Hobart
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Present

Victor Lavalle
and Amy Minton

ON NARRATIVE

VOICE

AMY:

Let's begin our talk about narrative voice by defining the term—which isn't an easy assignment. If the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* admits that narrative voice is "a vague metaphorical term," that doesn't bode well for fiction writers when we want to talk about it. Here's a quote I use when I'm asked to define it, and I concede that it's cheeky as hell. (I won't reveal who said it or in what context. Not yet. And I'm hoping you don't know.)

"If you have it, you don't need it. If you need it, you don't have it. If you have it, you need more of it. If you have more of it, you don't need less of it… The point is, if you've never had any of it, ever, people just seem to know."

For the benefit of at least this one writer who lacks a solid definition, would you please share your own definition of narrative voice? Perhaps you might even elaborate on how you arrived at that definition.

VICTOR:

You're right about the quote being pretty cheeky. It's funny, but I also don't think it's very generous. I don't know why but so many writers seem to act as if there's a magic key and those who've been published get to use it and those who aren't never

will. When, of course, we used to kick our feet at that locked door just like anyone else and, frankly, when it creaked open it was a complete goddamn surprise.

So. Voice. My definition of "voice" is personality. And since everyone has one (just about everyone) then everyone has a Voice. A lot of times, when I'm teaching, students will discuss voice as if it were just another craft issue. "In this story I want the voice to be a 90 year old woman's." Or, "I want to use the voice of a tough cop." I understand what they're saying, they want to see how different characters sound, but that's not the same as voice. As far as I'm concerned, each of us is born and raised with only one writer's Voice, and no amount of camouflage is ever going to disguise that.

I find that a lot of times, when I say that, a fair-sized contingent rise up as if I've just violated their Civil Rights. Where is Martin Luther King Jr. to protect their rights of invention and imagination! They seem to think that what I'm saying is that since we each only have one true authorial voice then everything we write must be autobiography. But that's not what I mean at all. That interpretation takes too narrow a view of exactly what personality is. Personality isn't just the sum total of our experiences, events we must regurgitate onto the page for the rest of our lives. Personality is the kind of news we're drawn too, our sense of humor (or lack thereof), it's not just how we are but how we see the world. In my experience

the pessimistic people always end up writing stories of gloom or loss or, at best, boredom, whether their main character is a sheriff or an alien or an office worker. Meanwhile the optimists can find a silver lining in the middle of a story about the Civil War. Why is that? It's because their personalities control so much of the story and that's a part of their authorial voice just as much whether they use slang of the King's English.

I hope I haven't gone too far off the rails here. I always do when it comes to the question of voice. Often I think the best thing to do, upfront, in conversations like this, is to admit exactly what you think writing is worth, what you think it's for, what makes it seem important to you, that way another person can understand your opinions and suggestions within the framework of your biases. That way another person, reading this at another time, can take or leave whatever he or she wants, plucking out only what's useful and discarding the rest.

I think of writing fiction as a way to tell stories, a way to entertain, a method of impressing people who might swoon over a beautiful sentence or two. I view it as a way of getting attention for myself because I really like attention. It's a way to try and make money (though how much depends on things beyond my control). A way to keep publishing stuff so I can get teaching work. A way to seduce bookish women. A way to understand history and morality. A way to challenge

every writer who has written before me. But most of all I view writing fiction as a lifelong pursuit toward self-awareness. I try to remind myself that even if all these things do come true (I do publish, I do get jobs, make money, meet women) it's of little consequence if it doesn't help me change and, hopefully, become a more understanding (could I even say better) person.

Obviously, this whole definition might be distasteful to a lot of people. It starts to bring things like ethics and morality, philosophy, into fiction and not everyone wants them there. Also, there's the understandable fear that the next step is something like John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction*. A book which made some fine points, but became pious and hectoring and, to be frank, just seemed to revel in insulting folks, pissing them off. So I don't mean to go in that direction, but this leads back to the idea of writing as a quest for self-awareness through the telling of some kick-ass stories. When you think of it that way you might see why I say voice is simply personality. There's nothing simple about it, but the person you are (in total, at that moment in time) is what creates the story you're writing. It's infused in every piece of punctuation, in the plot, in the most minor character who crosses the page. It's all your voice.

