Chapter 5

Narrative

A novel tells a story. It may also tell the reader other things such as the author's opinions (as in *The Last Plague*), the circumstances of writing (as in *The Jail Bugs*), a view of history (as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) – but if the story does not predominate, it cannot be defined as a novel.

Apart from the related genres discussed in chapter two, there are other kinds of narratives. A doctor's examination of a patient begins with a “history” of her conditions and circumstances. A judge's summing-up of a case starts with the ascertainable facts. A set of accounts may be accompanied by a narration of what has happened in and around the company concerned – a take-over, a rise in exchange rates or tax, a shortage of raw materials, a fire.

I do not remember being told much about narrative methods when I was a student. This is not because our twenty first century “narratology” is inventing any new methods of telling a story that have not been there from time immemorial. Perhaps what is new is a scepticism, an awareness of devious intent, which characterises the second half of the twentieth century. Neither the doubt nor the intent is new. “The hands are the hands of Essau but the voice is

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the voice of Jacob" (*Genesis* 27:22). We have added emphasis and tedious explanation. When King Solomon advises cutting a disputed baby in halves (1 *Kings* 3: 25), everyone knows that the genuine mother will protest. When the dying King Arthur sends Sir Bedivere back and back again to the edge of the lake, we know that the mystical climax of the story is near. The narrator may have remembered the prophet Elijah sending his servant out repeatedly until he saw the little cloud that forecast the coming rain. Luo rainmakers are also reputed to have told those praying, "Don't stand about gossiping, or the storm will overtake you on the way." The story is not meant to be open-ended. Anglo-Saxon bards kept their listeners to the main theme by repeating the tag, "It was not for the last time." Perhaps it is only the open-ended story that is new, and possibly our ancestors would have seen an open-ended story as simply unfinished.

A story can be told:

- objectively, without intrusion by a narrator. This is sometimes called "the eye of God method." The storyteller knows everything that happens, whether or not the characters know it. Even so, he may decide not to disclose events to the reader in the order in which they occur, as in Patrick White's *Voss*.
- subjectively, still from the eye of God, but implying a judgement on the situation as in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.
- by first person narrative, a character in the story telling it as he knows it, sometimes having to fill in background on something after it comes to his knowledge. The narrator may be:
    - a principal actor in the story as in George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin*
    - a minor character who participates in but is not a driving force in the story, like the tenant in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*
    - several characters sharing the narrative, as in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*

- an alternation of the detached narrator and one or more of the characters as in Dickens' *Bleak House*
- a collection of supposed documents, letters, or records.

There are also various kinds of frames used to suggest a reason for telling stories from the 1001 stories of the *Arabian Nights* up to the present, or the series stories like the spider and hare themes in African and African-American folklore or the Renard the Fox theme in northern Europe. Some frames, like those used in the fourteenth century by Chaucer and Boccaccio (without a strong separation of verse and prose narrative) add to the fun. Some, like Hawthorne's elaborate run-up to *The Scarlet Letter*, jar on the modern ear.

I do not believe that most writers begin by making a deliberate choice of narrative method, though a choice will have to be made somewhere along the way while the material is still fluid. Sometimes, an experienced storyteller, like an experienced poet, may set out to try his hand at a new mode. So, we may have several tries before finding the exact narrative voice we want. I had planned to write *Murder in Majengo* in very simple sentences, but I was not able to do so. In *The Present Moment,* I changed several times the order of disclosure of what the reader needed to know, although for most of the book, the reader knows things that some of the old ladies in the Refuge do not.

In several of his books, William Golding, whose *Lord of the Flies* was once a set book for O-level, keeps an important disclosure till the very last page. I do not think this is a good strategy. In real life if we find out, perhaps only when someone dies, what his real position in the family is, we are uncomfortable and would like to pose questions which now cannot be answered. In Golding's *The Spire,* we are told at last that the bishop is the son of the king. This must have been known to many of the monks and builders in the story. It explains his early promotion and command of funds. Why should the reader be kept in ignorance? A more reasonable scenario occurs when some characters are kept in ignorance of what some others do know but have a reason for not telling. For instance, in Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities,* readers know that Sidney Carton is not the man in whose name he is being executed. But the substitution would not work if the executioners knew of it or even if the threatened family knew it, because they would not accept the sacrifice of his life. In Wahome Mutahi's *Three Days on the Cross,* we are presented with Momodu and Chipota in their imprisonment, but their wives and employers do not know where they are. It is only later that a situation allowing possible escape can be set up.

