

Beyond Show Don't Tell: Creating Complex Child Narrators in Adult Fiction

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Abstract

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There is no one way to create a compelling child narrator, but attempting to write a novel-length piece from the purest “child voice” presents numerous complications. We can think of every word that a child does not know as another restraint on the writer’s prose- one less image, one less concept, one less explanation. If a writer chooses to reject the restraint of childlike language, they then face a different limitation- the loss of an authentic, childlike voice. Between these two extremes, there are numerous novels that try to find a balance in their diction, imagery, point of view and narrative tense and fall somewhere in between the language and perspective of an adult or child, and create complicated child narrators, halfway between the world of childhood and adulthood. Essentially, what craft elements can be used to combat the limitations of a child’s narrative voice? How can poetic language and adult descriptions remain rooted in childhood? What are instances when it is worthwhile to forfeit adult language in order to create an authentic,

age appropriate narrative voice? Is it possible to combine the elements of a retrospective adult narrator and immediate child narrator without pulling the audience out of the narrative dream?

Beyond Show Don't Tell: Creating Complex Child Narrators in Adult Fiction

When I began this project, it was with a very broad question in mind: how do writers create compelling child narrators in adult fiction? It's a question that I have thought about a great deal in my own writing, even though it sounds easy enough to answer. It likely brings to mind one of the age-old pieces of writing advice: show don't tell. In my own writing, I have tried to follow this advice by creating child narrators who act as mirrors to a complicated adult world. Oftentimes these children are quiet, perceptive, and surrounded by adults who struggle to care for themselves, never mind their children.

As an undergraduate, I tried to write a story narrated by a ten-year-old girl in first-person present tense describing a long Thanksgiving weekend with her extended family. The voice was childlike, but anchored in a sea of specific details, trying to color the girl's world with as many things outside of her own interior narration as possible. The details worked well at giving quick, characterizing information about a large cast of characters, but they lacked a central focus that pointed towards the main tension of the piece.

One reason the story did not work was that it did not have enough of a plot structure. Another reason was that I was only able to discuss adult issues within the mindset and language of a ten-year-old, due to the constraint of present tense. By contrast, a past tense child narrator (or a retrospective adult narrator) is able to bring the language of adulthood into the world of a child through memories. However, one could argue that this is not really a child narrator, but rather an adult recounting a story from their childhood, and using adult diction, syntax, and descriptions to do so.

Originally, I interpreted this failure to mean that present-tense child narrators should not be attempted in adult fiction, but now I find myself in a position where I am once again trying to

write a first-person present tense teenage/young adult narrator. I stayed away from present tense narration for years, but I have always been drawn to the way voice can be used in novels and short stories with young adult narrators, and how much children can simultaneously see about the world and miss about the world. The past tense narration in novels like Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* impact the quality of the childlike voice and the immediacy of the present moment, which leads some writers to create a narrator that moves freely between the adult in past tense and the child in present tense, like in Karen Russell's novel *Swamplandia!*.

It is possible to have a child narrator in the first-person present tense, but it requires the correct pairing with other craft elements. For example, combining the constraints of present tense and a young child could be difficult to successfully pull off. However, the addition of a third constraint, such as the use of an alternative form like a list or visual collage presentation, could potentially help alleviate some of the diction and syntactical issues that comes with the use of a traditional young child, present tense narrator. In order to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of restraints on child narrators, I looked for novels and short stories that used distant, retrospective adult narrators, as well as those that used immediate, childlike voices, and those that used a combination of restraints.

Essentially, what craft elements can be used to combat the limitations of a child's narrative voice? How can poetic language and adult descriptions remain rooted in childhood? What are instances when it is worthwhile to forfeit adult language in order to create an authentic, age appropriate narrative voice? Is it possible to combine the elements of a retrospective adult narrator and immediate child narrator without pulling the audience out of the narrative dream?

There is no one way to create a compelling child narrator, but attempting to write a novel-length piece from the purest “child voice” presents numerous complications. Imposing the limitations of a young age onto the narrator translates into the loss of a great deal of language, as children are still in the process of developing their verbal skills. In some ways, we can think of every word that a child does not know as another restraint on the writer’s prose- one less image, one less concept, one less explanation. However, if a writer chooses to reject the restraint of childlike language, they then face a different limitation- the loss of an authentic, childlike voice. Between these two extremes, there are numerous novels that try to find a balance in their diction, imagery, point of view and narrative tense and fall somewhere in between the language and perspective of an adult or child, and create complicated child narrators, halfway between the world of childhood and adulthood.

Attentive and loving parents should provide their children with stability and safety- which might not make for the most interesting novel or story. I found that it was common for writers to remove one or both of the child narrator’s parents, or to place the child under the guardianship of somewhat neglectful or nontraditional caretakers. This grants the children far more power and control over their own lives, and in turn makes them feel more like miniature adults than children. If a problem occurs in their lives, they do not have the option of turning to their parents to solve it for them, but must instead use the resources and skills at their disposal and attempt to piece together a solution.

Removing a parent also can leave the child narrator feeling isolated, even when siblings or other family members are present. Oftentimes, this shared isolation becomes a source of

tension in the novel, particularly when one or more siblings pull away from remaining family unit.

In Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, Ruth and Lucille are orphaned after their mother's suicide, and shuffle between the care of their grandmother, two elderly great-aunts, and finally their mother's sister, Sylvie. Helen's death serves as a catalyst for all of the central tensions in the novel and creates a world for Ruth and Lucille where they can only really depend on one another from a very young age. The sisters have an intense bond, where Ruth, even as a first-person narrator, can easily jump into Lucille's mind and detail exactly what she would have thought and why in that particular moment.

As the oldest child, Ruth likely has a clearer recollection of what their mother was like than Lucille does. However, Lucille is by far the more forceful and dominant of the two sisters, and unlikely to be dissuaded by her sister. As Lucille becomes more opposed to Sylvie's lifestyle, Ruth notes that she finds, "as Lucille changed, advantage in conforming" her "attitudes" to Lucille's (Robinson 93). The way that the two sisters each interpret their mother, and her similarities or dissimilarities to Sylvie, plays a major role in their decision making throughout the novel.

"Lucille's mother was orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow (more than I ever knew or she could prove) who was killed in an accident. *My* mother presided over a life so strictly simple and circumscribed that it could not have made any significant demands on her attention. She tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone—she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned" (Robinson 109).

Lucille becomes intent upon improving herself and learning how to rejoin society outside of her household with Ruth and Sylvie. Lucille firmly believes that this is what her mother would have done, and what she would have expected her daughters to do. Ruth remembers, most likely correctly, a version of their mother who drifted through life similarly to Sylvie, and would likely not have cared one way or another what the people in town thought about their shoes, household, or perpetual truancy.

Housekeeping is narrated from Ruth's first-person perspective in the past tense. However, the narrative voice is entirely Robinson's own, filled with elevated diction, poetic style, and richly detailed imagery. By utilizing the past tense, Robinson is able to "write from within dichotomy" and "shuttle between domesticity and drifting" allowing Ruth to narrate and Robinson to get "inside displacement" (Galehouse). Since Ruth is narrating the novel as a retrospective adult, it is understood "that Ruth has survived, perhaps even thrived, under Sylvie's care" (Galehouse). The use of past tense allows Robinson to move between the world of Ruth as a child, and Ruth as a retrospective adult. However, rather than concerning herself with using diction and descriptions that would be expected of a woman who has little education and lives as a homeless drifter, Robinson uses her own voice and descriptions freely in the novel. This has a distancing effect on Ruth's character, where I oftentimes found myself forgetting that the novel is being narrated in first person rather than third person limited. This is a small price to pay for Robinson's command of language and imagery, and the novel is a fine example of how a writer can combine a child narrator with elevated diction and a poetic style.

While Ruth's narration does not have the same sense of immediacy of a present tense child narrator, Robinson's use of specific imagery and sensory details allows the writing to present images and details that a child would notice, but with the language of an adult.

“I was content with Sylvie, so it was a surprise to me when I realized that Lucille had begun to regard other people with the calm, horizontal look of settled purpose with which, from a slowly sinking boat, she might have regarded a not-too-distant shore. She pulled all the sequins off the toes of the blue velveteen ballet slippers Sylvie bought us for school shoes the second spring after her arrival. Though the mud in the road still stood inches high and gleamed like aspic on either side where tires passed through the ruts, I had liked the slippers well enough. The tingling seep of water through the seams was pleasant on a spring day, when even in broad sun the slightest breeze raised the hairs on our arms” (Robinson 92-3).

Robinson’s language is poetic and clearly comes from an adult perspective, but it is also focusing on descriptions that would be significant to a child, and not an adult. The pleasure that Ruth experiences from “the tingling seep of water” (Robinson 93) is the sort of sensory experience that a child would find deeply satisfying, but that an adult would almost certainly view as an annoyance. Robinson manages to capture the pleasure of this moment from a child’s perspective, even with an adult’s language. The elevated sensory details also add to the adult reader’s ability to experience this pleasure with Ruth, rather than simply viewing it as a strange thing that children do, like picking their noses or kicking off their shoes in public. The feeling of coolness in early spring comes through in both the image of the water and the “slightest breeze” on a spring day that can raise the hair on their arms “even in broad sun” (Robinson 93). These images of coolness during one of the first warm days of the year remind the adult reader of how pleasurable something as simple as the physical sensation of cool wetness on dry feet could be, when you were young enough to come home and leave your shoes by the door and let them stay damp without worrying about them mildewing. And, the next morning, when they did smell like

mildew, that would only be its own sensation of smell, its own small source of pleasure. The “tingling seep of water” is a sensation that I remember well from my own childhood, the way my sneakers and socks would absorb rainwater from puddles on the playground, the way that water would squish out of the fabric every time I took a step, leaving my feet in their own shallow pool of filtered puddle water. How by the time I got home from school and took my shoes off, the wet socks would cling to my feet like a second layer of skin and leave flecks of white sock pilling on my feet and ankles and let out a comforting aroma of wet dog, sweat, and rainwater. Rather than only providing details that build the world of *Fingertone* and characterize Ruth and Lucille, Robinson provides details that focus the reader on the sensations and images of childhood. While we do not have the same level of immediacy of a present-tense child describing these sensations, Robinson’s beautiful command of an adult’s language works to strengthen these images much more than she could with the diction and syntax of a young child.