Sometimes I'll read a piece, whether by a student or a published writer, and get to the end feeling somewhat unhappy. Even when it's good there's some distance, a veil, across the page. Somehow it feels lifeless. Then I'll actually meet the

person and they'll be nothing like their story/novel. What I mean is that I'll meet a person and she's lively, smart, funny, a little weird, but then her very admirable novel was written in this dry third person omniscient tone, it focused only on the grim cruelties of existence, and it came to a sad but predictable end. The trouble is how I reconcile that book with the woman I've come to know. She may feel she's going in the right direction (and critics or fellow students may say the same), but my question will be, "Why doesn't this writing sound like you?" It doesn't have to use her diction. It doesn't have to have the same geographic origins that she does. But when I read people who have mastery over their voice I always find (always) that when I meet them or hear them speak I can detect the same essence that I discovered on the page. It must be like when a grade school teacher has parent conferences and finally gets to meet the mother and/or father of the child they've been dealing with all year. The parent walks in the room and almost instantly the teacher says, Ah yes, of course you're her parents. For me, that's when you know you're narrative voice is successful. When it's undeniably, recognizably yours. Even in the dead of winter, covered head to toe in a snow suit and a scarf, you can stand at the edge of the playground and say, That one, right there. That's my kid.

AMY:

The quote is from Bruce Campbell, B-Movie Actor, in a TV

advertisement for Old Spice. The ad is a satire about masculinity, and it's not meant to be generous in the way of instruction--so you're right there.

VICTOR:

Leave it to me to take that Bruce Campbell quote as something earnest! I thought for sure it was going to be a quote from Flannery O'Connor or Henry James or Toni Morrison. Some wonderful writer who takes him or herself much too seriously. And I really hate that kind of nonsense, thus my book length response in the last exchange. My apologies, both to you and the great Mr. Campbell.

AMY:

I realize now I should have admitted the source, but irreverence can be off-putting to some. I should be more shameless in my love of Bruce Campbell and all he has to offer in the art of not taking one's self too seriously. And in the art of shamelessness, I place Bruce Campbell on the altar.

Nevertheless, I've opened a can of worms (I didn't intend it, but I'll go with it now) of whether those who have suppressed their Voice can be taught to bring it out in the open by following some instructional method, or if Voice only rises to the surface for a gifted set. Of those I've met who have

mastery over Voice, they usually cannot articulate how they do it. Usually, it's something they've always been able to do without any instruction at all. I believe you have mastery over Voice, Victor, and judging by your book reviews I'm not the only one who thinks so. Has Voice always been in that "strength" column for you? I'm not talking about the work you've likely done to fine-tune it, focus it, sharpen it. I'm talking about the ability to put your personality on the page without anyone having to tell you, "You know, Victor, this writing just doesn't sound like you."

VICTOR:

I have to admit that I've always had a pretty easy time with Voice (much more so than plot or narrative, for instance). I do think there are aspects of craft that people have a natural affinity for (like there are natural novelists and natural short story writers), but having this natural affinity doesn't mean that you can't learn other skills as well. For instance, I'm just not a natural when it comes to plot. When I started I had the hardest time thinking of progressive action. When I look at both my book of stories and my novel I see they're really just groups of incidents, spread across 20 pages or 300. But I've been working pretty diligently at learning how a narrative flows and how you satisfy most readers' natural desire for plot, and with this new novel I'm really coming to understand it and use it. What I mean is that this time I'm not using my facility

with Voice to disguise the fact that I don't have a plot worth a damn. I'm trying to mix the two, which actually means pulling back on the pizzazz of Voice to make room for the pizzazz of plot.

When I think of why Voice has come pretty easily to me I think it's because I never really felt any discomfort with the idea of placing myself on the page. For instance, it never ever occurred to me that there were things I shouldn't admit or expose about myself and about all the people I knew.

