CHAPTER FIVE

POINT OF VIEW

Where does the story come from? Who is telling it? To answer these questions, writers use the point of view (POV) — the vantage point(s) from which the story is observed. News stories are filled with, he said, she said, according to, and other indicators of information sources. Fiction is under hardly less obligation, even though the sources are invented. The fictional source of information corresponds to the POV.

FIRST-PERSON POV

The most natural POV is the first-person singular, since all stories and trials originate with someone, an "I," witnessing what happens. All other POVs spring from this mother of all POVs.

Here is an example of the first-person POV from "Sister Imelda" by Irish writer Edna O'Brien:

I had met Sister Imelda outside of class a few times and I felt that there was an attachment between us. Once it was in the grounds, when she did a reckless thing. She broke off a chrysanthemum and offered it to me to smell.

The telling of a story usually occurs after the events; in the above example it comes years later. Although the "I" character was a school child, the narrative first person is not, and therefore tells the story in an adult's language. We must distinguish between the author and the narrator (between Edna O'Brien and the first- person adult narrator), and between the narrator (the adult looking back) and the character (the child).

The first-person character and the first-person narrator can appear to be one and the same, as in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn:

Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks.

Huck Finn the narrator sounds the same as Huck Finn the boy, and the novel sounds like something spoken. Mark Twain invented the child's voice as his narrative means of perception for his fiction. But Mark Twain is not Huck Finn. The first-person POV in fiction does not represent the author. The first person is a persona; persona, as discussed in chapter two, means "mask." This POV should be different from you; he should be free to have his own religion, politics, aesthetics, that may, but need not, coincide with yours. You as the author should not be blamed for what your persona does. If your persona is a serial killer, nobody should assume that you are a serial killer. If your fictional "I" performs acts of kindness surpassing Mother Teresa's, this will not qualify you for the Nobel Peace Prize. E.L. Doctorow says that "a novelist is a

person who can live in other people's skins." Writing in the first person helps you identify and empathize with characters who are very different from you.

This does not mean that you can't write about your essential concerns. On the contrary, now that you have a persona, a mask, you can bring out your demons and angels. As we discussed earlier, fiction is a carnival; behind your mask you can express yourself much more freely than with a straight face.

When the first-person protagonist is really you and the events in the story are taken directly from your experience, you are probably writing an essay or autobiographical fiction, which sounds like — and to some extent is —a contradiction in terms. Of course, you can cross the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. There are no German shepherds and barbed wires, no

Berlin Wall, between the two branches of writing. The Berlin Wall has collapsed in many ways. But make sure that this collapsed wall expands your world, rather than shrinks it.

The first-person narrator can tell a story with herself as a central character or she can be one of the minor characters. Or she can tell somebody else's story, barely mentioning herself except to show where the information comes from. Some literati argue, however, that the carrier of the first-person POV must always be a central character. Ostensibly we may follow and observe somebody else, but it's the story carrier's epiphanies and insights that matter to us most because we have identified with her vision. This may not always be true, but if your first-person POV carrier is an observer of somebody else's action, your readers will ask, "And what about this guy watching all this? Isn't he responsible too?" Gear your narrative, then, to answer these questions, no matter how subtly.

First-Person Multiple POV

In this variation of the traditional, first-person approach, you use several first-person narrators and alternate among them, usually beginning a new chapter with each change of narrator. This strategy offers a diversity of voices, viewpoints and ways of thinking. It allows you to convey just as much as through an omniscient narrator, without the arrogance of the omniscient sound and with the advantage of diverse voices.

Since the same event means different things to different participants and observers, the event could be presented richly, without an artificial extrapolation of what actually happened. Let the reader jump to conclusions and form an objective picture. William Faulkner explained his reasons for using this narrative strategy in The Sound and the Fury: "I tried to tell it again, the same story through the eyes of another brother. That was still not it. I told it for the third time through the eyes of the third brother. That was still not it. I tried to gather the pieces together and fill in the gaps by making myself the spokesman. It was still not complete. ... I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I'd probably fail again."

For short pieces, too, first-person multiple POV may be a fine way to write, especially in a story centered around a sharp conflict. Still, since a short story must establish a focus quickly and maintain the focus, jumping POVs might disrupt its flow.