The other images and metaphors in this passage also rely on images that a child could think of, but are composed into a metaphor or poetic description with elevated diction. When describing how Lucille looks at other people, Robinson uses a metaphor of Lucille looking at the “not-too-distant shore” from a “slowly sinking boat” (Robinson 92). While the metaphor, “from a slowly sinking boat, she might have regarded a not-too-distant shore” (Robinson 92) comes from an adult voice, the choice to include images of a sinking boat and looking at the shore from a boat anchors the metaphor back in childhood. Even though a young child would not be able to construct this sentence, they would be able to see a person looking out into the distance and relate that image to the way a person on a boat might look at the shore. If Robinson had used a metaphor comparing Lucille’s stare to the look of determination in a portrait of a 19th century French military general, that reference to something very removed from childlike images would

make the passage feel jarring, and eliminate any connection between the prose style and a childlike mindset.

In addition to providing sensory details specific to childhood, this memory of the “blue velveteen ballet slippers Sylvie bought us for school shoes” also points the reader towards the main tension of the novel- the growing divide between Ruth and Lucille’s worldviews, and the eventual dissolution of their relationship. In the moment, these details feel as though they are meant to add depth to Ruth and Lucille’s changing relationship, but, by the end of the novel, it becomes clear that details about seemingly insignificant details, like opinions about shoes, are actually very deliberately leading to us towards the rift in Lucille and Ruth’s relationship. Similar to the way an adult would not typically enjoy the sensation of having water in their shoes, Lucille feels no fondness for the shoes, and displays this by pulling “all the sequins off the toes of her blue velveteen slippers.” Lucille has matured faster than Ruth, despite being her younger sister, and becomes a little woman, “busy cleaning up outward appearances and family history to conform to the social pressures of small-town life” (Ravits 653). Ruth views herself as a perpetual child, tall and thin, but not developed like Lucille. Ruth recognizes that she resembles Sylvie, and their mother, and “sees no reason to ‘improve’ herself or to revise her memories of the mother” (Ravits 653) as Lucille does.

Eventually Lucille’s desire to remove herself from Sylvie results in Lucille’s decision to move in with her unmarried home economics teacher, and abandon Ruth and Sylvie. Ruth is given the option to choose conformity at the end of the novel when the sheriff asks if she would like to “come to [his] house tonight” (Robinson 206) and Ruth refuses, and chooses to abandon Lucille and live as a drifter. Rather than allowing the sheriff to take Ruth away from Sylvie by force, Ruth and Sylvie burn down their home and “cross the bridge” (Robinson 210) on the

railroad tracks, leaving the townspeople to assume they died by drowning in the lake, as both Ruth's mother and grandfather did.

Swamplandia! is an example of a novel that mixes the use of past and present tense narration in a way that separates the reflective adult narrator and occasional present tense child narrator into two separate voices. The novel opens with the Bigtree children grieving the death of their mother, Hilola. Ava narrates the opening chapter, and details how losing their mother is only their family's first tragedy, as "one tragedy can beget another, and another" (Russell 25). Hilola was the family's headline performer at Swamplandia!, and the combination of her death and the opening of The World of Darkness, results in both the closure of Swamplandia! to tourists and her father's decision to go to the mainland to secure funds for their amusement park. This leaves Ava and her older sister Ossie physically isolated, and left to fend for themselves on their "hundred-acre island off the coast of southwest Florida, on the Gulf side of the Great Swamp" (Russell).

The Bigtree children do not attend school and, without the tourists, become largely cut off from any connection with the outside world. Ava describes their only real link to mainland culture as coming from television shows and commercials- "an *I Love Lucy* marathon on channel 6" and a commercial for the World of Darkness with "plaid-vested schoolchildren lined up to enter the gaping doors of what appeared to be a giant amusement park" (Russell 31). This isolation and lack of supervision results in there being no real roadblocks preventing Ossie from running away from home to marry her ghost boyfriend, Louis Thanksgiving. Ava is left alone on the island with only a stranger, the wandering Bird Man, who has come to Swamplandia! to receive "payment for services rendered" (Russell 331). By removing all trustworthy adults from

the island, Russell puts Ava into a position where she must decide for herself how to rescue Ossie. If she was an adult, or had an adult guardian present, she likely would have contacted the police to report her sister missing, and assembled a search party to find Ossie.

Instead, Ava turns to the Bird Man for advice, and believes him when he tells her that the underworld is real and there are “thousands of openings in the limestone and the eastern mangrove tunnels” (Russell 396). He warns her that it was common for “mainland authorities [to] remove children from their families” if the child or family “was deemed unstable” (Russell 400). In this moment, Russell’s use of dramatic irony allows the reader to recognize that there is some truth to what the Bird Man says about how Ossie could be deemed “unstable,” but that this is not reason enough for Ava to believe him about the underworld, or trust him.

As a plot device, removing Ava’s parents from the island is the easiest way to grant her semi-autonomy and allow her to go out into the underworld, and into danger, on her own. The reader knows that trusting the Bird Man is a poor decision after he suggests not contacting the police, but the elements, and possibilities, of magical realism prevent the tension from deflating entirely from the second half of the novel. The reader is not entirely sure whether the Dredgeman’s Revelation could in fact be true, and if Louis Thanksgiving is real, and this is about to become a ghost-human love story. This instability comes in part from the alternating point-of-view between the first-person narrator in the Ava chapters and the third-person limited narrator in the Kiwi chapters. It is still possible, although unlikely, that Chapter 10 could be an Ossie narrated chapter in the second-person where she and Louis Thanksgiving are happily married. Additionally, there are already ambiguous, and potentially magical, elements in the story- Ava’s secret red Seth (alligator), children wrestling alligators, and Ossie’s perceived powers- to name a few.

