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That Little Voice:
The Outsized Power of a Child Narrator

“Things look different depending on who is doing the looking and what their vantage point is. Points of view, like microscopes and telescopes, can reveal things ordinarily unseen.”
~Valerie Vogrin

I love words, I love children, and I love the way children stumble toward words then into them, the way they grasp for words and stow them greedily away in the pockets of their minds. I love watching babies wrestle their unwieldy tongues against the still-foreign objects of their teeth to form vaguely recognizable sounds, and I love watching toddlers learn to recall words, control and arrange them, recognize their meaning and willfully draw it from them. I equally love watching older children strive to make sense of the complex, elusive, and alive nature of language. And I find it exhilarating to see young humans—so new to this world—sprinting to catch up to words they thought they knew as they continually catapult between thought, speech, and print. As when my firstborn, Sophie—an avid reader who had, by middle school, acquired a vast working vocabulary from nineteenth-century novels—believed that the word anxiety as she heard it spoken aloud had a twin word only encountered in books, a twin with the same spelling (like a homonym) *and* the same meaning, but a different pronunciation. As it echoed in Sophie’s mind, Jane Eyre’s anxiety had only three syllables: *angs-uh-tee*. It took a bit of convincing before Sophie accepted, with astonishment, that Jane’s and her own anxiety were one and the same, and always had been—a linguistic wrinkle exemplifying the inextricable link between unknowing and surprise.

Such unknowing and surprise—arising from an especially elastic and incomplete relationship with language, and, therefore, meaning—are in part what make child narrators so compelling. Child narrators can, in the right circumstances, create effects, powerful ones, that other narrators simply cannot. Of course, not every project, especially within adult literature, calls for a child narrator. Only a few memoirs probably lend themselves to one, in light of how reflective memoirs tend—thanks to the conventions of the genre—to be. As for essays, Merriam-Webster defines them as “analytic” and “interpretive,” two traits not commonly associated with children. And yet, in certain situations, the voice of a child narrator can crack open a personal story—and world—like none other.

The crack starts with defamiliarization—the way a child’s voice and perspective casts strange light on objects and experiences, resulting in startling new shadows. The concept of “defamiliarization” in literature was first described by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art as Device.” Shklovsky defined defamiliarization as “the literary device whereby language is used in such a way that ordinary and familiar objects are made to look different.” Recently, Gabrielle Bellot expounded on Shklovsky’s ideas in *Literary Hub*:

What I’ve always loved about ‘Art as Device’ [is] Shklovsky’s focus on ‘defamiliarization,’ a simple technique that, in his mind, described the goal of most art. Defamiliarization meant taking something familiar or mundane, like a chair or a horse, and making it seem utterly unfamiliar and strange by virtue of how it’s described. When you become too accustomed to the things around you, they stop seeming extraordinary; when you step back and reflect on how rocking chairs, televisions, or markers work, though, imagining that you are describing them to someone who has never before seen them, they begin to take on an air of magic, of the marvelous, and the true strangeness and wonder of the world around us begins to feel visible again.

My four-year-old granddaughter, Esme, defamiliarizes the world often when she speaks. For example, she once said of her toddler brother, as he encroached upon her couch space, “Oscar’s legs are not really very

respectable.” On another occasion, she explained, “Yesterday today was tomorrow but now tomorrow is today!” Likewise, I admire how Maggie Smith skillfully incorporates her children’s defamiliarized observations into her poems, as with, “At the End of My Marriage, I Think of Something My Daughter Said About Trees”: *When a tree is cut down, the sky’s like/ finally, and rushes in*. Children, for whom the world is still a buffet of discovery, tend naturally when speaking to “take on an air of magic, of the marvelous, and the true strangeness” so that “the wonder of the world around us begins to feel visible again.”

Here I must acknowledge my bias. You see, it was through discovering a child narrator—somewhat accidentally—and then carefully constructing her, that I finally gained access to the unmarked, unlit, and sometimes unsafe intersection of memory and craft while drafting my own memoir, *The Part That Burns*. Perhaps it is ironic that after struggling for years with dark material that included incest, child abuse, and graphic violence, it took the little voice of a child to speak that material in a way no other voice—and I had tried a great many—ever had. This might explain why I expected, while preparing notes for a talk on child narrators at a creative nonfiction conference last year, to find plenty of craft writing on the topic. Instead, I found very little.