Sometimes, the topic of the story is there only by implication behind the events described. In Zoe Wicomb's *Another Story*, the young, “so-called coloured” historian asks questions which seem valueless to her great-aunt Deborah, a spinster housekeeper. Sarah is arrested, but what has happened to Deborah, with her fine cooking and her weekly white woman's “book,” implies the history that we are so sketchily told (Lefanu and Heyward).

Another decision has to be made about the amount of detail required in a narrative. As a rule, description should be kept to a minimum necessary to enable the reader to picture the surroundings, but when different cultures meet, a lot is disclosed by naming the items that surprise the newcomer. With an international audience, there is a temptation to over-explain, but most of us can deduce the function of articles (sufuria, epergne, wok, billy) from the context and of titles (foreman, naval rating, aide-de-camp, Bayete) from the way they are used. Concepts of space and size are often subjective and comparisons can tell us a lot about the character. Trees may seem to one person soaring like cathedrals, to another enclosing a tunnel of darkness. The notion of “river” or “stream” holds different content in different languages. A point of view is implicit in what can be taken for granted, what needs explanation. Prices in remote times and places need to be related discreetly to possible earnings. So, historians tell us that Jesus' disciples were estimating a working man's wages for eight months as the cost of a small snack for 5000 people. In Toni

Morrison's *Beloved,* the girl from Denver is crossing America with the aim of getting a piece of velvet fabric of a particular colour. Her imagination is not more demanding than that.

Within any of the forms of narrative outlined above, the narrator may use devices which either expand the scope or mark time, indicating the passing of events or absence of them until something significant to the main action resurfaces. For instance, in *Coming to Birth,* Paulina has to establish a routine in which she keeps busy and learns to live with her grief in the years between Okeyo's death and her reunion with Martin. Such devices may be:

- *The flashback*. This is used frequently by Genga Idowu in her novels. Care has to be taken that the reader does not get the time schemes confused. John Le Carre uses the flashback masterfully.
- *The interior monologue*: this is chiefly useful when the circumstances of the story do not allow means to demonstrate the thought in action. For instance, I use it in *Homing In* to explore the memories of a woman who has had a stroke. The hallucinations of “The Fixer” on his way to execution in Bernard Malamud's novel tell us more about imperial Russian society than a straight narrative could. This is called the “stream of consciousness” method. Where it is used as the main vehicle, as in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the major story-line is left for the reader to deduce from scattered fragments of memory and the time-sequence is hard to interpret. Most writers vary the method to give the audience a bit more help.
- *The story within a story*: like the “Hymn to the Sun” in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah.*
- Interruption of the time sequence, as in A.S. Byatt's *Possession.*
- Mistaken identification of characters by the protagonists as in Ishiguro's *When we Were Orphans*.

- *Intertextuality*, that is, cross-reference, from one work to another the reader is expected to recognise. This has continued from ancient times when Virgil picked an incident from the Greek poems of Homer to open his *Aeneid* to modern times when Jean Rhys in *The Wide Sargasso Sea* imagines the action preceding Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Peter Carey uses whole pages of out of copyright work to pad out his novels.

None of these devices is new. *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne (issued in parts 1770-1777), with its innuendo, its typographical jokes, its constant procrastination of the supposed story of the nephew's birth, its ebullient character-drawing, has many of the features sometimes called "post-modern." It has been said that Sterne "invented for English literature the fantasia-novel" and "left the novel the most flexible of literary forms," (*The Shorter Cambridge History of English Literature*, pp.510). The terrible ironies and physicality of Swift also strike a chord with the 20th century – Lilliput and Brobdignag are only a preface to the true horrors of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

All these methods indicate stages in the release of information. This, as we have already seen from Paul Scott's handling of themes, is the key to the relationship between the writer's mind and the reader's.

Let us look at the detective story, for example. This is a kind of narrative that can operate at any level of complexity, and has been favoured by several literary dons and clergymen writing under pseudonyms. The story aims at solving the mystery of a crime or act of espionage, even if the reader is able to identify the person responsible from the beginning. For instance, John Banville's creation of the life of the spy related to the royal family, Sir Anthony Blunt, *The Untouchable*, is a masterly evocation of place and period. The official version of Blunt's career is already known.

