

Craft Paper: The Mind of the Unlikable

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Castellani dedicates his pages in *The Art of Perspective* to exploring perspective's fundamental role in storytelling, particularly in how it shapes the narrative experience. In this book, he stresses how different narrative perspectives can deepen character development, create suspense, and evoke emotional responses while emphasizing the narrative's subjective nature. Ultimately, the book is about understanding how a storyteller's chosen perspective can guide the reader through the story, creating a unique relationship between the narrator and the audience. Through this exploration, Castellani offers writers insights on using perspective intentionally to enhance their storytelling craft, particularly in complex character-driven narratives.

Narrators serve as guides into a story. Their perspective—whether reliable or unreliable—determines the lens through which the world of the story is revealed, influencing what information is emphasized or withheld. Through their voice, tone, and personal biases, narrators direct the emotional and intellectual journey of the reader, making them integral to the story's emotional impact. Castellani's chapter "**Try to See Things My Way**" explores the moral compass of narrators and how they manipulate perspective, "Some of these so-called unlikable characters are also narrators, and some of these narrators invite us to dislike them, even to reject them. Some insist that we do so, in fact, but their insistence and self-awareness are themselves forms of seduction; they're a dare, and who can resist a dare?" (Castellani, 2016, "Try to See Things My Way", digital p. 44)

He begins the chapter by describing the universal reader experience of hoping to be comfortably guided into a world by a fun and intriguing narrator. As I often do with stories, I find myself forming a blind emotional trust with the narrator; no matter the characters' opinion, the narrator supposedly has our backs in the story. So, a lot of therapy comes with the unreliable

narrator. The main point of Castellani's argument centers around the fact that the most intriguing narrators are not the heroes but the "unlikeable" ones. Ones with an attitude are dangerous, self-serving, or overall evil. Examples such as Humbert Humbert (*from Lolita*), Tony Soprano, and Travis Bickle (*from Taxi Driver*) are all discussed, with the critical insight being that these characters tap into a more profound psychological or emotional response from the reader. These narrators typically leave me feeling conflicted, even guilty, for empathizing with them. However, their self-awareness and self-justification keep me hooked more than anything, leaving a sense of curiosity and wanting to see how they rationalize their actions.

In *A Faithful but Melancholy Account of Several Barbarities Lately Committed* by **Jason Brown**, I was most fascinated by the fact that this story was narrated in the first person. Writing in the first person is riskier for me because I often find myself lost more in the narrative than in the story's events. However, I enjoy seeing the events through the eyes of one of the characters, through their own personal and emotional experiences.

However, I will add that the first person works with this story because John is an unreliable narrator. Though engaging and emotionally raw, his narrative voice doesn't present the events objectively or clearly. John is open about his own biases, especially in moments of self-deception or denial. For example, when John tells his grandfather, "No one wants you dead," he knowingly lies, which reveals his tendency to mask uncomfortable truths, both to others and himself. This moment is telling, not just because of the lie itself, but because it highlights John's struggle to reconcile his inner thoughts with reality. This dishonesty, while part of the reason he is unreliable, also makes him more human and more relatable—he's flawed and struggling. Yet, he's presenting these moments of vulnerability to us in a way that makes him feel sincere, even if his account is skewed.

Brown's choice to let us hear John's inner dialogue—his mistakes, his half-truths, and his moments of dishonesty—provides a richness that would have been absent in a third-person narrative. If the story had been told from an omniscient perspective, it would have lacked the same emotional depth, as we would not have been able to experience John's internal conflict. While John's perspective is undoubtedly unreliable, precisely this unreliability pulled me into the story. It forces the question, "What is real?" This contradicts what John says in the story, adding complexity and intrigue to the narrative. The first-person point of view amplifies this tension, allowing a connection to John's journey and suspicion of the truth he is presenting. The story's impact comes from that very tension—the pull between trust and skepticism, honesty and manipulation—something that would have been harder to achieve through a more detached third-person viewpoint.

Unreliable narrators add a second storyline to what's happening, so I worry about the actual plot and whether or not I can even trust it. Despite being "bad guys," these narrators seduce readers through their perspective. Castellani reflects that what often keeps us reading is the narrator's ability to articulate their flaws, inviting us to understand their actions from their warped point of view. This self-awareness adds an element of complexity and even redemption as readers begin to look for glimpses of humanity or remorse in these characters, no matter how morally dubious they may be.

As with any good craft book, Castellani discusses how difficult it is to write these characters. Crafting an antihero (like *Humbert Humbert* or *Tony Soprano*) is one thing, but it's another to make a genuinely unlikable narrator enjoyable. Castellani uses the example of *Barbara Covet* from **Zoë Heller's** *What Was She Thinking?* as a prime example. Barbara is judgmental, bitter, and manipulative. Yet, despite her negative qualities, I am still drawn into her narrative

because of her self-awareness and ability to justify her actions. The “unlikable” narrator works because perspective is controlled and manipulated. These characters give us a glimpse into their psyche, which is often at odds with societal norms, and as readers, we are invited to witness their justifications, flaws, and delusions. However, I hadn’t fully considered how an unreliable narrator could deepen a story’s emotional resonance without reading this book.

I now feel more comfortable allowing my characters to be flawed and messy in their narratives, lie to the reader (and themselves), and make choices that may not be immediately understandable. This type of writing allows me to play with perspective, withhold information, and add complexity, making my stories more decadent and layered. Writing and creating an unreliable narrator allows me to explore themes of self-deception, denial, and the tension between what’s real versus what’s perceived—concepts I hadn’t focused on as much before. It’s also helped me understand how important it is to balance a narrator’s reliability and emotional vulnerability. By examining the narrator's biases, I can reveal more profound layers of their character and motivations, creating a more intimate connection. However, I’m also learning that an unreliable narrator requires careful attention to detail, as the tension between truth and falsehood needs to be maintained throughout; otherwise, the impact is lost.

Castellani’s reflection on the “unlikable narrator” and the manipulation of perspective offers a fascinating glimpse into storytelling's darker, more complex side. Whether morally flawed or outright reprehensible, these narrators challenge the reader to engage with a story on a deeper level. I am allowed and ultimately may dislike the characters, but are seduced by their narrative voices, which command attention and curiosity. Through these flawed and self-justifying voices, writers can invite readers into a world where empathy, morality, and self-awareness are questioned, ultimately enriching the reading experience.

Works Cited

Castellani, C. (2016). *The art of perspective*. Graywolf Press.