To note, my scope was—and is still, for this essay—narrow. When I say, “child narrator in adult literature,” I’m referring to a precise subsection of literary works—in this case, nonfiction works, a delineation that further reduces an already slender focus by eliminating novels and short stories—meant to be read by adults and in which a child is narrating. This definition excludes works meant for adults that feature a child protagonist, but are told in the voice of—and, more importantly, from the primary perspective of—an adult. Unsurprisingly, though, these theoretical boundaries tend to blur quickly in practice: a work featuring a child protagonist can be narrated in part by the child *and* in part by an older or even adult version of that same child, who speaks in a more reflective voice. Such is the case with *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s Scout, who is perhaps the best-known and most discussed child narrator of all time (and therefore merits mention despite that she falls out of scope by being fictional, alas). Indeed, Scout’s vocal

range is so vast, her voice at times so sophisticated, and her perspective so clearly (if only occasionally) anchored in the future that some readers insist she's not a child narrator at all, but only an illusion of one. I both dissent and agree: Scout is a child narrator *and* an illusion because all child narrators are illusions. Child narrators will never speak (or think or feel, to the extent that they are granted interior lives) in ways that accurately reflect the verbal, intellectual, and emotional capabilities of average children of the same age. But the same can be said about *any* narrator of *any* age: narrators of memoir and essay cannot and should not realistically reflect the writers who create them. All narrators are personas, versions of the self, fashioned of urgency and necessity to tell a particular story in a particular way at a particular time, with particular effects. As Vivian Gornick writes in her classic craft book on memoir writing, *The Situation and the Story*:

Out of the raw material of the writer's own undisguised being a narrator is fashioned whose existence on the page is integral to the tale being told. This narrator becomes a persona. Its tone of voice, its angle of vision, the rhythm of its sentences, what it selects to observe and what to ignore are chosen to serve the subject; yet at the same time the way the narrator—or the persona—sees things is, to the largest degree, the thing being seen. (5,6)

For the telling of certain stories, the way a child sees things—and the way in which that child's manner of seeing transforms the things being seen—provides the clearest possible lens.

Being that they are illusions, child narrators cannot be solely defined by their sophistication of vocabulary or general knowledge base, or even by whether or how often their narration reminds us that their perspective on the story is grounded in some future point in time, as with Scout. Instead, I tend to identify child narrators by how and why (in other words, how *intentionally*) the author limits what the narrator can understand. Annie Dillard's nonfiction child narrator in *An American Childhood* illustrates just how sophisticated a child narrator can be with regard to her vocabulary and even her seeming complexity of thought, while still exuding a childlike understanding of the world:

Our parents and grandparents, and all their friends, seemed insensible to their own prominent defect, their limp, course skin.

We children had, for instance, proper hands; our fluid, pliant fingers joined their skin. Adults had misshapen, knucky hands loose in their skin like bones in bags; it was a wonder they could open jars. They were loose in their skins all over, except at the wrists and ankles, like rabbits.

We were whole, we were pleasing to ourselves. Our crystalline eyes shone from firm smooth sockets, we spoke in pure, piping voices through dark, tidy lips. Adults were coming apart, but they neither noticed nor minded. My revulsion was rude, so I hid it. Besides, we could never rise to the absolute figural splendor they alone could on occasion achieve. Our beauty was a mere absence of decrepitude; their beauty, when they had it, was not passive but earned; it was grandeur; it was a party to power, and to artifice, even, and to knowledge. Our beauty was, in the long run, merely elfin. We could not, finally, discount the fact that in some sense they owned us, and they owned the world. (20)

Dillard's narration is complex, rich, gorgeous. Also, far too ornate for a child of ten, with words and phrases like insensitive, prominent defects, pliant, decrepitude, revulsion, and even figural splendor! But, on close reading, the limitations of the child's perspective are still clearly felt. After all, are adults truly insensible to our own limp, course skin? Do adults actually neither notice nor mind our own gradual demise? And do we accept at face value this narrator's assertion that adults "own the world," or are we instead resigned to the fact we often feel impotent and beleaguered, helpless and afraid, barely owning our own afternoons, let alone the world, except through the filter of a child's limited understanding? As Dillard's glorious passage demonstrates, the defining feature of child narrators—and their greatest potential—lies not in their limited vocabulary or flawed grammar, but their uniquely developing analytical ability and incomplete understanding of their homes, families, communities, and worlds. Also, their freedom to express themselves.