Since in a detective story the reader's enjoyment comes largely from pitting his wits against the investigators', a great deal of irrelevant information has to be inserted (as also happens in real life) so that incorrect leads will be followed up before the truth emerges. The artistry lies in keeping this interesting because it throws light on the characters involved. In *The Constant Gardener*, Le Carre's novel of Kenya, there is no sexual relationship between Tessa and Arnold, but the fact that people think there is affects the action. Some detective writers like P.D. James tend to introduce excessive detail related to their personal tastes. Some, like Raymond Chandler, one of the most sensitive writers to use this form, select such details – intrusive make-up that girls use to distance themselves from reality, the shabby offices in which confidential deals are brokered – to sketch a whole marginal society and show how it is conducive to evil-doing. Some insult our intelligence by dragging in weapons or motives that the previous story has given no clue to. My own *Murder in Majengo* is not in that sense a detective story. Crimes in our urban slums do not ordinarily have neat solutions any more than murders in the similarly intricate thickets of high politics. Making an arrest does not necessarily explain anything.

So, in the subtler regions of the social novel, to expose a situation does not prevent its recurring. The sequence of events may seem inevitable as in Sam Kahiga's *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story*, while in the same writer's *Paradise Farm,* the events revealed at the end seem not to be implicit in the whole story.

A character's behaviour may be influenced by what she knows or comes to know about other people. For instance, at the beginning of *Bleak House*, Esther Summerson does not know that she is the daughter of Lady Dedlock. Nor does the reader know it, though he does know that the two families have an interest in the same case in the court of Chancery. The actions of the characters are more interesting than past revelations. Small mysteries like the identity of Trooper George can easily be guessed. In Meja Mwangi's *The Last Plague*, the HIV status of Frank Fundi remains a puzzle until near end of the book.

In many cases, the order of disclosure of information is crucial and the author may have several changes of mind before getting it right. So, let us look at the example given earlier in the *Themes* chapter about a Kenyan novel of father and son and their approach to university.

- You may start it with a third person narrator recording a dialogue between father and son and then going to the story of the son's life with his father, putting in stories of the past from time to time.
- You may start with such a dialogue and follow with a flashback to the father's relations with his own parents as he aspired to higher education, and an interior monologue of the son thinking about his own parents.
- You may tell the story in the son's voice, cutting back to what his father says or what he supposes his father to think. In this case, you reduce the possibility of a realistic portrayal of his father's and grandfather's generation.
- You may have the father tell the story, in which case the son's point of view will be mediated, except insofar as dialogue from his own generation may be literally reported (even if misunderstood by the father). Such dialogue will seem dated if your novel is still being read twenty years later.
- You may have another narrator, for instance, a younger sister of the father, who regrets not having had the same chances and yet has a sufficiently fulfilled life to report all sides of the action. She will probably see more likeness between father and son than either of them sees of themselves.
- You may wish to make ironical comment by inserting actual documents of different dates on education policy or resources.

Of course, there are many other possibilities. In choosing among them, you will be motivated partly by what is possible in terms of the information you have or have access to. You may desire to put on record a particular point of view of someone you admire or to refrain from causing pain to that person. You may wish to advocate a particular policy or to celebrate the different pleasures of learning. You may have a particular register of speech in mind.

You will need time and experiment to come to a decision. That decision will determine the title of the novel. Not all choices are academic. I planned to write *A Farm called Kishinev* in three parts, to be narrated by grandfather, son and grandson. I had to restrict my ambitions because I was no longer physically able to complete all the research I had intended. So, I decided that the grandson's voice would enable me to comment on events up to date, while still drawing on memories or documents of an earlier generation. I was also influenced by the fact that some questions put to different informants elicited incompatible answers, and even historical descriptions did not agree. This means not that one guess is as good as another but that a certain amount of intuitive guessing is inevitable. It helps to remind us that not all generalisations are meaningful. There never was “an English wedding” or “a Luo funeral.” There is always a component special to the circumstances. But this does not mean that no historical facts are verifiable, as extreme post-modernists may assert. If you have evidence that a certain item was advertised at a certain price in a named township at a given date, that a person of known community and religious affiliation was engaged as a teacher at that time and place, that the Official Gazette was at the same time circulating information about a will, a bankruptcy, a wage schedule or an outbreak of foot and mouth disease, then you have a framework for a picture of that society.

The events of your story may not have commonly happened but they could have happened and the framework supplements what the memories of old people may have slightly distorted. Your character could have got a job, she could have owned a tilley-lamp, she could have known that her previous employer had recently disembarked at Mombasa, she could have been baptised by an

African clergyman, she could have travelled by train to a specific station, and she could have sent a money order.