There is a second divide in the narration, as the novel is split between the Ava chapters in first-person and the Kiwi chapters in a limited third-person narrator. The jumps into the present tense are oftentimes during moments of danger or intense action. For example, when Kiwi saves a girl from drowning, “he came face-to-face with the girl under the lava globes in the water. *She is staring at me! Their eyes met*” (Russell 391). The narration moves from the past tense into a short exclamation in the present tense that refers to Kiwi in the first-person. The present tense moments in the Kiwi chapters have a somewhat ambiguous point of view, as we could be getting moments of free indirect discourse in the third person, or, more likely, Russell moves into the first-person during both Kiwi and Ava’s chapters, even though Kiwi’s chapters are narrated in third person. These moments of present tense are generally short sentences or fragments, only enough to color the prose with a pop of immediacy or emotion. However, occasionally the narrator transitions into the present tense for a longer sentence, such as in the aftermath of Kiwi’s save when he thinks, “*okay, genius, this is a human person, this is not some alligator you have to wrestle. But Kiwi had muscular amnesia. What came next?*” (Russell 392). As an isolated excerpt, this switch from a lengthier present tense moment to a past tense, third person description to a rhetorical question in the past tense feels jarring. This is an example of how trying to have an immediate, childlike voice combined with a retrospective removed adult perspective can overload the prose and threatens to pull the reader out of the narrative dream. However, in the context of the whole novel, an occasional jarring moment could be overlooked. When Russell uses short sentences or fragments in the present tense voice, it can be quite effective, particularly during the exchanges between Ava and the Bird Man. As Ava ventures further into the underworld, the present tense voice continues to interject into the narration, as does another voice, which Ava refers to as either her mother or a combination of her mother, the

Chief and “a much older creature” (Russell 512). In the aftermath of her rape, the combination of voices becomes the voice of her mother, who advises Ava to run away, saying, “*you won’t find your sister anywhere near here, Ava, and I would run, honey, personally...*” (Russell 553). This voice could either be interpreted as Ava mothering herself for comfort, or as the mother’s actual voice as a ghost, but either way it pushes Ava to escape.

When the Bird Man rapes Ava, even her present-tense voice becomes more removed, and we can see Ava as she separates from her own consciousness. There is a quiet smallness to her descriptions of the rape that feels both as though she is physically helpless and childlike, but already desensitized to the act in the moment, as if she goes from being thirteen to forty in the course of a few minutes. During the rape, Ava thinks, “Even after I realized what was happening, I held very still. *Oh, this*, I thought, and got a counterfeit déjà vu from the stories I had read and overheard” (Russell 546). In the retrospective past tense narration, Ava is able to discuss the physical and sensory descriptions of the moment, how “leaves lost their transparency for whole minutes...the man cupped a dry hand under my neck and said something I didn’t understand. I stared up at him; my fingers fidgeted, my wrestling hand cramping nervously” (Russell 546). But, in the present moment, the rape is simply “*oh, this*,” something she has known for years, even if she did not have the language for it. Ava is strong enough to wrestle a gator, but, in this moment, she is vulnerable and motionless.

The other reason for the switch between present and past tense is that it allows Russell to use an adult’s mindset, language and descriptions when writing, as Robinson does in *Housekeeping*. However, Russell is much more focused on creating a fictional world through details and characterization than on poetic style or elevated diction. The end of *Swamplandia!* suggests a somewhat happy ending, with the family reunited and presents the possibility that the

voice of Ava is not an adult, but rather Ava as a teenager at the end of the novel, after the Bird Man has forced her into a premature pseudo-adulthood.

Conveniently orphaning a child is a helpful plot device to give the child narrator independence and a large problem before the novel even begins, but it is possible to create a complex child narrator that does not rely on this orphan trope. *My Brilliant Friend* is an example of such an exception. Elena, the narrator, has both of her parents, but they are neglectful and abusive. This does not differentiate them from the majority of the parents in Ferrante's depiction of family life in post-WWII Naples, but it does result in Elena creating as much physical and emotional distance from her family and apartment as possible, even from a young age. Elena narrates the novel as an adult reflecting on her childhood as a first-person, past tense narrator. Ferrante allows the voice of the adult narrator to interject freely into the narration, but there is an immediacy to the prose that encompasses the dangers and violence of living as a child in postwar Naples. For example, at the opening of the second chapter, Ferrante interjects with a reflective adult voice, moving freely between the past and present moment, stating, "Not too long before- ten days, a month, who can say, we knew nothing about time, in those days- she had treacherously taken my doll and thrown her down into a cellar. Now we were climbing toward fear..." (Ferrante 50). The use of phrases denoting time like "in those days" and "now" signal moves back and forth between the present adult narrator, and the reflective narrator.

In Elena's world, the streets are a landmine of potential hazards and children are especially vulnerable. Even though the children in the novel are uneducated about many adult and worldly matters, they must negotiate the dangers and complexities of the adult neighborhood from a young age without help from their parents.