Because children are less restricted by the social norms and conventions governing what people should look at or away from, they have more license to observe openly and unflinchingly. Are children not, in fact, known for staring? A child's uninhibited stare, when deftly captured in a narrator, can amplify that narrator's ability to reveal certain truths, often difficult ones. Observations around personal or social shortcomings that would feel critical from an adult narrator may feel more neutral from a child. And children are allowed to ask questions in ways adults are not—they are held less responsible not only for ignorance, but bias. As a result, they can openly examine volatile, offensive, tragic, controversial, or even repulsive issues in ways less likely to repel readers. Much has been written about this effect with regard to both Harper Lee's Scout and Mark Twain's equally renowned Huck Finn, two child narrators widely accepted and loved by American readers despite the controversial ways in which they challenged racist ideologies. Novelist Michael Seraphinoff, who has written about the use of child narrators in Macedonian fiction, points out:

A child narrator can, among other things, create a degree of distance between the adult author and his or her message that serves to lessen hostility to that message. Readers tend to be more accepting of a child rather than an adult who gives voice to certain uncomfortable or controversial truths, because, after all, as American talk show host Art Linkletter, who made a career out of publicizing their utterances would say: 'Kids say the darndest things.' Mark Twain took full advantage of this fact in his classic work of American fiction, *Huckleberry Finn*, when he had the wild, irresponsible child Huck give voice to the evil of the former institution of slavery. He did this mere decades after the bloody American Civil War, at a time when many southern white people, although defeated in war, were in deep denial concerning the cruel injustice their former ownership of Black Americans had constituted. (158)

The differential between a reader's understanding and that of a child narrator can create humor and pathos. By limiting the narrator's ability to interpret or explain her experiences, writers allow readers to the

space to judge and feel for themselves. We see this effect in *Mockingbird* when Scout and her brother Jem manage to stop a lynch mob. Scout describes the encounter this way: “I kicked the man swiftly. Barefooted, I was surprised to see him fall back in real pain. I intended to kick his shin but aimed too high.” Though apparently lost on Scout, the humorous testicular implication is clear to most adult readers. And Justin Torres’s autobiographical novel *We the Animals* provides dozens of stunning examples of pathos emerging from the reader’s knowledge advantage over the narrator. In one riveting scene early in the book, the narrator discusses with his mother—still bruised from a spousal beating—his impending seventh birthday:

“Promise me,’ she said, ‘promise me you’ll stay six forever.”

“How?”

“Simple. You’re not seven; you’re six plus one. And next year you’ll be six plus two. Like that, forever.”

“Why?”

“When they ask you how old you are, and you say, ‘I’m six plus one, or two, or more,’ you’ll be telling them that no matter how old you are, you are your Ma’s baby boy. And if you stay my baby boy, then I’ll always have you, and you won’t shy away from me, won’t get slick and tough, and I won’t have to harden my heart.”

“You stopped loving them when they turned seven?”

“Don’t be simple,” Ma said. She brushed my hair back from my forehead. “Loving big boys is different from loving little boys—you’ve got to meet tough with tough. It makes me tired sometimes, that’s all, and you, I don’t want you to leave me, I’m not ready.”

Then Ma leaned in and whispered more in my ear, told me more, about why she needed me six. She whispered it all to me, her need so big, no softness anywhere, only Paps and boys turning

into Paps. It wasn't just the cooing words, but the damp of her voice, the tinge of pain—it was the warm closeness of her bruises—that sparked me.