AMY:

I'm glad you brought up your new book because I wanted to bring up your reading at Warren Wilson College in January 2007. What struck me about your reading is a common element in all your other published writing: you grab the reader by the jugular on the first line and don't let go. With that line, you had our undivided attention. Here are a few more first lines from your short stories that are surprising:

1. "Rob eats pussy like a champ." -"Slave," *Slapboxing with Jesus*

2. "The next morning I was still scratching my nuts, for hours; in the afternoon I called Lianne; I was fiending." – "Raw Daddy," *Slapboxing with Jesus*

Your Voice in your stories, from the first sentence, is impossible to ignore. Now, something akin to any of these lines flew out my brain and landed on the page, I would have a hard time not editing them, especially if there was pressure from others (teachers, editors, readers) to do so. Would you please choose one of these lines (or another of your favorites that might have a better story behind it) and talk about its journey—from the moment the line popped into your head to reactions of first readers and editors to reactions from audience and public?

VICTOR:

I'm glad you like those first lines! I have to admit that I always think of first lines first. Maybe the benefit to that has been the more gripping quality you're talking about. It might really have to do with growing up on horror stories, the best of which tend to give you something write from the outset. Either they start on a moment of interesting philosophy or they dive right into a powerful action.

Like this opener from an H.P. Lovecraft story called "The Doom That Came to Sarnath."

"There is in the land of Mnar a vast still lake that is fed by no stream, and out of which no stream flows. Ten thousand years ago there stood by its shore the mighty city of Sarnath, but

Sarnath stands there no more."

Or the first lines from Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hill House*:

"No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood there for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone."

I'm sorry for quoting the whole first paragraph of Jackson's novel, but it still gives me shivers of joy to read. I remember first reading it as a kid and getting that one little aside, "Hill House, not sane, stood by itself..." And I never thought of horror writing as something cheap or silly again. So when you're into stuff that has to draw you in that way, and can do it so well, I really think it has an effect.

As for my new novel, the first sentence reads: "I'd impregnated a whole series of women by that time. But not one of them ever bore me a child."

I'd gone through a number of first sentences in my head before I settled on that one. Most of the others had much more to do with setting the scene. The novel starts off in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont so I began with these grand overviews of the land, trying to create a mood much like the mood I think Lovecraft is going for in the quote above.

Then I tried to focus on this mysterious library that is situated in those Vermont woods. The place where the main character is heading at the outset of the book. But what I found is that it came off as silly. Rather than being profound in the way I found Ms. Jackson's first paragraph profound it seemed leaden and melodramatic. The first sentences in this vein were just plain dumb.

But then I reread the *Hill House* opening and realized that what hit me so hard about her opening paragraph wasn't simply the gloomy doom of that house tucked into the hills, but the way that Jackson animates that house so quickly. She doesn't just say, This house was big and spooky. She states that this house has gone insane. And not from evil, but from the forces of straightforward reality. The house had gone mad because of its existence, a life of utter loneliness (we find out about the loneliness eventually).

That's when I realized that the novel didn't have start off with big chills, but with a deeply rooted human problem. One that

many people could relate to. For *Hill House* it was reality and loneliness. For my main character it was his frustrated desire to father a child. Once I began thinking this way I realized I should just lead off with the blunt admissions: he wanted children, but he couldn't have them. I felt like this might be enough to draw a reader in. There was a need, but also a mysterious failure. Why can't he have children? That's how I came to those first two lines.

AMY:

And they are rather daring first lines.

VICTOR:

I think the mastery of Voice begins with shamelessness. And when it comes to writing I'm about as shameless as you can get. I will talk about anything and everything that I've ever known. Whether specific incidents or general sensations and feelings. And I'll inflict the same torture on all my loved ones, friends, passing acquaintances.

So really I think Voice comes down to fear or lack thereof. If the author has parts of him or herself that are considered off limits, that can't be indulged or addressed (or parts of those people he or she has known) then I think it comes across on the page and the words seem tame, even comatose. Even if the

story is compelling, the lines lack courage. I'm not really talking about beauty or poetry here, but blood.
In that way I think I actually can say exactly what it is that has made people compliment my use of Voice. At some point during that compliment they usually will say things like, I can't believe you admitted that. I can't believe you let the character say that or do that. So Voice seems tied to surprise, which is the single great quality that all living things share. All living things will surprise you. But with writing, it's very easy to get rid of surprises. You can edit them from the page. Or, more common, you can edit yourself even before you put the words on the page.