Epistolary Fiction

Letters are almost always written in the first person. Many novels—especially in the nineteenth century, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther—have been epistolary, or written in the form of correspondence. We as

readers become voyeurs prying into these "personal" revelations. The advantage of writing letters is that you can visualize a correspondent and aim your voice at him as your audience. This might be a good model for any POV. Rather than writing for "posterity" and a "national" audience, find one trustworthy ear to talk to. John Steinbeck, author of The Grapes of Wrath, said: "Your audience is one single reader. I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person —a real person you know, or an

imagined person —and write to that one."
Akin to epistolary fiction, the diary form also uses the first-

person POV. The narrator writes to come to grips with an event and perhaps to keep it preserved for memory. The advantage here is that you may get rid of all self-consciousness and establish a frank voice.

Nowadays, fewer people write personal letters, so the epistolary novel is not a frequently used form. But a similar means-of- communication form has sprung up, the phone novel, which has the appearance of a telephone conversation transcript— Nicholson Baker's Vox and parts of Evelyn Waugh's A Handful of Dust use this approach. This is an objective —or theatrical — POV, since we as readers get the experience of being an audience, listening to conversations.

First-Person Narrator's Reliability

Philosophically, the first-person POV is the least problematic: The narrator has seen something, and now tells us about it.

However, when the source of information is singular, there are no checks for the truth of what's said. We can wonder if the reporter is telling the truth. (Of course in fiction nothing is reliable, but we strive to appear reliable.) We find the simplest paradigm of the unreliable narrator in the sour grapes fable: The speaker says that he did not want the grapes anyway, they were too green, when it's clear that he wanted but could not get them.

Here's an example of a self-conscious unreliable narrator, from Fyodor Dostoyevski's Notes From Underground:

I was lying when I said just now that I was a spiteful official. I was lying out of spite. I was simply amusing myself with the petitioners and with the officer, and in reality I never could become spiteful. I was conscious every moment in myself of many, very many elements absolutely opposite to that.

What can you believe here? Reconstructing the true motives beneath the surface presented by the narrator is a part of the pleasure of reading an unreliable narrator. The narrative becomes a study of a split personality, a hypocrite or a liar. Since quite a few people fall into these categories — we probably all do at least now and then — this narrative strategy is often the perfect choice for a story.

Pros and Cons for First-Person POV

The first-person POV offers advantages and disadvantages that you should be aware of before using it in your fiction. The advantages include the following:

1. It's technically the least ambiguous. The reader always knows who is seeing and interpreting the narrative action. No artificial objective knowledge is assumed. If the first person makes faulty inferences, the reader will accept them as part of the narrator's unreliability.

2. In our era, subjectivity — even in the sciences —seems to be the prevalent mode, so we need an option for telling a story subjectively, and first-person POV certainly gives you that option.

3. In first person, you can choose a voice most freely. While

third-person narrative basically restricts you to standard English, in the first person you may use slang, bad grammar, everyday language to arrive at an authentic narrative voice.

4. First person offers smooth access to a character's thoughts. You don't have to worry about awkward switches in pronouns, like "He opened the door and thought, I better thaw the chicken."

Here are the disadvantages to the first-person POV for you to consider:

1. We can't take an outside look at our carrier of POV, unless we place a mirror somewhere, and mirrors have been overused in fiction. Avoid them unless you find no other solution. (Compensate for the inability to look directly at your character by reporting her thoughts about her appearance.)

2. From the first-person POV, faithful reproductions of diverse dialogues may be implausible. Your first person may appear to be a theatrical genius with an amazing ear. On the other hand, to render almost every dialogue in one or two voices may be monotonous. Generally, it's better to err toward the interesting side —good reproduction of dialogue.

3. That an "I" tells the story implies that the "I" is still alive. Thus, one source of possible suspense —whether the character will survive —vanishes in the first-person POV.

4. It's hard to create a compelling new voice for each story. Many productive short story writers find it easier to write in the third person because they don't have to invent voices so frequently. Once you create a strong voice, you might want to stick with it for a series of short stories or a short novel.

THIRD-PERSON POV

In third-person POV, the writer uses "he," "she," or "they" rather than the first-person "I." After choosing third person, the writer must then select which type of third-person strategy best fits the piece of fiction.

