

The Collective Protagonist: Multiple Points of View  
and the Search for Truth in Familial Narratives

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**Abstract**

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Narratives

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How do you tell the story of a family? This is a question that is of key concern to me as both a writer and a reader. I am drawn, from both angles, to character as a key element of fiction. Yet when we speak of a family, we refer not just to the individuals that make up the family, but to the family unit itself, as a series of complex relationships that vary hugely over time and in reaction to events and moments that act as catalysts for change. To capture a family in writing, then, one must be able to express the simultaneity of togetherness and selfhood, of dependence and independence.

## **Part I: The Collective Protagonist as a New Kind of Truth**

How do you tell the story of a family? This is a question that is of key concern to me as both a writer and a reader. I am drawn, from both angles, to character as a key element of fiction. Yet when we speak of a family, we refer not just to the individuals that make up the family, but to the family unit itself, as a series of complex relationships that vary hugely over time and in reaction to events and moments that act as catalysts for change. To capture a family in writing, then, one must be able to express the simultaneity of togetherness and selfhood, of dependence and independence.

In Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris' *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, the authors refer to "a collective protagonist" as "a group that functions as a central character (a couple, an extended family, a special-interest group)" (59). This argument puts forth the notion that the concept of the protagonist can encompass multiple identities when those identities are linked around a critical common ground. In the use of a collective protagonist, we see an insistence upon the possibility of a communal framing of the world, rather than the usual assertion of a single character as the lens through which the reader understands and navigates a work of fiction. In this essay, I intend to argue for the efficacy of the collective protagonist as a device through which to convey the narrative of a family, and the significance such a choice carries when applied to concepts of truth, legitimacy, and individuality.

When a work of fiction privileges the voices of multiple individuals, a nuanced and ever-shifting understanding of the truth emerges. By truth, I refer to the existence of a narrative in which the reader can place their trust. The question of truth in fiction is an enduring one; the existence of the unreliable narrator is one of many ways in which the

concept of truth becomes muddled in many fictional works. Yet even in works that employ an unreliable narrator, there is the expectation that, beyond the narrator's machinations, a true narrative exists. When a collective protagonist speaks, such an expectation cannot be fulfilled. Because a work with a collective protagonist insists upon presenting more than one version of events by drawing on multiple points of view, it asserts the equal legitimacy of multiple narratives; thus, the search for one pure or objective truth is made futile.

The denial of a single legitimate narrative, and the replacement of the need for this single narrative with multiple narratives that crucially inform each other, creates space for freedom. This freedom rests in the rejection of a dominant truth. The goal of a work is thus reframed: rather than attempting to prove the greater value or legitimacy of one form of truth over another, the work forces the reader to contend with the very impossibility of such proof. This challenges a hierarchical understanding of truth as a concept in which certain understandings are deemed more objective, and therefore more legitimate, than others. Subjectivity becomes its own justification; the act of telling, and the permutations of memory revealed in that act, form a version of the truth that may exist alongside other versions of the truth. When multiple points of view are explored, a "house of mirrors" quality arises from characters' constant reflections on and of each other. Those points at which versions of the truth diverge from or chafe at one another reveal the spaces in which we find the most meaning in the narratives of a collective protagonist. The contradictions between one family member's understanding of the past and another's grant the reader access to a fuller knowledge of what truth is: subjective,

inchoate, and untouchable. Incongruity and discordance are not aspects of these narratives that must be quashed or silenced; instead, they are welcome and necessary.

A collective protagonist does not only play against notions of truth; it challenges our cultural knowledge of individualism as a defining aspect of character. The concept of the collective protagonist rejects common perceptions of a narrative as containing one voice that emerges victorious, or as a single journey that comes to an end, but instead puts forth a multiplicity of lives being lived and witnessed. Central characters are not defined against one another; rather, they come into focus through their relations to one another. We come to understand that a character's individuality is deeply connected to and shaped by the togetherness inherent in the collective protagonist.

Yet another possibility created by the use of a collective protagonist is the way in which it privileges the reader as a holder of secrets and a knower of emotional deceptions among multiple voices. The reader is able to see beneath and around the lies that the characters tell themselves. The potential for characters to achieve liberation or fulfillment is seen while simultaneously the acts of self-sabotage and familial sabotage are made clear. This inflects a work with a richness and fullness that might otherwise be denied, and allows the reader to give credence to or acknowledge the flaws within the narratives being shared.

## **Part II: The Short Story Cycle as Vehicle for the Collective Protagonist**

The short story cycle, which is known by many other names, falls between the novel and the anthology or collection of short stories. While every story included in a

cycle is meant to be capable of standing on its own, the reader's understanding of the story as a single unit is meant to be enhanced, complicated, and expanded upon by its relation to the other stories in the cycle. The effect of reading the cycle in the same way that one might read a novel, as a single and purposefully organized entity, is meant to impart the sense that, as is commonly said of successful short story cycles, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

In texts that discuss the short story cycle, there are often adamant proclamations of the unique capabilities and particular worth of the form (see *The Composite Novel* and *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, among other texts). Such proclamations are accompanied by spirited discussions of what does and doesn't count as a short story cycle, how the form might be organized, and what separates the form from the novel, on the one end, or an anthology or collection of stories, on the other. While I fully believe in the value and significance of these conversations, I've come to realize that, for the purposes of my own writing, I am less interested in the form itself than in its utility as a vehicle for multiple points of view. This realization has been dawning on me gradually, but it hit me full-force at AWP 2016, when I sat in on a panel about multiple points of view in novels. While the authors who spoke had not written specifically about families, their thoughts on the value of multiple points of view echoed my own almost exactly, despite the fact that they were speaking as novelists. In my notes on the panel, phrases such as "accumulated meaning," the idea of "truth" and how multiple viewpoints reveal that "nothing is true; everyone sees in a different way," and the idea that the lack of a "dominant truth...creates space for freedom," made visible the shared concern that many writers possess for a means of capturing the slippery nature of truth and representation in

their work. J. Gerald Kennedy even asserts, in the introduction to *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, that “[i]n its more experimental aspect...the novel has for about seventy-five years been veering toward the short story sequence as a decentered mode of narrative representation” (x). So why, then, do I focus on the short story cycle as a form in this essay, as opposed to a more wide-ranging examination of works with multiple points of view?

