

Capturing the Adolescent Narrator in Adult Fiction

By Karen Desrosiers

It is commonly perceived that fiction featuring a young or adolescent narrator is intended for the adolescent or young-adult reader; however, many authors have risked creating an adolescent narrator in adult fiction, from classic novels such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* to contemporary works like Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*, Francine Prose's *Goldengrove*, and Kaye Gibbon's *Ellen Foster*. What makes these novels work? What fiction writing techniques and tools of the craft are needed to make an adolescent narrator interesting for the adult reader, and to structure a child's story in a way that is compelling for adults?

1. Point of View - It seems immediately clear, when scanning the number of adult novels printed with adolescent protagonists, that there is somewhat of a standard for adopting the first person point-of-view. First person affords the reader an opportunity to form a close relationship with the protagonist. However, the nature of the adolescent voice and mind puts limitations on how the writer can tell the protagonist's story. The language and internal thought process of the narrator must remain true to the character's age.

Some authors have chosen to use the third person point-of-view. The danger in using the third person point-of-view is the distance that it can create between the reader and protagonist, as

well as the risk of making the voice older than the narrator’s established age. Even when using first person point-of-view, there is a danger of allowing the voice to slip, to sound more adult.

2. Narrative Voice and Distance - Several other issues come immediately to the forefront when identifying a young narrator: the age of the character, the age of the narrator, and the distance between them. The reader must be comfortably grounded in the age of the narrator early on in the story. Many writers quite successfully identify the narrator’s age within the first few pages by finding a way for the character to announce, or tell his audience, his age. In Jonathon Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Oskar tells his listener, “For my ninth birthday last year...,” so that the reader knows, almost from the first page, that they are in the hands of a child story-teller. Some authors take advantage of setting the character’s age, while establishing a piece of their personality at the same time. J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield tells his audience his age, very early in *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as the timeframe of the events, and a little about his personality: “I was sixteen then, and I’m seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I’m about thirteen.”

When the narrator of the story is removed from the character, as in the case of the adult protagonist reflecting back to tell the story of events that happened in his or her childhood, there is a further complication of clearly identifying not only the age of the protagonist in the story being told, but also the narrator’s distance from the events. To signal the reader that the story is being told by an adult looking back, some authors structure their novel with “bookends” of a prologue and epilogue written in the adult point-of-view. Other writers establish distance between the narrator and the character with the use of phrases that reflect back, and sometimes

flash forward, in time. In *Goldengrove*, Francine Prose uses several such phrases to tell Niko’s story, including “When I think of that time...” and “Even before that Sunday....”

3. Language and sentence structure - Because the author is somewhat limited in the language available while maintaining the realistic, adolescent voice, writers must use more creative ways to tell the story that are interesting and intelligent. Phraseology that is child-like but not childish can be used to capture the way children think and keep the story interesting for adults. Rather than being restricted by a child’s limited vocabulary, the writer can make use of original ways of speaking and less conventional uses for words. Unsophisticated and grammatically incorrect sentence structure can also portray an adolescent voice.

Kaye Gibbons’ young narrator, Ellen Foster, has a unique voice that is distinct and authentic, riddled with grammatically incorrect and unusual phrases: “She certainly was a oddity and I had to step back when I saw her and was not looking for anything in particular but knew her time was what all that I needed to grab,” “Her mama works on quilts right much,” and “I have growed right much since then.” The reader can almost hear the child’s voice reading *Ellen Foster*.

4. Character’s internal life - One of the most striking ways that an author can create an authentic and realistic adolescent narrator is in the characterization, in creating the character’s internal life, and of particular importance with an adolescent narrator, in establishing a healthy imagination. The reader is drawn closer to the adolescent narrator, believing completely in the narrator’s fantasy life, because the reader knows that these types of dreams and imaginings are

authentic and real for children. And, most likely, the reader remembers her own childish fantasy life.

Oskar, in Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, deals with his anxiety and emotions by “inventing.” When he is suffering from insomnia, dealing with sadness, and wandering the city alone, Oskar invents in his mind, including “... a lever that could be on the front door, which would trigger a huge spoked wheel in the living room to turn against metal teeth that would hang down from the ceiling, so that it would play beautiful music, like maybe ‘Fixing a Hole’ or ‘I Want to Tell You,’ and the apartment would be one huge music box” and “... a Nature Hike Anklet, which leaves a trail of bright yellow dye when you walk, so in case you get lost, you can find your way back.”

5. Theme and Content – There is an intensity of language and theme that characterizes most adult novels, and that most adult readers look for and require in a good book. Theme and content also help to distinguish adult fiction from young-adult fiction, regardless of the age of the narrator. By choosing a young narrator to tell the story, the author is able to capitalize on the natural honesty that comes with a child’s perceptions and naiveté, making it possible to tell the story in a way that would not work using an adult narrator. The reader is able to see the underlying truths of the story through the young narrator’s untainted and unguarded observations. Choosing to use an adult narrator may make it more difficult to show events and societal norms with unbiased clarity.

Sue Monk Kidd takes a candid look at race and inter-race relationships in 1964 southern United States, in *The Secret Life of Bees*, through the innocent eyes and voice of Lily:

“All people ever talked about after church were the negroes and whether they’d get their civil rights. Who was winning – the white people’s team or the colored people’s team?” In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain is able to comment and reflect on the hypocrisy, pretense, and slavery within society of his time, through the honesty of Huck’s voice. Huck recognizes the injustices of his society and struggles against it through his friendship with Jim.

When an author stays close to the narrator’s authentic young voice, relying on the tools of the craft to bring depth and interest to the story, the reader is held in the fictional world of the character, connecting with the character, and remaining with the story for the full ride. However, when an author establishes distance between the narrative voice and the age of the protagonist, using prose that, no matter how beautifully written, are not authentic to the character’s age, the reader remains removed from the heart of the story and is not as emotionally engaged. Although it can be difficult, balancing the techniques of craft, including point-of-view, language, and characterization, to realistically capture the voice of an adolescent narrator in adult fiction, it is possible. When done well, the writer can create an adult novel, with a young narrator, that is compelling and entertaining for the reader, and that may be more objectively balanced and honest than would be possible with an adult narrator.