My family is a little wacky. There are ups and downs to being related to them, as there are with all families. But one thing my mom and grandmother did splendidly was to raise me with a sense of unconditional love. We might fight like crazy, hate each other like mad, but I never, ever thought that I could do anything to erase that deep-down, base-level, capital-L Love they felt for me. This has been truly freeing because I never think there's a word I could write that would make them turn their backs on me for good. (For years maybe, but not for good.) As a result, I really don't edit myself on the page and, I think, that's what people are complimenting when they say I've got a strong Voice.

Now I'm not going to lie, no one near me finds this trait

charming when I'm writing honestly about them. It's never destroyed relationships, but it sure has strained them. And rightly so. The desire to write in an unedited fashion is a selfish desire. It's an asshole move. It's good for me because I receive compliments and money when I do it well, but there's less benefit for those around me. All I can hope is that if I'm good to them in other ways they'll forgive me. And the ones that don't? Fuck them.

Though, of course, no one I care about better ever write honestly about me!

AMY:

Let's go back a bit and talk about family—I think there's a thread to follow there. An obviously shameless writer who makes no attempt to veil the actual people in his stories is David Sedaris. He does admit that his family is wary of what they say around him now, but somehow he keeps getting new material, so they must be forgiving. I often wonder why they haven't killed him yet. However, he is writing thinly-veiled fiction, and I think it's a tad easier for pure fiction writers. Who would want to own up to being the character in a story, especially if it's an unflattering one? But I'm way off topic now…

To get back to my point on family, or to broaden it into

"the people you know," here is what Grace Paley once said about Voice:

"I'm not sure exactly what it means, but as a teacher I had to talk about `voice,' so I had to figure out something about it. Language is so amazing. It can be put together in so many different ways and voices that you can almost tell who's talking....Voice is the kind of language used—inflections....It's a mixture of literary and neighborhood sound. It's more a sound than anything else."

(http://www.berkshireweb.com/rogovoy/interviews/grace.html)

You mention how wacky your family is, and I wonder how much auditory observance is a factor in the craft of Voice. Paley writes about her family and her neighbors, people she's met and people she's heard. So, in addition to the fearlessness you speak of, if writers are able to make observances about the way people sound, particularly people they know well so that nuances like tone and rhythm are a part of those observations, then will the Voice on the page be stronger? And what about oneself? If a writer develops a stronger sensibility for how he or she sounds in their own family or community (and I'm talking about actual speaking voice now, the unique way one inflects speech, presents oneself, gestures, and, in general, communicates audibly and/or visibly in the

broader world), do you believe that would make a difference when it comes time to put words on the page?

VICTOR:

I think Grace Paley is wrong. I know this is heretical, and even worse because she's recently died. But I think she's one of the great writers of our time, so I really doubt my little opinion is going to cause her, or her reputation, much worry.

The reason I feel she's wrong is because her idea of Voice is much too limited in its explanation. She's talking about an element of craft, those voices one hears, those sounds, but I'd argue that Grace Paley's voice is identifiable not in the tones she uses or the bits of dialect, Grace Paley's voice is apparent in who she chose to write about. And what she chose write about them.

She was a pretty staunch advocate of the overlooked (in various definitions of the word), and you only have to read a handful of her stories to see that. The places where her empathy shows, that's where her Voice (capital V) is exposed. In that respect I wouldn't say it's so important to focus on the ability to make observances about how people sound or how oneself sounds, but to figure who exactly you're willing to hear. Another way to say this is that you shouldn't write about people you don't like. The most honest way to say this is that

you shouldn't write about people you don't consider human.