Because of its natural affinity for multiple points of view, the short story cycle offers itself as an ideal form for narratives of family. While a novel can—and often does—utilize multiple points of view, it does not have the benefit of discrete narrative units that lend themselves to alternating points of view without the necessity of transitioning logically from one point of view to the next. The short story cycle, on the other hand, allows a writer to tell stories as they are, without having to connect them to other components of the larger work. Aspects of the story that are truly significant to each character’s narrative can be focused on without the need to foreground plot connections or continuity within the work as a whole; each voice can shape and inhabit its own narrative unit, while simultaneously speaking to the other stories in the cycle. Thus, the need to maintain linearity, thematic coherence, or other aspects that are expected of chapters in a novel is disposed of. Each story is allowed to have the integrity of a self-contained work while revealing a greater meaning when seen in the context of the entire cycle.

The fact that each story can stand alone allows us to view characters with fresh eyes, and to separate out members of the family from the family structure without losing sight of the ways in which every single character is deeply informed by and caught in that

structure. The lack of necessity for linearity allows circling back; we can return to a character at different points in time and understand how they have (or haven't) essentially changed, without the logical movement through time demanded by a single continuous work. The burden of a unified chronology and the imperative of a forward-thrusting narrative are thus shed by the stories in a cycle. This is not to say that short story cycles in general, and those that concern family in particular, do not contain their own internal logic and chronology that are vital to the structure and meaning of the work. Rather, it is to point out the opportunities for variation in narrative shape, focus, and voice presented by the cycle form.

To return to the question of form, it is necessary to answer a question that arises when we examine a short story cycle that includes both a recurring set of characters (the family) and a recurrent, or repeatedly referenced, event (the inciting incident). If so many factors unify the various stories, what justification does an author possess for writing a short story cycle rather than a novel? What benefits reside in the short story cycle form if the stories within it concern the same central plot—the fate of the family, in light of the inciting incident—and a unified set of characters, two factors that are key ingredients in the traditional novel form? Whether it is fair to write linked short stories rather than the chapters of a novel simply because one is most drawn to (or perhaps comfortable in) the short story form is a question that appears to qualify the novel as being intrinsically better than the short story cycle, as though one should choose to write a novel unless there is a clearly justified reason for choosing otherwise. The fact that a short story cycle allows a writer to jump from one idea, plot, or other narrative thread to another in quick succession is an oft-repeated criticism of the form, noted by its detractors as an indication

of the writer's inability to see a single plot, idea, or other element "through" the length of a novel. A criticism noted by Stuart Dybek in his introduction to David Shields' *A Handbook for Drowning* exemplifies the claims of laziness or incompetence leveled at the cycle form: "a recent reviewer in the *New York Times Book Review* condescendingly wrote, 'The collection-as-novel is an appealingly manageable form for emerging writers . . . the form suggests something less than total confidence, a sense of not-quite-completed apprenticeship, a preference for smaller, perfectible structures'" (7). This sense of a novel-length exploration as the duty of a "serious" writer—perhaps, even, as the ultimate test of whether a writer's ideas are worthy of being written about—strikes me as entirely arbitrary, with an emphasis on a bigger-is-better understanding of writing.

Dybek stresses the possibilities inherent in the simultaneous suggestion of brevity as a defining feature of the components of the short story cycle and the intention of the cycle to utilize each short story to build something that is, presumably, greater than the sum of its parts. The fascinating tension that is created between part and whole allows the short story cycle or novel-in-stories to act as a hybrid form, with its own unique potential to move between individual and community. Dybek emphasizes the way that a cycle can highlight conflict between the individual and the whole:

"The paradoxical nature of hybrid form makes the novel-in-stories particularly suited for expressing dichotomies such as the contradictions and outright conflicts inherent between the individual and the community. The use of sequence allows these books to express the multiplicity of community whether the community is a town, a suburb, a neighborhood, or a still smaller unit—a gang, a platoon, a family—while the scale of the individual stories lends itself to conveying the

intimacy—and if necessary, the claustrophobia—inherent in such localized settings.” (9)

This focus on multiplicity as geared toward contradiction and conflict strikes me as both useful and somewhat reductive, insofar as the family unit is concerned. Certainly the struggle between the formation of a viable self and loyalty to the family underlies many of the narratives in a family-focused cycle. Yet the pleasure of connection, and the intense bonds that can be welcome even as they are painful to detach from, are equally significant and nuanced features of a cycle that concerns itself with community in its various forms, and family in particular.

In family-centric short story cycles that tend toward a more novelistic structure, a central event or a central set of events is crucial as a grounding point or inciting factor that the different family members grapple with, define themselves by or against, and strive to make sense of. In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, this event is the abandonment of the family by Beck Tull; other events seem to branch out from, echo, or respond to this initial betrayal. Similarly, the abandonment of the Tate children by their mother in *Last Call* stunts their emotional development and leaves them unable to function fully as husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers. In *Franny and Zooey*, the spiritual crisis experienced by the youngest child in the Glass family, Franny, causes a reckoning with and a semi-cathartic response to the events of Franny’s and her brother Zooey’s childhoods.

