

Stalking Authoripus Intrudicus

Finding and Banishing the Intrusive Author

The goal of much modern fiction is to immerse the reader in a vicarious adventure. A good novel guides the reader along a journey that doesn't just entertain or enlighten. A reader expects to fall in love, or experience the pain of loss and the joy of recovery, or use her brilliant intellect to solve a vexing mystery, or dive without fear into a den of thieves and bring them to justice.

None of these things can happen when a narrator recites a chronology of events. Gone are the days when a story begins with a variation of *Once upon a time there were three little pigs*. The modern novel is more likely to begin thus:

Jennifer paused in the doorway, her gaze fixed on the back of Mark's glistening, bald head. As usual, he had the TV's volume up so high that the windows rattled. Good, she thought, allowing herself the luxury of a smirk. The neighbors will never hear the shot.

In the passage above, the reader is deep inside Jennifer's head, seeing what she sees, hearing what she hears, even sharing her thoughts. In other words, the reader *becomes* Jennifer. Now imagine that the following paragraph appears next, as Jennifer stands behind Mark, gun in hand:

Jennifer and Mark had fought for years. Last night he had stayed out until three AM, and that was the last straw. When she got up this morning, she decided to kill him.

Ouch! That hurt. Raise your hand if you felt yourself jerked out of the story. Sure, it might be nice to know why this woman is about to commit murder. But do you really want to get this information from an in-your-face busybody? No, I don't either. That's why we will now explore the several varieties of Authoripus Intrudicus, the dreaded intrusive author. Once we are able to identify instances in which the writer drops into the world of our story, we will be able to make an informed decision about whether to welcome this intrusion or give the author the boot.

The Teller

Everybody has a story they'd love to tell. *Bob and Mary had lived together in marital bliss for seventeen years when one day Mary came home to find Bob wearing her pantyhose. That made her so angry! She confronted him, and when he was unable to explain himself, she stomped out of the house.*

It's easy to put finger to keyboard and pound out the facts, exactly as they happened. The problem is that reading a passage like the one quoted above is like sitting at home while your friend in a movie theater phones you every so often with an update on what's going on in the show. It's hard to feel involved when the writer *tells* the story.

The key to presenting a story effectively is to *show* it to the reader through the senses of a *Point-of-View* (POV) character. These senses include not only sight, but also hearing, smell, touch and taste. Paint a picture for the reader, and then bring it to life by means of sounds and smells, perhaps even flavors and textures. Consider this opening of a scene:

After spending hours chained to a hard bench, waiting for Mr. Darling's arrival, Mary watched him walk into the room. He was very fat. As he came closer, she felt afraid because he smelled of the narcotic cooba-cooba juice.

The closest we come to a picture here is a vague image of a fat man walking into Mary's room. These three sentences are nothing but a compendium of dry facts. Even the last three words, *she felt afraid*, have nothing to do with actual emotion.

Now let's paint a few pictures as experienced by Mary. More words are required, but the price is well worth paying.

The steel bench had grown harder and more frigid by the hour, and now its icy touch penetrated to her bones. She tried to shift her weight, to let blood flow into her tingling legs, but the chains around her waist and ankles kept her pinned in place. Igor had said that Mr. Darling would be along shortly. He lied.

The door swung open and a gleaming gold belt buckle appeared, followed by a mountain of flesh. Mr. Darling waddled into the room, huffing like an antique steam locomotive. His head, reminiscent of a rotting Halloween pumpkin, sat directly on top of his shoulders, without benefit of an intervening neck. With every step he took, the man's gut swung from side to side, threatening to demolish anything that dared get in his way.

She'd sworn to herself that she'd stay calm and reason with her captor. He was no threat as long as she played his game. But as he came closer, she realized she'd made a fatal mistake. The nauseating stench of cooba-cooba juice hung over him like a funeral pall. The man was mad, a drug-crazed zombie. And now she was as good as dead.

The Explainer

In a well structured novel, the author will deliver information to the reader in an organized, progressive manner. This may be done by means of events, or dialog, or the thoughts and observations of the POV character. Every scene will build on prior scenes, adding to the reader's store of knowledge one step at a time.

In a poorly organized novel, crucial information will be delayed or left out, and the author will need to step in to explain why certain words were spoken or deeds done.

Garth spotted his mother across the garden and crossed the walkway in a dozen steps. "Mother! I invoke the Writ of Edmund and refuse to ride in the Royal Tournament tomorrow." The Writ of Edmund was a centuries-old tradition that allowed the first-born son to decline a tournament invitation if he was betrothed.

The author could avoid this jarring intrusion by including a conversation like the following in a prior scene:

Garth clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back, enjoying the look of confusion on Cassandra's face. "Ah, but you have not read your history." He gave her an exaggerated wink. "The Writ of Edmund may not have been invoked in a century, but it still holds. The first-born son has the right to refuse a tournament if he is betrothed. Why do you think I announced my engagement to Gwendolyn yesterday?"