“We lived in a world in which children and adults were often wounded, blood flowed from the wounds, they festered, and sometimes people died. One of the daughters of Signora Assunta, the fruit and vegetable seller, had stepped on a nail and died of tetanus. Signora Spagnuolo’s youngest child had died of croup. A cousin of mine, at the age of twenty, had gone one morning to move some rubble and that night was dead, crushed, the blood pouring out of his ears and mouth ...Giannino, who was in fourth grade when we were in first, had died one day because he had come across a bomb and touched it” (Ferrante 53-54).

Rather than establishing the child narrator’s independence by orphaning them, Ferrante’s children have a different “built-in problem”- that they are living a world with hostile conditions, and daily survival is a struggle. Elena and Lila dream of escaping the neighborhood, but the combination of their families’ views, poverty, and educational access continue adding obstacles to their plans. From the forward of the book, we are told that the “I” narrator is the writer, and she begins the novel by stating, “I turned on the computer and began to write- all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory” (Ferrante 38). Including a forward creates an element of dramatic irony, as the reader knows that adult Elena does “escape” from the neighborhood, as she is now living “in Turin,” while Lila has “never left Naples in her life” (Ferrante 29). It is also possible that Elena could be wrong, and that Lila has actually died. Even if the inclusion of an introduction means that the reader knows that both Elena and Lila will survive their childhoods, I would argue that having this knowledge does not reduce the tension or feeling of immediate danger that both Elena and Lila face growing up in the neighborhood. One reason for the continued suspense is the fact that the reader knows that people in Elena’s world can technically survive, in the sense that they are still physically alive, but have been beat down

to the point that their mental or emotional self is dead. One example of this is the case of Melina Cappuccio, an unstable widow who has an affair with Donato Sarratore, a married man living in the apartment below her. When Sarratore's wife insists that they move away, Melina has a breakdown as the family loads up their carts. Elena describes Melina's screaming as if she, "wasn't uttering words but only aaah, aaah, as if she were wounded" and how "copper pots, glasses, bottles, plates appeared to fly out the window of their own volition, and...hit the asphalt, bounced, shattered, sending splinters between the nervous hooves of the beast" (Ferrante 113). Melina survives her breakdown and continues physically living, but she is an impoverished, mentally unstable, single mother to six young children. Lila and Elena might still be physically alive at the point in time when Elena writes the forward, but that does not mean that they haven't been dealt a series of injuries with lasting effects.

As a rhetorical choice, the inclusion of a forward that tells the reader this much information about the main characters in present day strikes me as a somewhat unexpected decision. The forward feels as though it is attempting to establish the reliability of the first-person narrator and reminds me of the types of forwards or introductions found in some of the earliest novels, where the narrator is attempting to prove the veracity of his accounts. In Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe spends the first four chapters of the novel introducing Robinson Crusoe's life from the opening line of "I was born in the year 1632" (Defoe 2) to when he introduces the journal-style writing, "of which I shall here give you a copy (though in it will be told all these particulars over again) as long as it lasted; for having no more ink, I was forced to leave it off" (Defoe 109). This declaration of author and narrator being the same person is similar to the way that Elena is the name of both the narrator and author's pen name. Ferrante's forward establishes that these are the same fictional person, just as the forward of *Robinson*

Crusoe attempted to establish that *Robinson Crusoe* was written by Robinson Crusoe. Elements of oral storytelling play a role in both Defoe and Ferrante's decisions to include a forward that serves to establish who the narrator is before they begin telling their story. If we think of Ferrante's novel as the first part of an argument that she is making about what happened in her and Lila's childhoods and relationship with each other, the introduction is a sort of opening remarks from a lawyer. Ferrante is able to establish that Elena is writing this story for herself, so that Lila will not be able to "eliminate the entire life that she had left behind." Rather than wanting to reminisce with nostalgia on her relationship with her childhood best friend, Elena begins the novel feeling, "really angry" and using the novel as a means to "win" against Lila (Ferrante 37). However, even as the narrator claims to be telling things exactly as they were, there is another piece of irony in this introduction. It is true that Elena thinks that she is motivated by anger, but the reader realizes after reading a few chapters that this is not a story born out of anger, but rather out of a deep love. For child narrators, this type of forward helps to create a context for the use of a past-tense and retrospective adult voice telling the story of a young child. This allows the narrator to use elevated diction, imagery, and sentence structures that would be beyond the grasp of a young child. Additionally, it allows the adult voice to flash forward and illustrate how they feel about or interpret that moment now as an adult.

I would argue that *My Brilliant Friend* could work just as well without the introduction. The novel could instead open the story with an adult voice telling a story about her childhood, as Robinson does in *Housekeeping*. The introduction serves to establish the question, or concern that is motivating this exploration, namely a desire to preserve the part of her that is intertwined with Lila, even though they are not presently in each other's lives. It is helpful for the reader to know that this is a story about a relationship that does not end well, but it is possible for the adult

narrator to present that information without having an introduction that explicitly tells the reader that Lila has either died or is trying to hide from her life.

Rather than being a necessary plot device, the introduction's main purpose is to establish the fact that the author and narrator are the same person. This stems back to the controversy surrounding Ferrante's identity, and the belief that her use of a pen name, and decision to name both her narrator and author "Elena," means that her novels are autobiographical. Ferrante's decision is either for privacy, or possibly to raise levels of intrigue surrounding her identity, but it is not a necessary plot device for introducing an adult narrator acting as a retrospective child narrator.