It seems to me that the stories in a successful family-based cycle cannot just recount things that happen to individuals who happen to be a part of the same family. A story that follows a single child or parent from the family at a time period or in a situation

that sets them apart from the family, without clearly grappling with the influence of the family on that individual, risks feeling like an outlier, and loses the wonderful intensity of focus that a cycle can sustain. For this reason, Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, despite being composed of a single short story and a novella, better represents a family-based cycle than his *Nine Stories*, which happens to include a couple of stories relating to the Glass family, but also throws in numerous stories that have no connection to the family whatsoever.

### **Part III. Exemplary Pieces: *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, *Last Call*, and *Franny and Zooey***

One of the potentially fascinating aspects of the short story cycle form when applied to familial narratives is the utilization of repetition as a means of delving ever-deeper into the mutable, troublesome, and endlessly fascinating question of truth as it applies to the family. In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Anne Tyler successfully demonstrates how repetition can illuminate the construction of multiple narratives around the same incidents and patterns within families. She manages to avoid monochromatic, meaningless repetition of events, sentiments, and ideas even as she explores the same event, sentiment, or idea through multiple perspectives.

The first three stories in the cycle present recurring elements voiced by three different characters. We hear from Pearl Tull, the matriarch; Cody Tull, the "bad" son; and Jenny Tull, the only daughter. Ezra Tull, the third child, is purposefully exempted from the repetition of elements in the cycle; we are meant to understand Ezra as living in his own world, possessing a knack for mentally separating himself from the conflicts of

the family even as his actuality is continually defined by the actions of Pearl and Cody. There are three elements that find themselves repeated in both Pearl and Cody's stories; Jenny provides further repetition on two of these points. The first is the repetition of perceptions of Pearl's motherhood as dangerous and disastrous from Cody and Jenny, and, by contrast, Pearl's puzzlement over their lack of appreciation. Jenny's description of her mother's rage is perhaps the most vivid and damning of the three versions we receive:

Jenny knew that, in reality, her mother was a dangerous person—hot breathed and full of rage and unpredictable. The dry, straw texture of her lashes could seem the result of some conflagration, and her pale hair could crackle electrically from its bun and her eyes could get as small as hatpins. Which of her children had not felt her stinging slap, with the claw-encased pearl in her engagement ring that could bloody a lip at one flick? Jenny had seen her hurl Cody down a flight of stairs. She'd seen Ezra ducking, elbows raised, warding off an attack. She herself, more than once, had been slammed against a wall, been called "serpent," "cockroach," "hideous little sniveling guttersnipe." (70)

This description grounds itself in precise, particular details such as the "claw-encased pearl of her engagement ring" and Pearl's eyes "as small as hatpins." Even better are the final remembered insult, "hideous little sniveling guttersnipe," which is an odd and voice-specific brand of name-calling far more convincing than "cockroach" or "serpent." Such details strike the reader as irrefutable; the specificity is such that we believe Jenny's recounting implicitly. The inclusion of Cody's and Ezra's travails as well as her own further bolster our belief in Jenny's version of events; she is not attempting to paint

herself as a special victim, but rather trying to account for the shared experience of all the Tull children. From Cody's story, we receive a full scene—recounted from enough of a psychic distance that it suggests objectivity—that further accentuates the reality of Pearl's volatility and tendency to use violence toward her daughter and sons.

By contrast, Pearl cannot fathom why her children accuse her of giving them a miserable childhood. Though she is aware, to a degree, that she has not been a perfect mother, and while she does not refute the claim that she has lashed out violently at her children, her memories of motherhood do not foreground such recollections:

She wondered if her children blamed her for something. Sitting close at family gatherings...they tended to recall only poverty and loneliness—toys she couldn't afford for them, parties where they weren't invited. Cody, in particular, referred continually to Pearl's short temper, displaying it against a background of stunned, childish faces so sad and bewildered that Pearl herself hardly recognized them. Honestly, she thought, wasn't there some statute of limitations here? When was he going to absolve her? He was middle-aged. He had no business holding her responsible anymore. (22-23)

There are multiple points of interest in this passage, the first being Pearl's understanding of her children's complaints as being grounded in material possessions and social standing. Where Jenny and Cody emphasize Pearl's emotional and physical violence, as well as her attempts to prevent her children from engaging anyone beyond the family unit, people she refers to as "outsiders," Pearl sees their accusations as being rooted in petty grievances. And because Cody, as a character, is prone to exaggerate the awfulness of his childhood, Pearl reads his invoking of "sad and bewildered" children as not merely

exaggerations, but as inherently flawed memories. Finally, she attempts to discount the staying power and profound effect of the wounds she has inflicted, physically and emotionally, on her children. We thus find ourselves both certain, as readers, that Pearl has scarred her children, and we experience pity for Pearl, in her inability to comprehend the harm she has done.