Third-Person Omniscient POV

In this POV, which is used infrequently in contemporary writing, the author knows everything about all the characters, places and events involved. Since not everything can be presented simultaneously, the author jumps from inside one head to another. We observe from many angles. The "camera" is conveniently set wherever the action is, akin to television coverage of a basketball game.

In the example below, from Middlemarch, which is mostly in third-person omniscient POV, George Eliot frequently makes comments in the first person, taking a panoramic view of the narrative, sweeping through history, philosophy and individual minds:

At present I have to make the new settler Lydgate better known to anyone interested in him than he could possibly be even to those who had seen the most of him since his arrival in Middlemarch. . . .

Lydgate's spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which, in spite of noble intention and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world: that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour did not penetrate his feeling and judgement about furniture or women or the desirability of its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons.

As you can see, the author seems to knows everything. She can tell us more about a settler than anybody, including himself. She tells us about human nature; she makes no bones about this being

an artificial narrative. She intrudes on the exposition of the narrative, saying what she plans to do with it. Intrude may not be the right word, though, in the omniscient narrative — since the reader is invited to share the omniscience and is given the credit of being constantly aware of the novel's artificiality.

Here's a contemporary omniscient narrative, from Einstein's Dreams by Alan Lightman:

At some time in the past, scientists discovered that time flows more slowly the farther from the center of earth.. . .

Once the phenomenon was known, a few people, anxious to stay young, moved to the mountains. . . . People most eager to live longest have built their houses on the highest stilts. Indeed, some houses rise half a mile high on their spindly wooden legs. Height has become status. When a person from his kitchen window must look up to see a neighbor, he believes the

neighbor will not become stiff in the joints as soon as he, will not lose his hair until later, will not wrinkle until later, will not lose the urge for romance as early.. . . Some boast that they have lived their whole lives high up, that they were born in the highest house on the highest mountain peak and have never descended. They celebrate their youth in the mirrors and walk naked on their balconies.

The narrative here does not enter into specific people's heads. The narrative voice knows everything—science, customs—but the author does not ostensibly jump in to tell you about his stance. Jumping into the minds of two or more people and showing their thoughts is the standard feature of most omniscient writing. Here's an example, from "August 2002: Night Meeting" by Ray Bradbury.

"Good lord, what a dream that was," sighed Tomas, his hands on the wheel, thinking of the rockets, the women, the raw whiskey, the Virginia reels, the party.

How strange a vision was that, thought the Martian, rushing on, thinking of the festival, the canals, the boats, the women with golden eyes, and the songs.

Properly speaking, most omniscient narratives have the nature of a series of third-person limited omniscient with occasional essayistic explanations of what the world is like in the interim.

Third-Person Limited POV

This POV —and its variants —is the most common one used nowadays. There are at least three kinds of third-person limited POVs:

Third-person subjective POV. This POV resembles the first- person POV except usually it's done in standard English rather than in the character's voice. For example, "As Judy watched monkeys jump on trees, she thought about getting into shape and remembered that her mother wanted to buy her a ski cap." Here we have access to a person's thoughts and feelings just as we do in the first person.

Third-person objective POV. We observe what our "she" is doing without entering her head, and we don't attribute the observation to another character. You don't reveal the viewer— the way you don't see the person holding a camcorder. "As she faced the monkey cage, she rubbed Chap Stick over her thin lips."

Third-person limited omniscient POV or third-person flexible POV. This is a contradiction in terms. If the POV is limited, it can't be omniscient. However, since this term is so widely used, we could use it too, though I prefer to call this a third-person limited flexible POV. The two names for this POV are interchangeable. Both are in currency. This combines the objective and the subjective approaches. "As Judy watched monkeys jump on trees,

she rubbed Chap Stick over her thin lips and remembered that her mother wanted to buy her a ski cap." We can see Judy and learn what she thinks. (For possibilities of irony in this approach—the author knowing more than the character — read Flaubert's paragraph about Bovary's gambling at

the end of this chapter.) Although a narrator is not revealed, there must be an incognito narrator. It's hard to distinguish between the third-person POV narrator and the author. You may assume that most readers will interpret whatever the hidden third-person narrator says to be the author's viewpoint.