The Summarizer

A frequent problem in a novel involves passing time while the characters are involved in an activity that has little to do with advancing the plot. Maybe our Hero and Heroine are going out on their first date, dinner at a fancy restaurant. Sometimes the dinner itself will be a pivotal event. Recall the seduction-via-food scene in *Tom Jones*, or the many disasters in some romantic comedies. But most of the time, it is key conversations before, during, and after the dinner that are most pivotal to the novel. The eating-of-food and drinking-of-wine are there only as burdensome but necessary vehicles for progress of the plot.

So what do you do about that troublesome dinner if you don't want to use it for comedy or seduction? Certainly you don't document every bite and sip, even if the publisher *is* paying you by the word. You need to keep it short and simple, covering only the essentials. Here are a few choices that are less than excellent:

The rest of the dinner went well enough. Tom almost spilled his wine when he sneezed, and an escargot shot off Mary's plate when she skewered it wrong. There were no real disasters, though, and they left the restaurant hand-in-hand.

Mary had never had such a boring dinner in her life. All Tom did was talk about himself and his hockey trophies. He never even asked why she didn't eat a bite of her steak. What a disaster!

What's wrong with these two examples? Both of them use the author to summarize the events. Summaries are fine, often mandatory, but they should not come from an intrusive author. Later dialog, either with the dinner partner or with a friend, is often an excellent way to summarize events for the reader. Consider this opening to the dinner scene:

Their waitress placed a steaming platter on Mary's plate and lifted the lid to reveal a dozen succulent escargot swimming in a dark sauce. A single word, "Yes!" escaped her pursed lips before she could stop it. She felt a flush of embarrassment, and dabbed her mouth with the napkin.

Tom smiled at her outburst, plunged a fork into his plate of spaghetti, and twirled it. "Bon appetite," he murmured, raising the fork to his mouth.

At this point you could have a scene break and jump straight to the conclusion of the dinner. For example:

As the restaurant door closed behind them, Mary slipped her hand into Tom's. "Hey," she said, leaning close, "How about my aim with that flying escargot? Who would have thought I could sink it in that old lady's cleavage?"

"Tom," she said as the restaurant door closed behind them, "Remind me again how many football trophies you won in college."

"It was soccer, not football. And I won 23, even though the bums only gave me 18. In that 1997 game, they never..."

She waved her hand in his face. "Football, soccer, whatever. Aren't they the same thing when you get right down to it? Hey, I hafta wash my hair. Gotta run." She flagged down a passing cab.

The Historian

Historians love to sneak into novels to tell their own stories, and the longer, the better. Sometimes their motive is apparent: they believe that the reader needs a detailed backstory in order to understand the behavior of characters as the novel progresses. Other times their motive is not so clear. A pureblood historian likes the story for its own sake, no matter that it has little or nothing to do with the novel at hand.

Historians are most likely to inflict their damage at the beginning of a novel. In fact, if a novel has a Prologue, an item discouraged by many modern publishers, there's a pretty good chance that it is the handiwork of a historian. In the Prologue, the intrusive omniscient author may relate an event or series of events featuring characters who are long dead by the time the real novel begins, and whose actions have far less to do with the novel than the historian believes. In a way, this irrelevance is good, because the vast majority of readers will at most skim the Prologue, and many will skip it entirely. If, God forbid, the author has embedded truly crucial information amidst the dusty relics of history, then God help the reader.

Although the early parts of a novel are most at risk of invasion by an intrusive author of the historian variety, his evil touch can creep into a novel at any time. The big giveaway is the word *remembered*. For example:

The intercom buzzed and Sally Connover hit the switch. "Yes?"

"Ms. Connover, there's a Mr. Jack Herrington here to see you."

"I'll be with him in a moment." The pencil fell from Sally's fingers. Jack Herrington. She remembered the last time he'd come to London and sought her out. The moon was full, and the night warm. They'd walked hand-in-hand along the beach, talking about... blah blah blah.

Once the word *remembered* appears in a novel, the historian grabs the reins. Hundreds of words may follow, all spoken in the omniscient voice of an intrusive author, trying to hide behind the

flimsy excuse of a remembrance. When this happens, the first step the writer should take is to ask if the information in the memory is crucial to the novel. Does it push the plot forward (hard to see, when it is a move backwards in time)? Does it add a *necessary* depth to the character? Is the information *required* in order for the reader to understand a future milestone in the plot? Memories are so disruptive to the forward motion of a novel that they should be included only when they have clear, demonstrable value.

The Interior Decorator

One of the first things every beginning writer learns is that setting is a vital component of a good novel. The words and actions of the characters must take place in an environment that the reader can experience. Also, the characters must be people whom the reader can visualize. This leads many writers into the realm of *gratuitous description*. This is no different from gratuitous sex or gratuitous violence. It is description presented purely for its own sake. It serves no purpose beyond being there.