Another recurring motif in Tyler's cycle consists of the varying perspectives that different family members have on the role of the house in which Pearl raises the children. Again, we see a clear polarity between Pearl's understanding of her efforts to constantly shore up the house as good motherhood and as something she has a talent for versus Cody and Jenny's sense of claustrophobia and meagerness in the house. For Pearl, her continual efforts to seal the house against outside elements represent her best self, a self that is protective of her family, prepared for emergency. This self emerges even before her husband abandons the family, and proves to Pearl that she has competence: "From early in their marriage, from the moment she had realized how often they would be moving, she had concentrated on making each house perfect—airtight and rustproof and waterproof...All she cared about was sealing the house, as if for a hurricane...With tools she was her true self, capable and strong" (16). Pearl's motives in sealing the house are deceptively selfless and sensible in the first sentence of this passage. She prepares against the kind of everyday disasters that homeowners must watch for: rust, water damage, mold creeping in from outdoors. Yet a sense of something else beneath this sensible planning materializes with the word "hurricane." Because the Tulls live in Baltimore, a place unlikely to see any hurricanes, the use of this term indicates that Pearl's actions are largely unnecessary. The zealotry with which she seals the house cannot be justified

by her circumstances. And so we come to the final sentence, which makes clear the true nature of Pearl's investment in proofing the house against all elements: she derives a sense of being "capable and strong" from her ability to perform these duties. As a single mother, overwhelmed by her children and lacking any outside help, she finds assurance in knowing that she can do the tasks that are perceived as belonging to a husband and father, and do them well. To Pearl, this is what it means to make a home "perfect."

Where Pearl derives a sense of self-worth from her exertions in shoring up the house, Cody and Jenny find the resulting environment to be anything but home-like. Every observation that fourteen-year-old Cody makes of the house hones in on the lack of even the simplest comfort in his mother's decoration. This sense of lack, of a profound emptiness in the home's essence, mirrors Cody's sense of an emptiness at the middle of his own life:

Cody looked around him and noticed, for the first time, that there was something pinched and starved about the way this house was decorated. Not a single perfume bottle or china figurine sat upon his mother's bureau. No pictures hung on the walls. Even the bedside tables were completely bare; and in all the drawers in this room, he knew, every object would be aligned and squared precisely—the clothing organized by type and color, whites grading into pastels and then to darks; comb and brush parallel; gloves paired and folded like a row of clenched fists. Who *wouldn't* leave such a place? (42)

This section speaks to both the house itself and to Cody's perception of his life as missing any hint of warmth or emotional closeness. The fact that the neatness of the objects "aligned and squared precisely," which indicate care and effort, exists alongside the utter

lack of attention paid to the way that the home fails to feed the emotional needs of its inhabitants is striking. Cody even imputes an aggression to the precision of the objects, viewing gloves as a “row of clenched fists,” and he assesses the entire home as being “pinched” and “starved” in the same way he comes to view his childhood as pinched and starved of affection. While Cody notes the emotional emptiness in the house, Jenny senses a kind of claustrophobia that seems to invade her mental state. She, like Cody, notes the sense of something lacking in the house, but it is the claustrophobia that most disturbs her: “[W]henever Jenny returned, she was dampened almost instantly by the atmosphere of the house—by its lack of light, the cramped feeling of the papered rooms, a certain grim spareness” (83). In both Jenny’s and Cody’s reflections on the house, it becomes clear that the “grim” and “cramped” sensations they describe refer, in fact, to Pearl’s presence more than anything else. It is Pearl who devotes herself to shutting the house off from the outside. Her refusal to let the outside in extends to the way she expects her children to remain grim, spare, and uninfluenced by the outside world. It is this expectation that Jenny and Cody are so desperate to escape.

The final element of repetition concerns the inciting incident of the series—Beck Tull’s abandonment of the family—and reveals the profound gap between what Pearl believes her children know and what they are actually aware of. After her husband leaves, Pearl believes she can continue on without alerting her children to any great change, a plan made simpler by Beck’s frequent absences as a travelling salesman. As time passes, Pearl finds herself seemingly able to extend her children’s ignorance over weeks, and then months. She believes wholeheartedly in this ignorance: “He was never coming back...It was time to tell the children. She was amazed, in fact, that she’d managed to

keep it from them for so long. Had they always been this easy to fool?” (14). Pearl’s belief in her children’s innocence and lack of awareness allows her to see Beck’s disappearance from their lives as having little effect on their wellbeing. She never, in fact, tells the children that he has left; it becomes an unspoken secret that is hidden from no one. This failure to acknowledge such a traumatic event leaves the children bereft of an explanation, much as Beck never gives Pearl an adequate explanation for his leaving. Yet it allows Pearl to indulge the fiction that her children do not notice their father’s absence, a notion that is never entirely dispelled.

Pearl’s belief in her children’s ignorance is proven to be almost entirely wrong by Cody. In his story, we learn that he becomes aware of Beck’s absence far earlier than Pearl suspects, and furthermore, that he pays close attention to the way Pearl herself behaves to garner clues about his father’s disappearance:

[O]ne morning Cody woke up and saw that it had been a while since their father was around. He couldn’t say that he had noticed from the start. His mother offered no excuses. Cody, watchful as a spy, studied her furrowed, distracted expression and the way that her hands plucked at each other. It troubled him to realize that he couldn’t picture his father’s most recent time with them. (40)

While Pearl professes astonishment at how simply she can dupe her children into believing nothing is wrong, Cody reveals himself to be “watchful as a spy,” capable of reading into furrows and hands as well as more obvious signs of disappearance, such as the emptiness of his father’s closet and dresser that he notes later on in this passage. And though Cody, like Pearl, at first thinks Jenny and Ezra have noticed nothing, he soon enough finds that Jenny is convinced their father has left, and that even Ezra shows signs

of sensing that something is off. The disparity between what Pearl thinks the children know and what they actually know exposes a significant truth about the relationship between mother and offspring: Pearl is far less skilled at reading her children than she thinks herself to be, a reality that hints at her eventual inability to understand their resentment toward her.