That can be kind of tough to imagine. I think most people's knee jerk reaction is to say, "I think everyone is human!" But that isn't true. I don't mean the person thinks others are animals or savages or monsters, nothing like that. I mean that, generally speaking, the person doesn't really think much about a certain type of person until they sit down to write about them. Like you don't think about people from Bangladesh until you want a Bangladeshi character to walk into a story. This is backwards, of course, but we do it all the time. We should write about the kind of people that we take the time to know in our daily lives.

How many men have little to no grasp of women, I mean in a deeply humane sense, but are willing to set down a slew of utterly flat and worthless females in their pages? And, of course, it shows in the work. The women are either objects for sex or violence, or they're simply helpmates, they're one of those rare human beings who's willing to sacrifice anything and everything just to help the main character's narrative move forward. This is writing that doesn't presume the humanity of the woman character and that is why she shouldn't be there at all.

I can't think of how many times, during my first attempts at short stories, I had white characters who only showed up as

bullies or racists, they were awful in some way, you could bet on that. It took some time for me realize that these weren't people, they were simply expressions of my own loathing. Made even more strange by the fact that I'm half-white and I've got more than enough white friends! But I'd ignored those real people when setting down to write and once I'd realized this it was my job to keep white people out of my work until I could write them with the same empathy and generosity that I used for black and Latinos, Asians and Indians. (I'm happy to report they're back now and doing just fine.)

But that's what I mean by the idea that your Voice is simply You. All the things you try to hide are exposed on the page. Your prejudices and preferences, they come out no matter how you work to hide them. They come out even when you don't realize they're there. So, in my opinion, becoming a better writer goes in hand in hand with becoming a more generous human being. I know some people might bristle at that statement; they'd like to say that writing simply comes down to your mastery of craft. But I find these are the same people who think you can separate morality from politics. These things inform each other; one often determines the other.

Okay, that's me galloping along on my high horse, but I'd like to get down now. I'm really just trying to say that it's a mistake to think of Voice (or voice) or writing (and Writing) as a simple question of mechanics. When you read

your work you should try to recognize the fact that your Voice is already there. Even just in some early form. Don't reread and revise with the goal of making this one story better or tighter or publishable (at least not to start). Look at it and ask, Do I recognize myself in here? Again, I don't mean your literal body or personal history (not necessarily). I mean do you find your sense of humor (or lack thereof)? Your intelligence (your specific kind, not just general IQ)? Your concerns? Your sense of joy and tragedy? These technical issues of dialogue and pacing and phrasing and language are red herrings. They're actually distractions from the real question at hand: are you making work that is singularly your own? Fiction that, for one reason or another, no one else can produce?

This is the goal because mechanical competency is actually pretty easy. Open a million "literary journals" and you'll see it on blandly poetic display (many of these works will be called 'pitch-perfect' a compliment I've received in reviews myself, but have never understood). Open ten million "genre magazines" and see the same old plots told in the same old way by yet another unmemorable hack. What makes you, you? That's what you've got to figure out. That's what you've got to then use on every page. If you do that then no narrative, no matter how conventional, will ever seem drab or plain or dull. You're not any of those things, so how could your Voice be?

Lastly, and maybe most importantly, keep in mind that the

best way to read advice from a writer is to take what's worthwhile to you and discard the rest. These are my ideas about Voice and I champion them because they've worked for me. Yours will be different, they'll be your own, and I'll look forward to the time when I can read your advice and learn just what I need from it.

AMY:

I hate to end this discussion. This has been fun.

VICTOR:

I know this is a lot of work, and for no money at all. I've enjoyed working on this with you (even though I was a slow ass in my responses). And this part is not a private note, if you want to put it at the end of this discussion I'd be fine with that. People deserve to know the effort, and generosity, you've shown me during all this. Thanks, Amy. I appreciate it.

Victor LaValle is the author of two books: *Slapboxing with Jesus*, which won the PEN/Open Book Award and the Key to Southeastern Queens; and a novel, *The Ecstatic*, which was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. He has been the recipient of a Whiting Award and USA Ford Fellowship. His writing has appeared in *GQ*, *The Fader*, *The Washington Post Book World*, and *Essence*, among others. He teaches at Columbia University. His latest novel, *The Madonna of the Apocalypse*, is going to be a lot of fun.

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