In "Ask Me If I Care," a short story in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan creates a compelling first-person present tense teenage narrator. It is helpful that the narrator is seventeen or eighteen years old, and more in a state of flux between childhood and adulthood than a young child, but a great deal of the story's success results from Egan's work with voice and creating specific and focused details. The central tensions of the story are of age and losing time, and the details surrounding each character points them towards that tension. Lou is described as clinging to youth, while Rhea views him as an old man. Rhea and Jocelyn are on the brink of adulthood, and are characterized by details that push and pull them on either side of the childhood/adulthood seesaw.

"A week ago, I looked at the menu outside Vanessi's and saw linguine with clams. All week long I've been planning to order that dish. Jocelyn picks the same, and, after we order, Lou hands her something under the table... It's a tiny brown bottle full of cocaine. There's a miniature spoon attached to a chain, and Jocelyn heaps up the spoon two times

for each nostril... Then she fills the spoon again and holds it for me. By the time I walk back to the table I've got eyes blinking all over my head, seeing everything in the restaurant at once... Lou tells us about being on a train in Africa that didn't completely stop at the stations—it just slowed down so that people could jump off or on. I go, “I want to see Africa!” and Lou goes, “Maybe we'll go together, the three of us,” and it seems like this really might happen. He tells us, “The soil in the hills is so fertile it's red,” and I go, “My brothers are grafting bean plants, but the soil is just regular brown soil,” and Jocelyn goes, “What about the mosquitoes?” and Lou goes, “I've never seen a blacker sky or a brighter moon,” and I realize that I'm beginning my adult life right now, on this night” (Egan).

There is an intimacy between the narrator, Rhea, and Jocelyn and the rest of their friends. Rhea is a first-person narrator, but she possesses a detailed knowledge of all of her friends' motives and family stories, which is keeping with the theme of jumping between many characters' storylines in the novel. As a seventeen or eighteen-year-old, Rhea's voice is right on the cusp of adulthood, which she acknowledges when she says she's beginning her “adult life right now, on this night” (Egan). Egan does use details that are not directly related to the main tensions of the piece, such as the “Easter egg colored homes” (Egan), but many of the most telling details in the story direct us towards the changes in Rhea and Jocelyn's lives as they move into adulthood. Both girls are straddling the fence between childhood and adulthood, but Jocelyn's foot is a step further into adulthood.

The opening line of this passage describes Rhea looking at the menu “a week ago.” Looking at the menu and planning her meal a week in advance characterizes a childlike side of Rhea, which is heightened when Jocelyn decides to order the same dish. For Lou, this is just

another night out, but for Rhea this is a special occasion, a night that she is excited about a week in advance, and she wants to make sure that she orders something that she really wants.

Additionally, since she has likely rarely, if ever, been to a restaurant as nice as Vanessi's, she could also want to make sure that she is familiar with the dishes being served and doesn't accidentally order a raw octopus.

The introduction of cocaine presents a seemingly adult detail, but the level of detail included about the cocaine, such as exactly how many snorts Jocelyn has before scooping some for her, suggest that this is still something exciting and dangerous. This level of detail could also be attributed to a highly perceptive narrator, but including an exact number of snorts feels more childlike than if she simply says, we did cocaine in the bathroom. When they return to the table and Lou brings up a story about the trains in Africa, Rhea's response of "I want to see Africa!" feels like a combination of childlike exuberance and the cocaine taking effect. This exclamation is a merging of Rhea's two worlds, as the cocaine emboldens her to declare her desire to see Africa, but the generalness of wanting to visit Africa, versus say a safari trip in a certain country, feels childlike and naïve, as though she does not know where tourists tend to go in Africa. When Lou comments on the soil in Africa, Jocelyn and Rhea cannot join in the conversation as equal adults because they do not have the same adult life experiences, like travel, that Lou has had. Rhea's response to the soil includes a reference to her brother, which tethers her back to her family, and her role in that family as a sister and child.

The story ends with Rhea and Alice looking at Alice's old green school uniform, as though they are searching for a piece of childhood even while they are still in childhood. The girls go downstairs and watch Alice's younger sisters, "slapping a bright-yellow ball around a silver pole" and, when they turn around they are "laughing in their green uniforms" (Egan).

There can be a sort of mourning in novels and stories with child narrators, that as the child moves towards adulthood there is the knowledge that they are losing youth, even though within their young adult world, childhood is something to be disposed of as quickly as possible.

When we discuss child narrators, it is critical to differentiate between the developmental phases of childhood. For the sake of this paper, I will consider the end-point of adolescence to be the age of legal adulthood (regardless of whether or not that actually marks the end of adolescence in contemporary society). Adolescence is traditionally considered to be the teenage years between thirteen and eighteen, but it is defined as the period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult. For many children, the onset of puberty begins at as young as nine-years-old, which means that a child between the ages of ten and thirteen (typically considered a preadolescent) could in fact already be an adolescent.

Development, or lack of development, is a key characterizing feature of child narrators at the cusp age between preadolescence and adolescence. In both *Swamplandia!* and *Housekeeping*, the child narrators have a sister who has entered adolescence, while the narrator has not. Ava is thirteen and at the very end of preadolescence, while her sister Ossie, at fifteen, has discovered her sexuality in a way that feels foreign to her sister. Similarly, in *Housekeeping*, Lucille physically develops while Ruth remains “a towering child” (Robinson 97) despite being the elder of the two sisters.

