



Library podcast

POV (Part II): Third Limited – Your Limitation Is Your Strength

[00:00:04] Welcome to the Seattle writes podcast produced by the Seattle Public Library with support from the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Seattle writes, supports local writers through programs, workshops and write ins and by providing space to work throughout the city to see upcoming classes, and additional information about Seattle writes. Visit our website at [www.spl.org/Seattle writes](http://www.spl.org/Seattle%20writes).

[00:00:39] I'm Andrea Gough, a librarian and co co-ordinator of Seattle writes. I'm here today with Peter Mountford. For the second in a two part series on Point of view. Point of view: Third Limited-Your Limitation is Your Strength. Peter Mountford is the author of the novels A Young Man's Guide to Late Capitalism, winner of the 2012 Washington State Book Award in Fiction and The Dismal Science, a New York Times editor's choice. His work has appeared in the Paris Review, Missouri Review, The Atlantic, The Sun, Granta and elsewhere. He's a popular writing coach and instructor in Seattle and is on faculty at Sierra Nevada College's MFA program. Peter has also taught with Seattle writes, covering topics such as making a scene and experimenting with narrative time.

[00:01:22] Welcome. Thank you. I'm so excited to talk about third person limited and narrative distance, which is really part of that. It's somewhat complicated subject for readers. They sometimes struggle with it and I find that unfortunately. Sometimes students understand it intellectually, but then when they show me their writing, it hasn't yet actualized on the page. And then when it really does sink in, I've often seen their writing kind of go into three dimensions. It goes from two dimensional to three dimensional and it becomes so much more satisfying to write and read. Once you really grasp how to control narrative distance and how to do third person limited. But I want to start with a little bit of a flashback, if I can. When I was in my MFA program and millions of years ago and now is in 2004, I took my first writing class and I showed up full of self-confidence, I guess is a polite way of putting it. And my first piece was being discussed by the class and my lanky, mustachioed professor read the piece and then he asked the class. I was sitting there silently and he asked the class. What's the point of view of this story? And in my mind, I thought, well, this is third person. Thank you very much. Who wouldn't know that? And then one of the students lifted their hand and said, is it third limited? And the professor said, well, if you look at the third paragraph, you'll see that the point of view is drifting. And then he said, maybe it's omniscient. And I was like, wait a second. Limited drifting. What is going on here? It felt completely out of my depth.

[00:03:09] I didn't understand at all what they were saying. And it turns out that was a pretty big problem. Like many people, I sort of assumed the third person was just the point of view where you

write he and she. Instead of I, without understanding all the nuances of this, it's like classifying all wheeled vehicles from bicycle to big rig under the category of car as opposed to feet. I didn't really understand that third person limited for a long time, and I certainly didn't understand why an author would choose to be limited in a way like isn't limitation bad? Don't we want to avoid limitation? And I continued to sort of not fully understand for a number of years. And then as my understanding finally clicked in and I understood specifically how to write close third person limited, my writing really changed. And ever since then, most of what I've written has been published. Prior to that, about a thousand consecutive rejections, which was really uncomfortable. But I'm glad that's over. So it's a really powerful and flexible approach to narration, and it's specifically powerful because you can go close and pull away from the point of view character. So first, I'm going to back up a little bit and talk about the general choices of third person in the last podcast. I did talk a bit about omniscient which is a narrative approach that was favored in classical literature and really emphasized a kind of all knowing narrator. And it felt pretty distant. You can read any Charles Dickens or any of those books and see how this narrator, this god like narrator is quite far away from the characters.