The first page of any piece of work has a great deal to do with whether the reader goes on paying attention or not. The last page has a lot to do with whether he has further questions to ask (which may be the writer's intention), whether the reading has accomplished the drawing together of personalities and emotions, cause and effect, that is, the meat of the story; also whether there is a resolution, a right relationship between parts, what it is fashionable these days to call closure, the completion of an experience.

It is because stories engage our sympathy as well as our intellect that this is a technical exercise of considerable delicacy. We may get satisfaction at the end of a theorem in geometry – QED. There is satisfaction in opening a textbook and finding on the first page a statement of intention, such as “I propose to examine the assumptions governing international loans to corporate bodies.” Now we know where we are. There is satisfaction when an author starts by relating his subject to other spheres of knowledge. “The universal is the local without walls,” as Professor Harper puts it.

But in a novel or a short story where a scene is being set out of an infinite number of possible scenes, and characters brought alive out of a terrifying range of possible characters, there is no standard way of focusing the reader's attention. Each time we do it, we reduce the number of unused possibilities. Sometimes we have to draw on or repeat other people's openings. This is where the writer stands on the still bare stage fixing the audience's attention like Brother Jero in Wole Soyinka’s play, “There are eggs and eggs. Same thing with prophets.” We have already looked at the narrative method of *Wuthering Heights*. In the opening scene, the new tenant of Thrush cross Grange calls on his landlord at Wuthering Heights. This gives him reason to cross the grim countryside, look at the forbidding exterior of the house and introduce himself. That way, we learn why he has come to stay in so lonely an area and see through his eyes the strange characters that live at the Heights. This is an excellent technique for setting the scene and whetting the reader's appetite.

The *short story* is a much more difficult form than the novel because the narrative must be able to achieve its goal in a few pages. The setting must be demonstrated, leaving out everything extraneous to the story, and the point made in a paragraph or two. I do not write short stories myself, since the few I tried when I was young made me feel that each required as much imaginative labour as a whole novel. A novella is “an in between length”, usually between 40 and 70 pages, in which a story with small cast of characters can be worked out. It is, therefore, seldom able to analyse a situation as deeply as a full novel. My own work, *Street Life,* is a novella published in aid of charity. I had wanted to write full novel in dialogue form, looking at things from pavement level, but found that was too hard, so I used up some of the dialogues in the novella. Some people issue linked short stories as an in-between form. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's many stories about the detective Sherlock Holmes and his friend Dr. Watson are among the most famous and are still good readings despite their old-fashioned setting. If we had as good a telegraph services as London had in 1890s, we might not have to use our mobile phones!

This is the first paragraph of Grace Ogot's story “The Empty Basket” from her collection *Land Without Thunder,* 1998:

> Aloo hastened her steps. She felt nervous and panicky. It looked as though the earth under her feet was moving in the way that angry clouds race in the sky when it is going to rain. But now the earth was moving in the opposite direction pushing the hut further and further away. She started running. The distance was narrowing. She could see more people gathered in the yard close to the hut. She recognised Nariwo, the wife of her brother-in-law whose hut was in the village next to theirs. Aloo's knees suddenly went weak and numb, and she could not run. (pp.79).

We soon find that a big snake has entered the bedroom of Aloo's house where her baby girl is asleep. The skilful evocation of Aloo's growing fear and the transfer of that menace to the surroundings and the weather– what is technically called the pathetic fallacy – winds up the reader's feelings and leads to the solution of the problem in a concise and memorable manner. In a novel, the suspense would have to be sustained over a long period.

Another issue to consider is *the stage you begin to write*. Paul Scott has shown us that the conception is in your mind before anything goes down on the page. The words come later and may be reshuffled and re-written many times, as the plot develops.

We meet people as we relate to them and little by little find out what they did before and who their relations are. Often, we never find it out. The first chapter of a novel sets us in a relationship to the characters and the story gradually reveals more about them. The same with events. We know that a bomb went off in Nairobi in 1998, that there was fighting in Iraq in 2003, that Kenya got independence in 1963, but to get interested in the narrative, we have to see how these events relate, from page one, to the protagonists. If the events are fictional – a fire, a murder, a coup – or literally, true, but so far removed from the expected reader's consciousness that they have to be explained, then they have to be introduced as part of the story, not a history lesson or a foot-note.

This is where the writer's sense of design comes into play, shaping the idea that is already in his mind. Just as a poem is recognisable by its pattern of sounds, so a story is distinguished from a jumble of news items by keeping the parts in relation to one another and fixing them in the reader's memory. This is like music, where different styles and images interweave at different speeds.