Here's an example of a third-person subjective POV from Doris Lessing's "Habit of Loving":

But he would not go to the hospital. So the doctor said he must have day and night nurses. This he submitted to until the cheerful friendliness of the nurses saddened him beyond bearing, and he asked the doctor to ring up his wife . . . She promised to find him someone who would not wear a uniform and make jokes.

And later, from the same story, after the man marries a freelance nurse:

"But you are nothing but a child," he said fondly. He could not decipher what lay behind the black, full stare of her sad eyes as she looked at him now; she was sitting cross-legged in her black glossy trousers before the fire, like a small doll. But a spring of alarm had been touched in him and he didn't dare say any more.

From an objective distance the narrative jumps into the main character's head and from there we observe how other characters look and behave, and decipher how they feel, without entering their heads. We are limited to one third person's knowledge.

Despite some initial distance toward the character, this POV resembles the first-person POV: We follow the thoughts of one person and see from that person's POV. Lessing's approach is mostly subjective —our vantage point does not step out of the main character's head for us to be able to observe him. Later in the narrative, when she needs to describe the man, she brings up a mirror so she would not leave his vantage point.

Conventionally, in the third-person limited perspective, the author should not intrude by having the narrator step in and tell something about himself or offer some universal truth. This authorial intrusion is more irksome than in the omniscient narrative, because the additional jump here will be from the limited to the omniscient POV.

Because it offers the leeway to say whatever the author pleases, the third-person omniscient is the most flexible, and in a way, the most forgiving POV. So it's surprising that it's not in fashion. Perhaps since we have good reasons to be skeptical about nearly everything, the omniscient voice may sound too dogmatic. Yet, because of the freedom to point out that the narrative is an artifice, third-person omniscient could sound less dogmatic than the third- person flexible.

Third-Person Multiple POV

This sounds like omniscient POV, and the difference may be subtle, but it's best to see it as a series of third-person limited POVs minus authorial intrusions. Czech writer Milan Kundera alternates two POVs from chapter to chapter in "Let the Old Dead Make Room for the Young Dead."

[Chapter I] He was returning home along the street of a small Czech town, where he had been living for several years. He was reconciled to his not too exciting life. . . . [II] She knew the path to her husband's grave from memory, and yet today she felt all at

once as if she were in this cemetery for the first time. [Ill] Not long ago he had turned thirty-five, and exactly at that time he had noticed that the hair on the top of his head was thinning very visibly.

The narrative follows the protagonists' POVs —we know what they think and what they see —so it's an alternation of two third- person subjective POVs.

Objective POV

Sometimes this perspective is blurred under the third-person objective POV, but we should distinguish an objective POV, which does not focus on one person, from the limited objective POV. Another name for this is the theatrical POV. We observe the action of two or more protagonists, favoring none of them with an exclusive focus, as though in a play. The author does not comment on anything, does not enter people's heads, but merely presents to us the drama as objectively as possible. Ideally, no hidden third or first person lurks anywhere. Of course, there are limits to objectivity; some people consider everything subjective. No doubt, the author will taint the narrative, but as long as she does it with subtlety, the scene will appear objective. Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is one of the most popular examples of this narrative stance:

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table. "The beer's nice and cool," the man said. "It's lovely," the girl said.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."

The narrative offers a recording of a conversation in which a couple is probably discussing an abortion. The reader is allowed to be the judge of what's going on but, of course, must work harder than usual to infer the meaning of the narrative.

UNUSUAL POVS

Occasionally you may get tired of using the basic first- and third-person POVs. After much use, the first may sound too individualistic, and the third too distant and objectifying. Or you may feel stuck in a routine. For a fresh angle of vision, or for a special effect, you may resort to less frequently used POVs. The names for POVs come from the personal pronouns, so besides the ones we covered, there are we (first-person plural POV), you (second-person singular POV — and also plural in the sense of "Y'all"), and various permutations of these and of the ones we've already covered. After excursions to the less frequently used POVs, you'll probably want to return to the prevalent first and third person, which will become fresh again.

Second-Person POV

The author makes believe that he is talking to someone, describing what the person addressed is doing. But the "you" is not the reader, though sometimes it's hard to get rid of the impression that the author is addressing you directly. Here's an example of this POV, from "Main Street Morning" by Natalie M. Patesch, a contemporary American short story writer:

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Your knees are weak as you lean against the freshly painted red, white and blue fire hydrant. Your impulse is to run toward them, crying out, me too! me too! You can now taste your own long denial; you want to run and tell her all about your thirty-one years without her and have her cry out with absolving certainty: Oh what a beautiful daughter you are!