Egan’s short story “Great Rock and Roll Pauses,” presents an example of how the use of an experimental format can create a successful non-reflective preadolescent narrator. Ally is twelve, and tells the story of her family through a series of PowerPoint slides. The PowerPoints function as an alternative to journaling, and utilizes a fragmented style where the reader gets

bite-sized nuggets of information in typically one sentence or less. The physical presentation of flow charts, speech bubbles, and diagrams used in PowerPoint slides lends itself especially well to this fragmented style, as it places physical boundaries on the amount of space the narrator has to present each detail. There are exceptions to this brevity, but these are largely restricted to sections where Ally records her family’s dialogue.

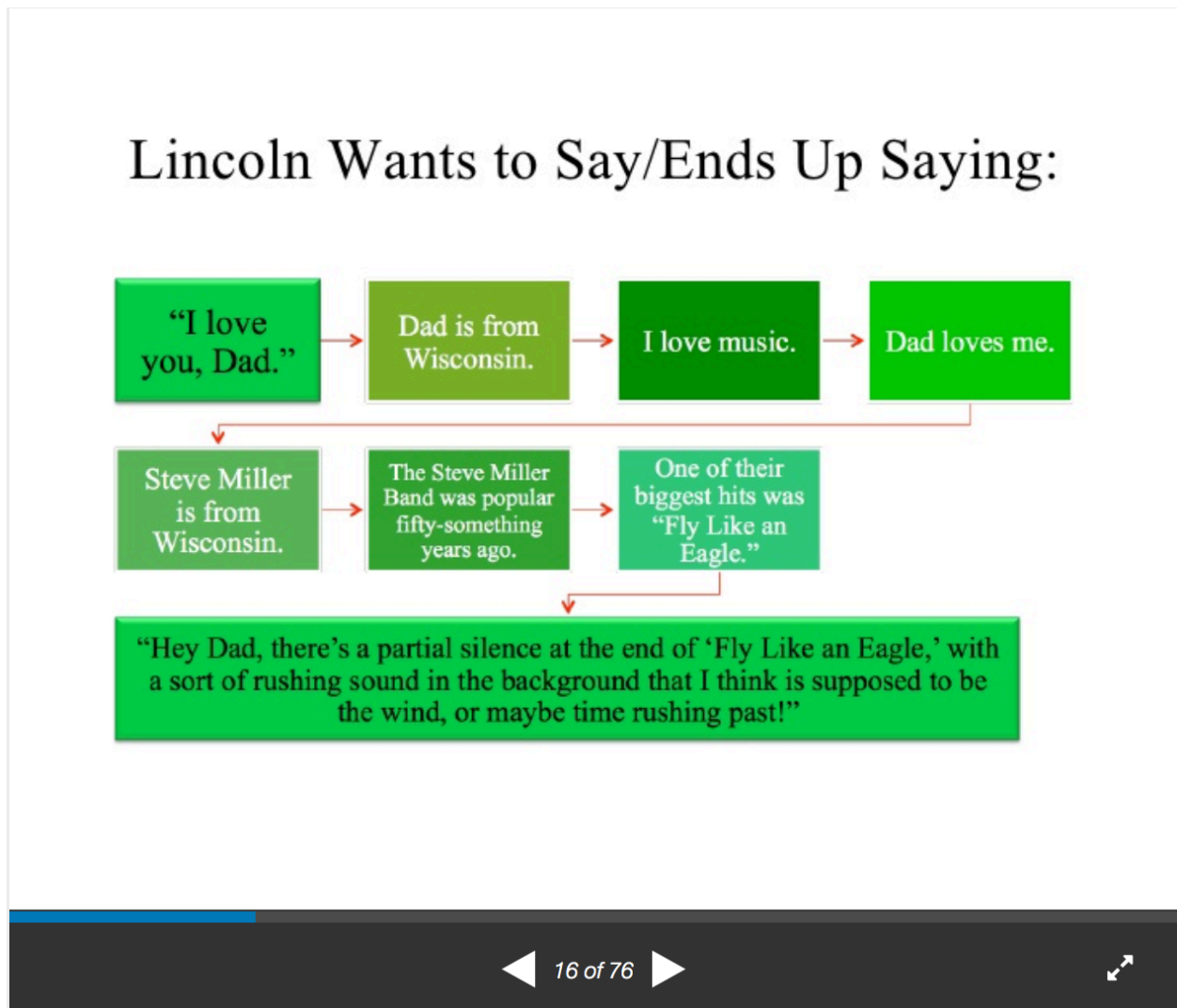


Fig. 1. Lincoln Wants To Say/ Ends Up Saying slide from: Egan, Jennifer. “Great Rock and Roll Pauses.” Slideshare.net, 19 May 2010.

I would argue that the story's success, and particularly its success in evoking emotion, comes from narrating in Ally's non-reflective perspective, and how she uses that perspective to translate for her brother. These translations are particularly effective in the flow chart or visual diagram format shown above (e.g. see fig. 1). Even though Lincoln is Ally's older brother, his disability creates a shift in the power dynamics of their relationship that allows Ally to be a protector and interpreter for him. Drew's parental role prevents him from seeing Lincoln's actions objectively, and, if Egan had one of the parents narrate the story from an adult perspective, we would likely see Lincoln interacting with his family through a more subjective lens. In this sense, the use of a child narrator provides the reader with access to a character who is slightly distanced from the parent-child relationships between Drew, Lincoln and Sasha. There is a story about this family that could be told from any of the other characters' perspectives, but the reason this story is so emotionally successful is because of the intimate, and yet slightly off to the side, coverage and interjections we see from Ally.