John Smith walked into the room. The walls were beige, and a blue rug covered the floor. In the corner was an overstuffed chair, and a gold sofa sat along the far wall. A huge chandelier hung from the ceiling.

The man he was meeting stood in the corner. He had shoulder-length blond hair, blue eyes, and a ruddy complexion. He wore a red shirt and cutoff jeans.

How are these words attributable to an intrusive author? Are they not a detailed image seen through the eyes of the POV character? This would be true only if they are details that the POV character would naturally notice and think about. If your POV character is the sort of person who would ponder observations such as these, and if such ponderings have some importance in the context of the novel, then they can stay. Otherwise they are static descriptions narrated by the all-knowing voice of the author, serving only to clutter the manuscript.

But what if you, as author, want these details to be known? Then you have to make the character notice them!

John Smith pushed open the door and paused, struck by the incongruity of it all. An elegant crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, yet the furniture reminded him of his dorm room from decades ago. The overstuffed chair in the corner had a depression in the middle from a broken spring. Dark blotches that could only be cigarette burns marred the sofa at the back wall, and the rug that had once been solid blue now bore the mottling of countless spilled glasses of wine.

The man he had come to meet stood in the corner, his shoulder-length blond hair in wild disarray. John scowled. The guy didn't even have the decency to change his clothes for their meeting. Greasy stains covered his faded red flannel shirt, and his cutoff jeans looked like they hadn't seen the inside of a clothes washer for a month.

Descriptions presented through the senses and feelings of a character have a life of their own, while details recited by an omniscient author are worse than worthless; they are annoying clutter.

The Dictator of Emotions

This variety of intrusive author drops in at times of high emotion so that he may dictate to the reader how he or she is supposed to feel.

Jessica faced the door, listening to the footsteps that came closer by the second. The knob turned and her captor entered. It was Mr. Belleweather! Dread descended over her heart.

Gerald waited for Mr. Jacobson to sit. Then he took a deep breath, ready to give the old coot a piece of his mind. How he hated that man!

Annie closed her eyes, feeling the delicate touch of Jim's fingertips as they caressed her cheek. He was so gentle, so kind. Her love for him overflowed.

It's easy for the author to tell the reader that a character feels dread, or hate, or love. But how much more effective it is for the character to show the reader these emotions:

Jessica faced the door, listening to the footsteps that came closer by the second. The knob turned and her captor entered. At the sight of his bulbous, pocked nose and eyebrows so wide that they met in the middle of his forehead, a shiver rattled her body. How could it be him? He was supposed to be in prison for life. They would never let a sadistic killer like Mr. Belleweather go free!

Gerald waited for Mr. Jacobson to sit. Then he clasped his hands behind his back to keep them from shaking while he spoke. "Sir." He paused a moment to let the pulse that pounded his ears slow its angry beat. "Your greed killed my wife and child, and injured dozens of other innocent bystanders. You lied to the inspectors, cheated your workers, and stole from your own family. Now it's time for you to pay the price."

Annie closed her eyes, feeling the delicate touch of Jim's fingertips as they caressed her cheek. He was so gentle, so kind. She reached up and placed her hand on top of his. "I love you, Jim," she whispered. "More than I've ever loved anyone in my life."

When the reader learns from Jessica's thoughts that her captor is a sadistic murderer who was supposed to be in prison, we know she feels dread. When we hear Gerald's words to Mr. Jacobson, we know he hates the man. When we hear Annie's words to Jim, we know she loves him. The author does not need to tell us these things.

Should we ever let the author in?

Of course. Unlike dangling a participle, intrusion by the author is not illegal. But legality is the wrong question. Just because something is legal does not mean that it is beneficial. The real question, to be considered for each and every sentence, is this: do we *need* the author here? Most of the time we don't, and it's far better to keep that pest out.

J. K. Rowling begins her first Harry Potter novel this way:

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.

This is a classic case of an intrusive author telling the reader some facts. A fanatic would say that she should rather show these aspects of the Dursleys' personalities to the reader through dialog and actions, and let the reader come to this conclusion without being told. Does anyone wish to take this up with Ms. Rowling? No? I thought not.

Sometimes a few well chosen words, especially at the start of a novel, can set the stage quickly and effectively, far more so than an extended period of images, thoughts, and dialog. Also, as a novel progresses, it is occasionally more expedient to let the omniscient author jump in and recite some facts that are crucial to understanding the story. This is especially true in science fiction, when the author may be the only reasonable vehicle for presenting future technologies, or historical fiction, in which the reader may need solid grounding in the customs and context of the times.

Such rare necessities should never be taken as license for freely admitting the author, though. In almost all cases, showing (through the senses of the POV character) is more immersive and powerful than using the author to tell facts. Unless you have a demonstrable need to admit the author, bar the door.