I turned into her, saw the swollen mounds on either side of her face, the muddied purple skin ringed in yellow. Those bruises looked so sensitive, so soft, so capable of hurt, and this thrill, this spark, surged from my gut, spread through my chest, this wicked tingle, down the length of my arms and into my hands. I grabbed hold of both of her cheeks and pulled her toward me for a kiss.

The pain traveled sharp and fast to her eyes, pain opened up her pupils into big black disks. She ripped her face from mine and shoved me away from her, to the floor. She cursed me and Jesus, and the tears dropped, and I was seven.

So potent is Torres's use of concrete specific details—not only in this excerpt but throughout *We the Animals*—that I often teach his book specifically to help students acquire this important skill. And when consciously chosen details are not only presented, but defamiliarized (the damp of her voice, the warm closeness of her bruises, a wicked tingle that spreads down the length of the narrator's arms and into his hands, and pupils like big black disks) and presented with little to no explanation or interpretation, those details bloom open into meaning. This is especially true when the details are imagistic and primarily external—that is, when they remain largely uncontextualized by a narrator's thoughts and feelings. In other words, when narrators show restraint with regard to interior monologue about the experience—not that they offer none, but that what they do offer is, as Torres demonstrates, deliberate, spare, and searing.

Regardless of who is narrating, restraint benefits any work in which we want readers to *feel* something, not simply understand it. I certainly want to feel something when I read. I want, as my late mentor, the brilliant Richard McCann once said in workshop, “to be devastated.” And I want readers of my work to be devastated, too—not only in the sense of being destroyed, but in the sense of Merriam-Webster's second definition of the word: “to reduce to chaos, disorder, helplessness.” This is the energy of phoenix, through which we are burnt down to nothing in order to rise again. In other words, I want to be

irrevocably changed by literature, however subtly. Did Kafka not say, after all, that the whole purpose of art is to be the axe that breaks open the frozen sea inside us? With memoir and personal essay, that axe must sometimes, perhaps often, be deftly sharpened with the tool of restraint.

In general, excessive emotion in personal essay and memoir can, instead of evoking emotion in readers, cause defense mechanisms that prevent it. And some readers are naturally guarded about highly emotional topics, too. Indeed, a great many are adamantly averse to reading about a child being hurt, let alone molested. One member of my short-lived book club once said she avoids any story in which children are not lovingly tucked into bed at night. Even when readers *are* willing to enter literary worlds in which children get hurt, those same readers likely do so already braced to push the material away if it becomes unbearable. This is exactly why a child narrator became crucial in my memoir. Child narrators—when carefully sculpted with an appropriate naivete and naturally limited analytical capacity—can help prevent readers from numbing or retreating. A child’s point of view can make it possible to write about something unspeakable. When I was a child—age three, four, five, etc.—I did not understand fully what my stepfather, Mafia, was doing to me, let alone its implications. I only knew I did not like it. Therefore, I created a child narrator who could speak about her stepfather only in a succinct, nongraphic, matter-of-fact voice with little to no explaining or dwelling:

The oil plant leaves a smell on Mafia. I get the idea to pick my nose and wipe it on his jean jacket. I hate Mafia because he tried to pick me up by my hair. He can’t get hold of my hair now, though. That’s because Mama cut it short again. She said it was a rat’s nest. Sometimes Mafia chases me and tickles me and takes off my clothes and rubs between my legs, just like he did in Duluth. I don’t like this game. Not in the basement or upstairs. But upstairs is definitely better. (20)

Later in the memoir, an older, more aware narrator does reflect on what happened to her in childhood. But at the beginning of the story, readers are left to think and, hopefully, feel for themselves.