The ability to both enter into a character's interiority and to see how that character is perceived from outside, or by other significant characters, seems to move us closer to a crucial realization about the shifting, multitudinous nature of emotional truth in families. We see the unbridgeable gaps between the characters on both sides; we understand, with painful clarity, that some relationships cannot be healed or changed, no matter how deeply both characters desire to change them. This is particularly true of the relationships between characters like Ezra and Cody, or Cody and Pearl; their resentments and misunderstandings can be seen, by the end of the cycle, as encoded into their very being. Without their oppositions to each other, without their rage and grief and resentment, they would have no way to frame themselves.

Pearl and Cody, the two characters who are least able to disentangle themselves from the resentments and the ill-fitting roles they fill within their families, also happen to be the most fascinating, vivid voices in the cycle. Their inability to become self-aware, and thus to move beyond or become more than the identities that they fulfill within the structure of the Tull family, makes them anguished and obsessive, unable to see themselves beyond the strictures of bad son and self-sacrificing mother. Cody, with his deep-seated hatred and envy of Ezra, and his hatred of Pearl for loving Ezra most, reveals to us the ugly, illogical, and often-intractable nature of the beliefs that form when

children are constantly compared to one another. The ugliness of his emotions, and the unfairness of his treatment of Ezra, makes him all the more recognizable to the reader. Pearl's failure to acknowledge the ways in which she has damaged her children, and her understandable puzzlement at the way none of them seem to recognize the depth of the effort she has put into motherhood, resonate as markers of the ways in which love can be both genuine and twisted. And so we find that the two characters who appear to be thwarted, pressured, and ultimately consumed by their family ties draw us into the cycle most deeply. Characters like Ezra and Jenny, although interesting in their own right, seem less compelling by virtue of the fact that they have emerged with a sense of self beyond their family, even if neither is perfectly intact.

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In K.L. Cook's short story cycle *Last Call*, we track the lives of several generations of a family in West Texas. Among the cycles I've examined, *Last Call*—along with Cristina García's *Dreaming In Cuban*—is unique in its use of clearly structured sections within the cycle as a whole. Because the question of organization is key to understanding the way in which a particular cycle functions, it is critical to examine how a highly structured work like *Last Call* utilizes these sections. There are four sections in all, composed of four, three, four, and one stories. The organization of the sections within the text is roughly chronological, with the first section, "Nature's Way," taking place entirely in 1958, and the last section, "Penance," set in 1990, the latest point chronologically of all the stories in the cycle. The two middle sections, "Last Call" and "Pool Boy," overlap chronologically; the former begins in 1978 and ends in 1980, while

the latter begins earlier—in 1970—and ends in 1981. The stories within each section are organized chronologically from earliest to latest.

More interesting and, I would argue, more crucial than chronology is the use of point of view in each of these sections. Cook explores multiple points of view over the course of the entire cycle, yet within each section, we see a choice made to either focus exclusively on one point of view, or to carefully alternate viewpoints to illuminate a theme. The first section, “Nature’s Way,” is filtered through the third-person limited omniscient point of view of fourteen-year-old Laura, one of five children in the Tate family. Each of the four stories in this section remains within this point of view, and because the chronology of the section takes place over a relatively short time—we begin in March 1958, and end in August 1958—this consistency of point of view highlights the significance of the events in each story for Laura’s development. We come to understand that this short period of time is critical to the person Laura becomes later in the cycle. Parenthood and abandonment, two major themes of the cycle, are driven at by each of the stories in this section, concluding with the final story, “Thrumming,” in which the abandonment of the family by Mrs. Tate, Laura’s mother, is finalized.

This section also repeatedly asserts one of the overarching motifs of the cycle, which is the possibility of foreseeing the future through signs in the present. This theme arises in the first story of the section, “Easter Weekend,” when Mrs. Tate’s mysterious detachment from the family prompts Laura to search for some meaning behind her mother’s actions: “She felt she was on the verge of understanding something, as if she could almost grasp how a puzzle fit together” (24). This sense of something beneath the surface, of potential knowledge that might alter the future, is made all the more poignant

by the fact that the signs Laura notices amidst the ignorance of her father and brothers point to her mother's impending departure, which will irrevocably scar her and her siblings. As with other stories later in the cycle, the second story in this section, "Nature's Way," uses the technique of peering into a character's future to illuminate the moments that will leave an indelible impression: "It made her a believer, though she wouldn't have known how to say it at the time, that there were always seeds of the future in the present, growing, preparing for the blossom" (32). This is a more subtle example of the kind of foretelling that allows us to learn of a character's death before it happens in the third section of the cycle, and points to a narrative presence that makes full use of the omniscience with the third person limited point of view. The use of omniscience also serves to emphasize the purpose behind utilizing this point of view rather than the first person point of view chosen for stories later on in the cycle.

"Last Call" is the next section of the cycle, and interestingly, the multiple points of view presented in the section that shares the cycle's name are the most inscrutable in terms of relation to the overall focus. It is also the first section in which we hear from the adult versions of the Tate children. The stories are narrated by Gene, the second-oldest brother in the Tate family; Travis, the son of Gloria, the oldest child in the Tate family; and Rich, the Tate's youngest child. This section is the only one in which multiple points of view are present, and therefore is less outwardly unified than the others. Furthermore, it mixes the second generation, the Tate children, and the third generation, their own children. Gene and Rich act as bookends of this section both in terms of their shared status as younger brothers in the Tate family, and because their sections are hugely linked in both plot and theme. The inability of either brother to maintain his marriage, and the

wild, violent response to this failure and to being abandoned by a wife, play out in almost comically similar patterns.

