor’s office and her former lover, sets out to investigate her murder, he quickly finds that all the clues point back to him.

This, in effect, turns the novel into the first-person testimony Rusty never gives at his trial. We watch him quietly cover up evidence that points to his guilt even before we realize he is going to be accused of the crime. Because we are in his head, we realize he has not only the motive and the opportunity to commit the crime, but the intelligence to get away with it. By making Rusty the novel’s narrator, Turow is subverting more than just the mystery genre; he’s calling into question a central conceit of psychological realism, which is that, through fiction, we can come to know the human heart.”

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-lasting-influence-of-scott-turows-presumed-innocent/>

What makes an unreliable narrator compelling is that once the reader realizes that something might be off...they are hooked and will stay to the end for the twist they sense is coming.

Have fun writing!

Julia

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