In most cases, as Paul Scott has said, the end is pre-determined. It is part of the idea of the book. In my own case, I usually, not always, start with the beginning and the end: how does a person who, you know started in this circumstance end up in that one?

Someone else may start with a public situation – a battle or an accident – and go on to trace how it affects people's separate lives and brings them together. Or it is possible to start with a person looking back over the years and recounting some incidents, as Stefanie does in R.C Hutchinson's *Recollection of a Journey*, not always in the order they happened but in the order she came to know about them.

These are the given points: imagination and research work upon the process of change. So, the end depicts a staging post in the characters' lives, and usually, this corresponds with a point in the theme which the characters illustrate – perhaps a war has ended or begun, the economic system has been revised, a new technology is taking over or there is a revival in the church. When I planned *Coming to Birth*, relating Paulina's personal experience to the tremendous excitement of the early independence period, I intended it to cover 20 years, 1956 to 1976. Before I had finished writing it, President Kenyatta had died, and it was obvious that 1978, with a change in government, was the appropriate cut-off point. It did not make a fundamental difference: Paulina was 38 instead of 36, still able to carry through her pregnancy successfully. It just entailed filling in a little more background. The cut-off point may be either a real life event or a fictional one.

The commonest fictional endings relate to the solution of a mystery or a situation – a conflict, a courtship or a change of mind. When the end is inconclusive, it may be that another piece of work to extend the action and the development of the characters is forming in the writer's mind. Other novelists, like Bernard Malamud or Thomas Keneally, embody the theme they want to resolve in new stories relating to quite different times and places. It would be a useful study to compare the end positions of such sets of novels.

A recent critic has said of D.H. Lawrence, the mid 20th century novelist who insisted to the point of boredom in bringing explicit sex into the English novel: “that rhythmic, seductive, irritatingly repetitive style… leads us to what can best be described as a catharsis of exhaustion” [2]

Tim Parks gives the example of *Women in Love*, ending with a wrestling match that neither contestant wins. These are the final sentences of *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence's close to autobiographical novel. The protagonist's mother has died and he has rejected the possibility of marriage:

> Night, in which everything was lost, went reaching out, beyond stars and sun. Stars and sun, a few bright grains, went spinning round for terror, and holding each other in embrace, there in a darkness that outpassed them all, and left them tiny and daunted. So much, and himself infinitesimal, at the core of nothingness, and yet not nothing.
>
> 'Mother!' he whispered – 'mother!'
>
> She was the only thing that held him up, himself, amid all this. And she was gone, intermingled herself. He wanted her to touch him, have him alongside with her.
>
> But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly. (*Sons and Lovers*, Penguin 1948, 510f)

Nothing is solved, but a mood is created. In Lawrence's books, sex is almost divorced from having children and building a community. People are loners.

Jane Austen says near the end of *Northanger Abbey*, “my readers… will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity”, p.234. This is ironic, of course. Jane Austen was unmarried herself and was a member of a large family. She knew very well, as her stories show us, that few marriages are totally happy and many, in those days of slow transport and limited technology, extremely boring. But modest expectations reap modest rewards. The story ends with the expectation that those concerned will be as happy as society considers normal.

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[2] (Catharsis – purging, cleaning out, in the sense that Aristotle described out emotions as being emptied by watching a dramatic tragedy. (Tim Parks in *New York Review of Books* (NYRB) 25.9.03).

In a realistic type of novel, which was the mainstream for the 18th, 19th and much of the 20th century, we are disappointed if the end is not in keeping with the whole sweep of the narrative. Thackeray, the 19th century author of *Vanity Fair*, works through the battle of Waterloo and the whole social and economic scene of the period he is recreating to bring about the marriage of Dobbin and Amelia. It was happy, he says, it was notably good for the son of Amelia's first marriage, but it was not quite as rapturous as Dobbin, after his long years of courtship, had expected. This is not surprising, given our knowledge of the characters. We feel the author is being honest with us.

In some other cases, the allegedly happy ending leaves us a bit uncomfortable. Then there is a whole genre of adventure novels where the hero struggles to complete his mission, only to find that he has been deceived about the real purpose. It needs delicate handling to keep the reader aware of possible reversal of intentions all the way through. The twist in the tail ought not to be quite unanticipated.

We can never tell it all. That is the nature of the real world. Our aim has been to bring the story to a close that will satisfy the reader's curiosity, keep up his concern and cause him to reflect on the events and feelings he has shared. Then we withdraw.