For example, Drew hears his son's statement about the "partial silence at the end of 'Fly Like an Eagle' with a sort of rushing sound in the background" (Egan) as a symptom of Asperger's Syndrome rather than Lincoln's version of saying, "I love you, Dad" (Egan). The fact that Drew is a doctor adds to the way he views Lincoln's behavior as an amalgam of symptoms instead of Lincoln's attempts at expressing love.

As Lincoln's sibling, Ally is in a position of knowing him as well as their parents, but, as a preadolescent child, she has not witnessed how cruel the world can be to people deemed different. This childlike naiveté prevents her from labeling Lincoln's expressions of communication as inherently "wrong," as her father does, but instead she works to understand the roots of what he is saying. Ally is able to chart out the way that Lincoln's brain works,

viewing it as something like a puzzle that she is uniquely equipped to solve. From her perspective, the issues between her father and brother are largely based on miscommunication. This allows her to view the problem in its simplest elements, rather than becoming bogged down in exterior feelings and judgments related to Lincoln's disability, such as grief, fear, guilt, or shame.

Egan's use of flow charts works particularly well as a visual representation of her translation, taking the reader through each step, but without the unnecessary, and likely garbled, prose of a twelve-year-old's journal. The use of colored boxes, arrows, and our implicit knowledge of flow charts, allow Egan to weave these snippets of information together in eight relatively short sentences. In a traditional story, the amount of exposition needed to set up Ally's translation would be significantly longer and much less clear.

The PowerPoint also works to ground the reader in a specific place (their house and the desert) and with a cast of four main characters, clearly identified at the opening of the presentation. The story is broken up into four main sections (After Lincoln's Game, In My Room, One Night Later, The Desert) that establishes a linear timeline and the majority of the slides have individual subheads (i.e., "Mom Spots the Toy Horse,"; "Facts About Dad," etc.) that add further context. The subheads make it easy for Egan to include characterizing details in lists of memory snippets, like in "Facts About Dad," and move in and out of the main plotline without wordy explanations. This aside works well, since it both adds more details about Ally's relationship with her dad and further characterizes him.

The slides concerned with Rob, a friend of her parents who died in an earlier chapter of the novel, feel less successful, both in their format and placement in the story. "Rob Was Mom's Best Friend," contains thirteen boxes in five different colors on one slide, making the reading

order somewhat unclear. The attempt to fit a story about a love-triangle and death by drowning into two slides feels more like a way of trying to connect this story to the larger novel plotline, rather than expanding on the plot or characters present in *this* story.

The things I remember: the width of red whiffle ball bats, looking for Amish houses along the highway, the barns without tractors and candles in every window, the floral pattern of wicker couches and curtains in my grandpa's sunporch. The ping of rainwater falling in an orange plastic bucket in the attic directly above my pillow, the same bucket I'd kept by the side of my bed through countless flus. My love of snails, the suction against skin, even the wetness. Poking holes in plastic butter dishes, putting one in with a piece of lettuce and keeping it as a pet for a day, until it died, unable to see the harm in that sort of love. The sounds of Bruce Springsteen and Enya cassette tapes as I drifted in and out of sleep in the backseat, imagining our station wagon as a covered wagon traversing the Oregon Trail.

The details themselves do not make a successful story, but, even in novels with retrospective narrators, the use of sensory, specific details rooted in childlike images and pleasures keeps the speaker from seeming entirely removed from childhood. This is particularly true in *Housekeeping*, where the voice, as well as the use of diction and imagery, are unlikely to be coming from any speaker other than Robinson herself. Robinson's prose is simultaneously dreamlike and precise, filled with seemingly digressive details that point towards the story's main tension. And yet, Robinson's inclusion of childhood sensory pleasures demonstrates that even a story with such high diction and poetic descriptions can evoke moments of a child's perspective. However, I would argue that Robinson's overall ambitions for *Housekeeping* are far

larger than creating a compelling child narrator, and that she willingly sacrifices authenticity for an elevated prose style.

On the other end of the spectrum, Egan's "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," uses brevity to create an authentic, non-reflective child narrator. She does this by placing the physical restraint of PowerPoint slides on her prose, sometimes cutting whole scenes down to one or two short sentences. I would argue that Egan's ambitions for the story are much more concerned with creating a young voice and evoking a strong emotional response from readers than writing an elevated piece of fiction like *Housekeeping*. However, in terms of creating a successful child narrator, the use of a fragmented style strikes a stronger balance between authenticity and adult complexity than it would be able to in a traditional journal.

Throughout the last year, I have tried to take what I've learned from writing this paper and applied it to my own prose, and have found that brevity, as well as surprising, childlike syntax and sensory details, are the most effective elements for creating non-reflective child narrators. I began experimenting with prose poems, and found that restraining the quantity of words the child speaker has to tell a story, combined with a stream-of-consciousness style helped me to create successful non-reflective present-tense narrative prose poems from the perspective of a young child. In the future, I hope to continue working with physical restraints on stories told from a child's perspective, and possibly experiment with even more alternative forms.

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