[00:05:06] And it's pretty hard for a reader to develop a relationship with any of those characters. There's also a cinematic third person, which is what I would think of as kind of Hemingway, like writing and other types of writing where the narrator never really enters the mind of any of the characters. It's very distant. Hemingway and others have thought of it as a kind of objective narrator. The idea being that the narrator doesn't have opinions and doesn't mess around with anything that is subjective and they don't go into anyone's minds. The narrator is like a camera on the wall. These pieces of writing can sort of look like a screenplay. When you see them on the page, it's just dialogue and very plain physical description without a lot of emotional bend to it. Very, very straightforward. And that's a cinematic third person. And then there's the limited third person, which, as the name suggests, is when the narrator is limited to one person's perspective. And it is the most prevalent approach in literature since the early 20th century. There's so many examples that don't know where to begin, but I love the Harry Potter books are in third person limited from Harry Potter's point of view. If Harry doesn't know something, the reader cannot know it. The reader is stuck with Harry, although crucially, Rowling chooses very often to have a pretty distant relationship with Harry. Sometimes the narrator gets closer, but she's often quite far away. And I'll talk about what that looks like and how that works. But that's pretty common in genre fiction and in literary fiction the third person narrator is often closer to the point of view character.

[00:06:57] Before I get to that, I want to talk about shifting or multiple limited points of view in many, many books, including both of mine. The third person narrator is restricted to one character's perspective through the entirety of the novel. But in shifting or multiple limited points of view, the point of view changes from chapter to chapter. Or it can change between sections in within a chapter, but generally doesn't change paragraph to paragraph because that ends up feeling confusing and the reader can't tell where the point of view is going.

[00:07:36] Examples of shifting limited include *West of Here* by Jonathan Evison, which has about 50 different points of view then R. O. Quand, *The Incendiaries* and the works of Elizabeth George, the mystery writer and the *Game of Thrones* books are all shifting, limited, and in all of those cases, I

believe the way it works is that the chapter is with a certain person's point of view and then the next chapter will switch. But there's not switching within a chapter. You know, you're in a different point of view when you switch the chapter. Sometimes a narrator will. The book will have a structure where the name of the character whose point of view it is, is the name of the chapter to help the reader. But in the case of somebody like Elizabeth George, who will have as many of six or seven points of view moving throughout a novel, you can just tell whose point of view it is rather quickly through the way it's written. And that's because she does very good third person limited and the personality of the point of view character is immediately palpable to a reader. When you start reading a couple of sentences, you just know who it is. So your limitation is your strength. When a story or novel is written from one character's point of view, readers build a relationship with that character. We see the world through their eyes and feel their feelings and their experiences more intimately. In many respects, it is like first person point of view. But the critical distinction is that readers aren't trapped with the character's perspective.

[00:09:18] The ability to convey a character's thoughts and then back away when you'd like to mute their thoughts is a critical difference from first person. The narrator can sit on the protagonist shoulder for some parts of the story and then back away for other parts. Early in a book, for example, employing a close third person can help readers understand a character's inner workings really well. And as the book progresses, you might not need to be so close to the character. You can get a little bit more distant and even do a little bit more of that almost cinematic type of writing, because the reader, the reader understands the character really well. And so they can imagine what's happening in the character's mind. You don't have to show it to them all the time. And it does that thing. The flexibility, for example, that you can see is when when a character is experiencing something that is really agonizing. And if you're in first person, you're stuck with that character's agony and you have to write these sentences that are sort of emotionally overwhelming and can be kind of awkward to read after a while because it feels maudlin or overemotional. And when you have third person limited, you can pull away during those times. And that makes those passages more powerful than if you're kind of shoving emotions onto the page and you can kind of have a little bit more distance. But then when things are less emotionally overwhelming, you can get really close and show the inner workings of a character's mind. Limitation can also increase suspense.

[00:10:55] If you can't see outside of a character's perspective, then the reader literally doesn't know what's around the corner. Whether the character can trust other people in their lives. And if the POV character trusts someone that the reader worries might be dishonest. That can be an excellent way to build tension. One of my favorite examples is a short story that was published, I think in 2003 and is by the author Jill McCorkle. And it's called Intervention. It appeared originally and literary journal Ploughshares and then was republished in Best American Short Stories 2004, edited by Lorrie Moore.

[00:11:35] And I'm going to read just the opening part of the opening paragraph. Again, the story's called Intervention, which tells you a little bit about what it's about. The intervention is not Marylin's idea, but it might as well be. She is the one who has talked too much and she has agreed to go along

with it, nodding and murmuring and all right into the receiver while Sid, dozes in front of the evening news.