In the first story of the section, “Texas Moon,” Gene sees his estranged wife, Angie, in a bar where he’s drinking with Rich. The story is told in first person, and we experience, through Gene’s narration, his alternating hope and despair at getting Angie to return to him after the latest incident in which he has beaten her. This hope finally dies out when Gene learns that Angie is taking radiology courses at a nearby community college and plans to move up in the world, leaving him behind. With this realization, Gene drives Rich’s truck, along with Rich, Angie, and a third passenger, Shelley, into a lake. The story ends with Angie walking away, clearly leaving Gene for good. A similar arc occurs in Rich’s story, when he returns to his also-estranged wife, Babs, after months on an oilrig. Rich’s story, “Knock Down, Drag Out,” is told in third person point of view, making his actions appear all the more absurd and frightening when he ends up carrying his protesting wife from her home and strapping her to the bed of his truck in order to force a reconciliation. Gene and Rich appear compelled by their past, their impulsive natures, and their lack of introspection and accountability to commit violence against the women in their lives and to expect forgiveness as a response to their hapless, clueless attempts to redeem themselves.

Travis’ story, sandwiched between Gene’s and Rich’s, mines a different thematic vein, one that is simultaneously far darker than and far more hopeful than his uncles’. Rather than exploring the violence done by one human being to another, “Last Call” focuses on the indifference that the universe possesses toward random violence that ends in death. Though this is the single story told from Travis’ first person point of view, the

fact that it bears the title of both the section and the cycle seems to indicate that its thematic content is essential. The story itself follows seventeen-year-old Travis and his mother, Gloria, as they work at a bar, the Texas Moon, in the year following the death, by car accident, of Gloria's husband and oldest son. A key moment occurs between Travis and Gloria when she tells him, in hindsight, that their time at the Texas Moon "was the happiest time of my life" (126), even as she acknowledges the irony in this statement. A crucial truth seems to accompany this statement, a truth about the Tate family as whole: as a family who constantly undergoes tragedies large and small, they discover the most about themselves and find the most meaning in the clarity of loss. The formative nature of loss, and the way that it encompasses a kind of awful freedom, pervades the cycle as a whole. The abandonments by mothers and wives, husbands and children, seem to determine, for better or—more often—for worse, the deepest desires of the characters, desires they chase for the rest of their lives.

"Pool Boy" is the third section of *Last Call*, and in contrast to the section that precedes it, it is characterized by total uniformity of point of view. We follow Lee, the son of Laura Tate, as he tells of his parents' failing marriage, his father's outlandish schemes, and his mother's inability to refrain from making bad choice after bad choice when it comes to men. Lee speaks entirely in first person. This section brings us close to Laura again without yet allowing her the use of first person voice. We are thus able to understand the ways in which Laura endangers her children by bringing home unstable, abusive men, and how her behavior models the kind of dark, violent, unstable relationships from her childhood. Lee, in turn, inherits from his mother, who inherited it from her mother, the desire to escape his life and the turmoil of the relationships around

him. We see this play out in the story that shares this section's title, when Lee makes plans to go to Las Vegas to see his father: "I knew she felt I was abandoning her when she needed me most, but I wasn't about to be pulled into anything like that again. I wanted to escape" (195). Lee's desire to escape arises in reaction to the position his mother puts him in as her protector from the abusive men she brings home, one after another. He is, in essence, attempting to escape his mother's own means of escape. Lee's inheritance marks a turning point in the cycle's gendered dichotomy of chaser and escaper; where the other men we see in the cycle are either chasing after women who wish to escape or attempting to find roots following tragedy, Lee mirrors Laura's desire to run away.

The final section of *Last Call* returns us to Laura's point of view, this time in the first person. Because we've now encountered Laura both from a slightly distanced third person limited point of view and through the eyes of her son, Lee, this arrival at her true, unfiltered voice feels momentous. This sense of momentousness is heightened by the fact that there is just a single story in the section, "Penance," that shares a title with the section itself. Seeing a story that stands alone after the cycle has established a pattern of including three to four stories per section draws the reader's attention immediately, and signals that this story has intentionally been awarded its own space.

Where other characters receive mostly peripheral observations from fellow family members, the intense focus on Laura as a wife and mother that we encounter from Lee in the "Pool Boy" section allows us to understand Laura's first person voice in "Penance" as a response to Lee's. This story allows us a glimpse of how Laura has matured and gained self-awareness over the thirty-two years that have passed since we encountered her as a

teenager, even as she risks making the same mistakes that have alienated her children and left her deeply alone. While commenting on where she and her siblings have ended up, Laura notes that they are “all of us trying, like our mother, to escape our lives. Unsuccessfully” (228). In a moment like this, we see that Laura is able to acknowledge her own pattern of escape attempts, and to connect those attempts—as well as those of her siblings—to her mother’s abandonment of the family.

But she doesn’t merely acknowledge the way her mother has scarred her. The penance of the story’s title seems to refer to Laura’s admission that she has driven her own children away from her, and that, in doing so, she has committed the same negligence as her mother had. While Laura has a reconciliation of sorts with Lee, she does not know where her daughter Cindy is: “Like my mother, she had disappeared from me...I hadn’t protected her. Just as my mother hadn’t protected me” (240). This acknowledgement contains a startling revelation—that despite her physical presence in Cindy’s life, despite the fact that she never abandoned her children, Laura has betrayed and harmed them as surely and deeply as her mother betrayed her. The fact that Laura has failed to protect her daughter even while avoiding a repetition of her mother’s abandonment is a frightening and difficult concept. It seems to take the proverbial fate of turning into one’s parents and complicate it in a disturbing manner. Though Laura’s decisions don’t look anything like her mother’s, and she has never purposefully abandoned her children, she still finds herself thinking that she has “systematically destroyed every relationship that mattered” (243), a consequence that sounds suspiciously similar to the outcome of her mother’s choice to run away.