I find it a little confining to be told what I am doing and what I am thinking and what I am to do, as though I were following a recipe. If

I get rid of that impression, the "you" can be quite engaging. Since the plea of this POV is for immediate attention, most often it is told in the present tense. The present brings us into the time of action, suspends any knowledge of the future, and you as the reader are invited to identify directly with the character. This POV can sound too insistent, as if the writer is grasping for the reader's attention. It can also sound journalistic, since much travel reporting is done in second person.

First and Second Combined

You can combine the second-person POV with the first, as does Margaret Atwood in "Hair Jewellery":

Between my fits of sleep I thought about you, rehearsing our future, which I knew would be brief. Of course we would sleep together, though this topic had not yet been discussed. In those days, as you recall, it had to be discussed first, and so far we had not progressed beyond a few furtive outdoor gropings and one moment when, under a full moon on one of those deserted brick streets, you had put your hand on my throat. . . .

Here the first- and second-person POV, are combined to an excellent effect. This is the type of POV combination, or address of me to you, frequently found in love poetry, and Atwood's story is a love story of sorts, so the story benefits from the tradition. Yet, strangely enough, this POV combination is rare.

First and Third Combined

You can also combine first- and third-person POVs, as does Russell Banks in "Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story":

I felt warmed by her presence and was flirtatious and bold, a little pushy, even.

Picture this. The man, tanned, limber . . . enters the apartment behind the woman.

This combination of points of view helps to develop the theme —a narcissistic man's affair with a homely woman. The narcissist switches the narrative into the third person to take a look at himself, the way one might like to see oneself on a screen; he also deals with his cruelty in the affair like that, projecting himself into another person, to understand his guilt. You could use first- and third-person combined POV for other kinds of characters, especially those with a personality dichotomy, where you want to look at a character from different angles.

Third-Person Plural Observer POV

Here the perceptions of an event do not come from the angle of the central character, but from a group of characters who watch the protagonist, as in "Mother" by the Italian fiction writer Natalia Ginzburg:

One day when they were out for a walk with Don Vigiliani and with other boys from the youth club, on the way back they saw their mother in a suburban cafe. She was sitting inside the cafe; they saw her through the window, and a man was sitting with her. Their mother had laid her tartan scarf on the table. . . .

"They saw her through the window." We see the mother from the standpoint of the boys.

For the theme of the story, a mother's adultery, this is an effective angle. Her children's observation keeps her imprisoned in the role of motherhood, from which she tries to escape by becoming a lover. The story is secondarily about the boys, too, and our observation of their elusive mother through their eyes creates an effective narrative distance—appropriate because the boys are about to become orphans.

First-Person Collective Observer POV

This POV is ideal for small town narratives, where an individual lives under a communal scrutiny. This is how William Faulkner uses it in "A Rose for Emily," after an incident in which Miss Emily claims that her dead father is alive:

We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.

She was sick for a long time. When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angles in colored church windows —sort of tragic and serene.

The reader follows the motions and the acts of one person through a group's viewpoint; somebody in the group, as the narrator, speaks for the group, never drawing attention to his identity, as though he does not have any, other than belonging to the group. Faulkner never individualizes the "we" observing Miss Emily, so he keeps the narrative distance between "us" and "her." This first-person plural POV fits the theme of a woman living under the oppressive

communal gaze. If you set your stories in a small community —schools, towns, churches, families — and you focus on a secretive individual in conflict with the community, try this POV.

Stream of Consciousness

This technique evolved from cognitive theories about consciousness. In Principles of Psychology, philosopher William James, in striving to describe the thought process, coined the phrase "stream of consciousness."