[00:12:01] Things are so horrible all over the world that it makes them feel lucky just to be alive.

[00:12:07] Sid is 65. He is retired. He is disappearing before her very eyes. From this section it's maybe six or seven sentences you can see how much information is coming through to the reader on many different levels. It might as well be that line when she said this intervention might as well be her idea. She is the one who talked too much. You can feel Marilyn's, that she has set this intervention in motion and that she regrets it and that she has ambivalence about this. She murmurs and all right, in the receiver, as Sid sleeps in the next paragraph, presumably he can't deduce the plans being made while he's asleep. And yet she's careful with her words in saying things are so horrible all over the world that makes them feel lucky just to be alive. The word them demonstrates that Marilyn feels a closeness was said and that they often share the same worldview with the sentence: He is disappearing before her very eyes. We see that Marilyn feels something is wrong with him. And because the story is called Intervention, we know he is an alcoholic and she's trying to fix this, but she's also frightened of trying to fix it. There's so much going on in just a few sentences and so much of it is inside the subtext. The word feel appears only once in that paragraph. They feel lucky to be alive.

[00:13:41] All the other emotional content is communicated by implication, Marilyn's guilt, her sense of responsibility, her concern about her beloved husband's drinking problem, her accidental or half accidental instigation of a secret plan for an alcoholism intervention, and as well as the fact that she's sort of regrets possibly setting these plans in motion. All of that internal conflict and apprehension are presented in the kind of subtextual way through a close third person limited point of view. If the author McCorkle had tried to do that same paragraph in a cinematic third point of view, the paragraph would be so painfully blunt. And I have, for your benefit, attempted to do that right here. Here we go. Marilyn regrets telling her daughter that Sid, Marilyn's husband or daughter's father has been drinking too much. Now her daughter has called her on the phone to say that she wants to stage an intervention. On the phone with her daughter, Marilyn is nodding and murmuring. All right into the receiver. While Sid dozes is in front of the evening news, which is full of bad news from all over the world. Sid is 65. It's not so great. You could sort of feel how blunt it is and what the point of this kind of close third person is, is to kind of build layers of meaning of subtext so that the reader can read between the lines and gather information when you're doing a good job with third person limited and it's close.

[00:15:15] You can describe setting, but the way you describe the setting tells us about a point of view character because it's telling us how the character sees the setting. It's almost like constructive bias. The character's bias is inflected into the narration. So everything that's described tells you about the character as a way to really supercharge character information into a text that isn't really about the character. You never have to describe what kind of person they are because everything else that you describe tells us what kind of person they are. That said, writing in third person limited is surprisingly difficult for a lot of people. It requires close observation, practice and a willingness to rigorously rework sentences. I teach the approach in my MFA classes and as well with clients of mine as a

writing coach. Most commonly, writers seem to create richly drawn perspective for the characters they most easily identify with. But the point of view becomes more distant when they switch to a character who they feel is difficult or unappealing, or whose life experiences are really dissimilar from the authors. Readers don't hear the ungainly character's thoughts or get any sense of that complex, multilayered writing. So you can tell when they're switching points of view. You'll see when an author has an easier time doing close third with a character than when they don't.

[00:16:48] And it's really hard to do it equally well with all of your different points of view, which is what Elizabeth George does and it's so miraculous to behold. You need to completely understand your point of view character's inner life from the amount of self-awareness or lack of self-awareness to how they see the sunset. It's actually a lot as far as I think. I mean, I really believe this. It's a lot like method acting, writing in third person limited. You really have to get inside of the character's mind. In a 2016 op ed for The New York Times, the author, Kaitlyn Greenidge, described how she struggled in her novel, *We Love You, Charlie Freeman*, to write a subtly racist character in a way that felt convincing. She finally realized with dread that she would have to, quote, love this monster into existence end quote, that she had to get close enough to the character to sort of identify with them in a certain way. Or it would just feel like you could feel the author's distaste for the character and that made the character feel flat or two dimensional. You can build your own experience with third person limited by rewriting scenes in different perspectives, being keenly aware of the distinctions between each of them. Here's an example of the same scene that I wrote rendered three times, starting with the nomination third.