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J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey* defies categorization. On the face of it, it is merely a single short story and a novella bound together beneath the same cover, yet the connectedness of these two pieces, indicated by the title itself, points to something more complex and intentional. Salinger has written multiple stories concerning the Glass family, a large Irish-Jewish family of the upper-middle-class intelligentsia in New York City, in which Franny and Zooey (Zachary) are the youngest children. Yet unlike stories concerning other siblings Seymour and Boo Boo Glass, which are included alongside stories that have no relation to the Glass family in Salinger's *Nine Stories*, *Franny and Zooey* dedicates a separate volume to its subjects.

The short story "Franny" concerns the title character and her boyfriend, a college boy named Lane. On its own, "Franny" appears to trace the dissolution of their relationship under the pressure of the spiritual crisis Franny experiences, a crisis that Lane proves incapable of understanding. This crisis centers on Franny's disenchantment with the academic world, and the connection between this disenchantment and a book about a Christian pilgrim that she has taken to carrying everywhere. She confounds Lane with her disdain for the aims of the very men he respects and wishes to emulate. Even as she implicates herself in this disdain, she expresses a yearning to be subsumed by spiritual humility that Lane cannot conceive of: "All I know is I'm losing my mind," Franny said. "I'm just sick of ego, ego, ego. My own and everybody else's. I'm sick of everybody that wants to *get* somewhere, do something distinguished and all, be somebody interesting. It's disgusting—it is, it *is*. I don't care what anybody says" (26).

We receive a few hints that this crisis arises from Franny's childhood, but for the most part, the story limits itself to Franny's current state of being and the friction between her and Lane. Thus, it seems an unlikely entry in a family-focused story cycle.

Yet once the novella *Zooey* commences, it becomes clear that "Franny" is both a prelude to and an integral component of Salinger's exploration of the Glass family. This truth reveals itself through signs obvious and subtle. The final lines of "Franny" are a clear foreshadowing of her condition in *Zooey*, and help to ground the reader in a chronology: "Alone, Franny lay quite still, looking at the ceiling. Her lips began to move, forming soundless words, and they continued to move" (37). These lines make way for the conflict between Franny and Zooey in the novella, which centers on the spiritual education they received as children from their two oldest brothers, Seymour and Buddy, and how that education has, in a sense, emotionally disfigured them.

When we come upon Franny in the novella, she has descended into a state of nervous collapse, in which she continually mouths the "Jesus Prayer." The prayer is an utterance that she explains to Lane in "Franny" as the key to spiritual awakening: "'You get to see God. Something happens in some absolutely nonphysical part of the heart—where the Hindus say that Atman resides, if you ever took any religion—and you see God, that's all... And don't ask me who or what God is. I mean I don't even know if He exists. When I was little, I used to think—'" (34). The mention of Franny's childhood here is significant, for it refers to the intense spiritual past that she shares with Zooey, and which uniquely binds them to each other. The emphasis placed on spiritualism by Seymour and Buddy during Franny and Zooey's formative years has left them unable to contend with the meaninglessness of the everyday, of "ego" and "getting somewhere,"

albeit each in their own way. Where Franny breaks down from her inability to reconcile the reality she encounters in college with her spiritual knowledge and aspirations, Zooney covers his anguish with humor, cleverness, and uncompromising scrutiny of everyone he meets. When Franny tries to justify her recitation of the Jesus Prayer to Zooney, his unique understanding of her spiritual background allows him to take aim directly at the heart of Franny's intentions. He refuses to take Franny seriously because taking her seriously would mean taking his own spiritual confusion, the great morass of knowledge and belief that lives in his past, seriously too. So he skewers her aspirations as only he can, by accusing her of conflating Jesus with other figures both spiritual and not: "You can say your prayer here and roll Jesus and St. Francis and Seymour and Heidi's Grandfather all in one" (140). Zooney makes light of Franny's plight, and in doing so deeply wounds her in a way that no one else—and especially no one like Lane—could.

While Zooney comes across as capable of "seeing through" what he supposes to be Franny's pretensions of piousness and moral superiority, we are also treated to moments in which Zooney clearly fails to understand the depth of Franny's despair. Because we have seen Franny's encounter in "Franny," and we are therefore aware of the crassness and dismissiveness with which her torment has been treated by Lane, we have the ability to judge Zooney's actions as harsh and unmerited where, on their own, they might seem justified. There are points, in fact, where Zooney, who professes his hatred for Lane—referring to him as "a charm boy and a fake" (83)—behaves with as little understanding and willingness to take Franny seriously as Lane himself. He belittles Franny's sincere beliefs, and accuses her of not knowing her own mind. Because we know how desperately Franny wishes to be heard, and because we can compare Zooney's behavior

with Lane's, the moment when Zooney realizes his mistake is all the more meaningful and satisfying for the reader:

“Zooney broke off. He stared over at Franny's prostrate, face-down position on the couch, and heard, probably for the first time, the only partly stifled sounds of anguish coming from her. In an instant, he turned pale—pale with anxiety for Franny's condition, and pale, presumably, because failure had suddenly filled the room with its invariably sickening smell...very like the standard bloodlessness in the face of a small boy who loves animals to distraction, *all* animals, and who has just seen his favorite, bunny-loving sister's expression as she opened the box containing his birthday present to her—a freshly caught young cobra, with a red ribbon tied in an awkward bow around its neck” (145).