Here's a segment of a stream of consciousness, in Ulysses by James Joyce, written as a direct interior monologue. Note that for the sake of approximating the mental verbal flux, Joyce omits punctuation, since in our thoughts we probably don't punctuate. Joyce presents the stream of consciousness as Molly Bloom's thoughts, not as a piece written for an audience:

Father Corrigan he touched me father and what harm if he did where and I said on the canal bank like a fool but whereabouts on your person my child on the leg behind high up was it yes rather high up was it where you sit down yes O Lord couldnt he say bottom right out and have done with it what has that got to do with it and did you whatever way he put it I forget no father and I always think of the real father what did he want to know for when 1 already confessed it to God he had a nice fat hand the palm moist always I wouldn't mind feeling it neither would he Id say by the bullneck in his horsecollar I wonder did he know me in the box I could see his face he couldnt see mine of course he never turn or let on still his eyes were red when his father died theyre lost for a woman of course must be terrible when a man cries let alone them Id like to be embraced by one in his vestments and the smell of incense off him like the pope besides theres no danger with a priest if youre married.. . .

Molly Bloom recalls a confession and a confessed sexual encounter with a boy, daydreams about the priest, thinks about euphemisms and about men crying. The thoughts may seem random, but at the same time they have a narrative coherence. We find out what and how Molly thinks, what she did, what she'd like to do. Joyce communicates a rich texture of Molly's experience in this rush of consciousness. This technique is basically the first-person POV, a direct interior monologue. To follow the principle "show, don't tell," you directly show thoughts. Most often, we simply

summarize thoughts without showing them, but in crucial moments of your narrative, you may want to show them.

You can resort to the stream of consciousness whenever you want to bring us intimately into a character's experience, so this is potentially an excellent way to characterize. The technique is well suited for moments of indecision, waiting, pondering, quiet contemplation, as well as for moments of violent crisis (such as being wounded or shocked). Stream of consciousness may have slow-motion effect if you use it amid action. Naturally, if you overuse this method you will not increase but, rather, decrease suspense, since stream of consciousness tends to meander into the future, past and present, without a sharp focus.

The major drawback of stream of consciousness is that it's cumbersome to read in large chunks. While writing it is often fun, it usually isn't fun to read. Be considerate to your reader, and edit your streams of consciousness so that there's always something interesting going on, in terms of language, images and thoughts. Use the stream of consciousness in small doses, in fairly brief passages (perhaps no more than a page at a time) to enhance rather than kill your narrative tension.

SHIFTING POVS

Switches in POV irritate some readers and certainly most editors unless you establish the pattern early as the form of the narrative. So, if for no other reason than the practical one of getting published, most writers must respect the conventions of POV. Beginning writers often write pages from the perspective of one person and then suddenly, mid-sentence, they might switch like this: "While he bit his nails and thought that she did not understand him, she brushed her hair and thought that he needed therapy." In one sentence we enter two heads. If this narrative is not otherwise omniscient in form, this switch jars us. If the POV switches throughout, it still should not take place within the same sentence. Conventionally, when you switch from the thoughts of one person to the thoughts of another, you'd start a new paragraph or more often, a new chapter. Otherwise, your narrative will be jumpy.

Consistency is one guideline. If you plan to use multiple POVs, make this clear as early as possible. After chapter (or paragraph) one, in which your POV focuses on Jim, open chapter (or paragraph) two with Julie's POV. Then you can shift back and forth with each new chapter or paragraph, if necessary. You have prepared the reader for these shifts.

Sometimes POV shifts can be effective. This is what E.M. Forster said about switching POVs — from omniscient to limited and to objective: "A novelist can shift his viewpoint if it comes off, and it came off with Dickens and Tolstoy. Indeed this power to expand and contract perceptions (of which the shifting viewpoint is a symptom), this right to intermittent knowledge: —I find it one of the great advantages of the novel-form, and it has a parallel in our perception of life. We are stupider at some times than others; we can enter into people's minds occasionally but not always, because our own minds get tired; and this intermit-tence lends in the long run variety and colour to the experiences we receive."

Switching POVs can establish the source of knowledge that we discussed in the beginning of the chapter. So for example, we can derive information about an event initially in the first person. After the story has been assembled from several witnesses, and enough inferences have been made to cover even what has not been told by the witnesses, the event may be described without

reference to the sources; things can assume an objective third- person perspective —and a composite report can be written about the motives of everybody involved.

Gustave Flaubert employs this strategy in Madame Bovary. He starts in the first-person plural (or collective):

We were in class when the headmaster came in, followed by a new boy, not wearing the school uniform, and a school servant carrying a large desk.