[00:18:18] Tom, who owned the general store, was superficial and sexist, and he thought Mildred, a cheerful old lady who came to the store every day, was loud and unattractive. You can sort of feel that the narrator is neither with Tom nor Mildred and is able to sort of describe them both impartially with third person limited. We try to ensure that the character's beliefs are reflected in the narrator's description of things. So here we try again. Mildred burst into the store. This is from Tom's perspective now. Close, limited, third, Mildred burst into the store, braying hellos to everyone and brandishing her stained dentures and a crooked grin. Tom looked away, admiring the sleek new light fixtures that he had installed over the deli. One of the biggest challenges in writing this way is that the readers might end up thinking that the perspective being asserted here is the author's, not the characters, which can be really unfortunate, especially if your point of view character is someone as unpleasant as Tom. There's little to be done to mitigate this as far as I can tell. If you try to wink knowingly at the reader, the spell will be broken. The readers connection to the character will be lost. So you just have to sort of trust your reader. Here's that same scene with Tom and Mildred, but it's written from the point of view of Lily, the young woman who works in the deli at the same store.

[00:19:50] The door opened, Lily looked up through the glass of the deli counter, which she was trying her best to clean to Tom's exacting standards, and grinned to herself that the irresistible enthusiasm of Mildred, that chatty old lady whose arrival was one of the bright spots of every morning at the store. Another way to put third person limited into practice is by revising sentences where the thoughts and statements are doing a lot of work. You can move emphasis to internalized view, which is called free indirect speech. Here's an example, I need you to pick up this room, Theresa said to her sick

daughter, who was gazing at her phone. As she looked around the dark room, she thought to herself. These tissues and dirty dishes are disgusting. But to get closer, free and direct, you remove the quotes and build a kind of. Build the thoughts into the narration like this, Teresa's daughter still hadn't picked up her room. It was disgusting. Balled up tissues and empty plates and glasses were everywhere. Teresa glared at her on the sofa at the girl's puffy eyes and red rimmed nostrils. Morgan was staring at her phone again. You can feel the bias of Teresa inside the sentences. Her distaste for what her daughter is acting like is part of the text rather than it being a quoted thought.

[00:21:23] The quoted thoughts are always a sign that the narrator is far away from the character and that when I say, quote, a thought, I do mean also thoughts that are represented in italics. But I'm talking about thoughts that are presented as phrases. Teresa thought to herself, quote, These tissues and dirty dishes are disgusting end quote, that feels like a thought that is quoted as if it's a phrase. It's again, done in genre fiction. J.K. Rowling, again, does it a lot because she's distant third. It's a sign of a distant narrator. But when you get close, you can get rid of those and not have any thoughts like that. The more time you spend with this point of view, the more you will see the sentences begin to do several jobs at once. And that's really the point here. Layering meaning between the lines. This is what is so magical about third person limited and why I prefer it to almost anything. Readers don't even see the sleight of hand, but they feel inside of the sentences. The secondary meaning and third meanings coming through. And I have some exercises finally for those who want to try this out? This is a version of a prompt from John Gardner's, *The Art of Fiction*, sort of twisted it a bit. But I want you to try describing a barn from the point of view of a man who's just learned that his son has died.

[00:22:46] Don't tell us anything about the son or even that the son has died. Just describe the barn as he sees it. Another one is a version of Lisa Cron's from Lisa Cron's book *Story Genius*. And in this one, I want you to try writing a first person account from your POV character's childhood. Some important or pivotal moment that relates to this, to the formation of their personality, a time when they were ignored or where their house burned down, anything. And when you do this, you have to accept that what you write down might not end up in the final draft of your writing, but it will help you understand that character's perspective. This is when you're writing third person limited to understand your character. You write some first person stories from their childhood. And finally, another prompt is to take a scene as written without any internal perspective. The point of view character's thoughts are nowhere to be found and redo it with those thoughts used the same dialog, but after every line pour a paragraph or two of the character's thoughts into the space there, again, this will likely be cut or the scene will feel really disjointed. But it'll help you understand who the character is.

[00:24:03] Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you.

[00:24:10] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.