Zooney's capacity for realizing his own failure stands in stark contrast to Lane's self-satisfaction and distinct unconcern for Franny's need to be heard. And yet he has failed; we can see the version of the truth he has constructed for himself crumbling here, a truth that he wields against Franny by applying their shared past and his unique ability to enter into conversation with her spiritual knowledge. Salinger's use of figurative language draws our attention to the particular nature of Zooney's mistake: in his need to sound clever, whatever the cost, Zooney has trampled on his sister's genuine spiritual need. Where he should have engaged with her thoughtfully and seriously, he has plunged forth heedlessly and without regard for the harm he might cause, like a boy giving his sister a snake in place of a bunny. The fact that Zooney possesses the understanding to have avoided such a mistake, where someone like Lane could not begin to comprehend what is needed, makes the failure all the more shameful.

Beneath the spiritual anguish of Franny and Zooey is an anguish even more profound: the loss of Seymour Glass, the oldest brother. We learn that Seymour committed suicide years before the story begins, and it is hinted that his suicide was the result of spiritual maladjustment and an inability to match his lived reality with the reality he believed in. The parallels between Seymour's motivations for committing suicide and the roots of Franny's current spiritual crisis are clear, a fact that is not lost on Zooey. Franny herself seems to recognize the connection between her behavior and Seymour's: "Franny repeated her statement. 'I want to talk to Seymour,' she said" (127). The fact that talking to Seymour is an impossibility leaves Zooey with no response. For him and Franny, their brother cuts a tragic and brilliant figure, one whose presence pervades the novella. Because of Seymour's death, the spiritual crisis that Franny finds herself in the throes of takes on a physical urgency. We see the potential for Franny to fall into the same trap Seymour fell through; as inexplicably as he, she might lose her way completely and become untethered from life. And so we see that familial relations underpin every moment of the novella, even those moments in which the characters ascend to lofty philosophical heights in their discussions of religious transcendence.

Despite the clear structural differences between short story cycles such as *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and *Last Call* and a hybridized work like *Franny and Zooey*, the emphasis on the accumulated meaning is unmistakably present when we look at all three of these works in their entirety. On its own, "Franny" appears to be the story of a disintegrating relationship between a tedious, self-involved young man and a young woman whose capacity for self-reflection and scathing observation far surpass her partner's, even as these qualities appear to push her toward the edge of wellbeing. Yet

when placed in relation to *Zooey*, the meaning of “Franny” is utterly transformed. We gain a context which possesses a significance far beyond that which we know from the short story alone. The scars of being the spiritual guinea pigs of two overzealous siblings, and the burden of knowing that one of those siblings took his own life because of his inability to contend with the very spiritual questions he forced upon them, renders Franny and Zooey as profoundly lost, grieving, and incapacitated characters. Though they are but two members of a large family, we can feel the presence of the whole family—even those siblings who are no longer living—in every word they exchange, and perhaps even more so in the words unspoken.

#### **Part IV: Reaching (for) Conclusions**

The three example texts I’ve engaged with in this essay concern families who, from the outside, appear to have little in common. Other than their shared whiteness and overlapping time periods—all of which pass through the middle decades of the twentieth century—these families could hardly come from more dissimilar segments of America: working class Baltimore, rural and uneducated West Texas, and the intellectual class of New York City. Yet through the shared use of the family as the collective protagonist of these works, it becomes clear that the essential nature of familial relations—the profound way in which family shapes identity, memory, and truth—cannot be escaped by the Tulls, the Tates, or the Glass family.

How might we have read these works differently, had they been filtered through the point of view of a single character? It seems clear to me that none of these works would have succeeded in evoking the simultaneity of emotions experienced by their

central characters through any means other than a collective protagonist. While the voices of particular individuals—Pearl and Cody, Lee and Laura, Zoey Glass—may take up more space than those of other characters in these cycles, their voices would not be nearly so compelling and multifaceted were it not for the benefit of comparison and juxtaposition provided by the presence of other characters' points of view. Without the balancing effect of other viewpoints, the complex web of half-truths woven by each character would lose its power; we would not be able to see beyond and around the self-deception that bedevils familial narratives.

Ultimately, the failure of the characters we follow in these works to disentangle themselves from their families, and thus their pasts, creates a space for freedom through acceptance of a larger truth. This truth rests in the fact that, however purposefully an individual might separate themselves from their family and the patterns that define their familial structure, they are still defined by and against the family unit. Who they are and what they experience cannot be removed from the family identity and experience. At the risk of peddling platitudes such as “you can't change where you come from,” I wish to assert the freedom these characters discover when they acknowledge that they cannot separate themselves from the collective of family. Perhaps by acknowledging the permanence of the past, these characters can find a way to break free from the ossification that so often forms around expected familial roles—the sensation of being forever stuck in a role that seems to have chosen them, rather than giving them any choice. We see this with Laura Tate most vividly, but it also present in the narrative of Cody Tull, who finally accepts his place in the Tull family after Pearl's death. Even Franny and Zoey come to a kind of acceptance of their state of being as one which will

always be defined, at least partially, by their spiritual education. This is not to say that such acceptance is always joyful or embodies reconciliation with the family unit. There is, however, an allowance for a multiplicity of truths, and in that allowance, there is permission for characters to live their lives in connection with, rather than in spite of, their part in the family whole.

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