After Bovary and his background have been introduced, the first person observers drop out, and Flaubert gives us information, confident that we will have the impression that it has been gathered from witnesses, such as we had in the beginning. So after the first chapter, until the last, when the first-person plural POV reappears, the novel is narrated in a variety of third-person POVs, depending on what the novel needs to cover. For a while we follow Mr. Bovary. Sometimes we get his thoughts, other times we observe and analyze him.

To shut himself up every evening in the dirty public room, to push about on marble tables the small sheep-bones with black dots, seemed to him a fine proof of his freedom, which raised him in his own esteem.

Notice the duality of perception of Bovary's action. We learn that he derives a sense of freedom from playing dice. At the same time, the distant and hidden carrier —author? —of the third-person POV gives us an ironic angle on that freedom with the phrase, "push about. . . small sheep-bones with black dots." The dice are reduced to their banality, something Bovary does not see, and thus we are invited to see Bovary as bovine and banal. In many other chapters, the narrative focuses on Madame Bovary. In some passages, the narrative gives us the setting, the town of Yonville, with its history as a given knowledge. The novel employs many strategies. It would be too simple to say that it's written in the omniscient POV, although in sections it is. In other parts, it's written in a succession of different third-person flexible POVs, with authorial interpretations. I won't call it intrusion because the interpretations are done gracefully enough not to stall the narrative.

Unusual Shifts of POV

If you carefully read even some of the best fiction, you will find unusual switches. For example, in the much-praised objective POV by Hemingway in "Hills Like White Elephants," from which we read a brief section above, these two sentences occur:

The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.

He looked up the tracks but could not see the train.
You can see that someone is looking, from the outside. But to report what someone is seeing means you are in the person's head. How do we know that she saw the river? Perhaps she looked at the trees without seeing the river. In the second sentence, how do we know that he could not see the train? These brief POV shifts may be inadvertent, but perhaps Hemingway intentionally switched from objectivity to subjectivity, for one reason or another —maybe to make a disclaimer of objectivity. Who

knows? Maybe we need an omniscient critic to explain this to us.
If you switch POVs, be in control, and don't apologize or try too hard to cover your tracks because that will either intrude on the narrative or slow it down. Simply do it in a regular enough fashion.

Propel the reader into the new angle.
Here's an example of doing it gracefully, from Leo Tolstoy's "The

Death of Ivan Ilych." The POV shifts from one character's thoughts

to his appearance, from subjective to objective:
Peter Ivanovich, like everyone else on such occasions, entered

feeling uncertain what he would have to do. All he knew was that at such times it is always safe to cross oneself. But he was not quite sure whether one should make obeisances while doing so. He therefore adopted a middle course. On entering the room he began crossing himself and made a slight movement resembling a bow.

Tolstoy takes us from the character's thoughts to the appearance of his action — "a slight movement resembling a bow" — economically, with the help of one word, resembling. This is a good model, particularly in the third-person limited. After Peter Ivanovich spends some time observing Ivan Ilych's corpse and musing on Ilych's life in the first chapter, the second chapter opens with the history of Ilych's life. The transition takes place in a sharp way: The second chapter opens with Ilych as the subject. A new chapter as a new beginning opens up the possibility of starting from another angle. First, Ilych's history is objective, in the form of summaries, but in later chapters, the narrative focuses on Ilych's feelings, becoming quite subjective. The subject —the experience of dying—justifies the method of contracting the focus from the outside in.

Virtual Shift of POV

There's a way of getting into other people's thoughts without jumping POVs. Here's an example from Anton Chekhov's "Lady With a Dog." The story is told from a man's POV throughout, but at a crisis point, the narrative POV seemingly switches to the woman.

She glanced at him and turned pale, then glanced again with horror, unable to believe her eyes, and tightly gripped her fan and the lorgnette in her hands, evidently struggling with herself not to faint.

Note that once we have the woman's perspective, the author lets us know that we are not actually in her head, that we have reconstructed what must be going on in her mind. One word does the trick of distancing the POV: evidently. "Unable to believe her eyes" may be inferred from observation; or at any rate, our third- person POV, still with the man, could infer this. So in third-person limited, if you seemingly switch, indicate that we haven't actually switched POV but have observed deeply.