Children might not understand fully what's going on, but they have certain significant advantages as observers. Remember, children *stare*. Like a camera with a zoom lens, a child narrator might see things magnified or from unusual angles unnoticed by other protagonists. And child narrators have the agency to bring our attention to these details in arresting ways. Consider the opening of Jo Ann Beard's iconic memoir, *The Boys of My Youth*:

The family vacation. Heat, flies, sand, and dirt. My mother sweeps and complains, my father forever baits hooks and untangles lines. My younger brother has brought along a real-life majorette by the name of Nan. My brother continually practices all-star wrestling moves on poor Charcoal. "I got him in a figure-four leg lock!" he will call from the ground, propped up on one elbow, his legs twisted together. My sister and Nan wear leg makeup, white lipstick, and say things about me in French. A river runs in front of our cabin, the color of bourbon, foamy at the banks, full of water moccasins and doomed fish. I am ten. The only thing to do is sit on the dock and read, drink watered-down Pepsi, and squint. No swimming allowed. (3,4)

Beard says nothing one way or the other about enjoying or disliking family vacation. Not one word. Instead, she gives us concrete, specific details galore, starting with heat, flies, sand, and dirt. Older girls saying something about her in French. A river "the color of bourbon, foamy at the banks, full of water moccasins and doomed fish." In this camera-like way, child narrators can make up for their lack of ability to interpret or explain by instead drawing our attention to details that matter, that create mood and establish meaning. I attempted this effect in a scene in my memoir when the narrator, age ten, sees her abusive stepfather for the last time. The narrator aims her camera straight ahead and zooms in, then amplifies the "microphone" to capture the periphery:

One morning before school, Mafia takes me to Mama's bedroom. He pulls down my corduroys and rubs his hands between my legs like he does. He doesn't do the chasing and tickling part. Mama's dresser faces the foot of her bed. It has two white doilies on it. On one doily, a fancy

brush and comb and mirror. On the other, two figurines with their arms outstretched. The bases of both figurines say, “I love you this much.” Mafia finishes. I listen to his footsteps going down the carpeted stairs into the hall. Next, the closet door opening and closing. Then, the front door. I do not know, as I watch from Mama’s bedroom window, that when Mafia drives away in his red truck, he will keep driving all the way back to Duluth. (25)

And Jeanette Walls opens chapter two of her memoir, *The Glass Castle*, with an unforgettable scene that focuses, with discipline and restraint, on hyper-specific details that hold importance to the child while also pointing toward meaning:

I was on fire.

It’s my earliest memory. I was three years old, and we were living in a trailer park in a southern Arizona town whose name I never knew. I was standing on a chair in front of the stove, wearing a pink dress my grandmother had bought for me. Pink was my favorite color. The dress’s skirt stuck out like a tutu, and I liked to spin around in front of the mirror, thinking I looked like a ballerina.

But at that moment, I was wearing the dress to cook hot dogs, watching them swell and bob in the boiling water as the late-morning sunlight filtered in through the trailer’s small kitchenette window.

(9)

If clear-eyed observation without explanation or interpretation relies on defamiliarized details to create impact, Walls certainly succeeds by giving us a child standing on a chair in front of a stove wearing a pink dress with a skirt that stuck out like a tutu, cooking hotdogs. The child is, we know from the first line, on fire—something bad happens. But the narrator draws our attention swiftly away from immediate analysis or judgement of situation, directing us instead to consider a precious possession in this child’s world: her pink dress, which made her look like a ballerina. This is what it means to take the perspective of the child in narration.

I think of a child narrator's voice as coming through a radio, the dials of which the writer must carefully control, not just for volume and tone, bass and treble, but also for awareness, understanding, and attitude. Together, these carefully calibrated inputs create a persona whose voice can, sometimes very quietly, electrify the story's most important truths. Vivian Gornick speaks about persona as vital:

To fashion a persona out of one's own undisguised self is no easy thing Yet the creation of such a persona is vital in an essay or memoir. It is the instrument of illumination. Without it there is neither subject nor story. To achieve it, the writer of memoir or essay undergoes an apprenticeship as soul-searching as any undergone by novelist or poet: the twin struggle to know not only why one is speaking but *who* is speaking. (6,7)

When the "who" who is speaking is a child, their voice will likely need to change noticeably and perhaps dramatically over the course of the story. All protagonists are expected to transform, but the growth curve is far steeper for children, who develop rapidly across realms: emotional, social, psychological, and physical. That child narrators have transformation coded into their DNA is an asset, as long as we are able to convincingly portray it.

I mentioned the scant body of critical writing on the topic of child narrators, especially with regard to nonfiction. David Koranda, professor of journalism and communication at the University of Oregon, goes further in his essay "Child Narrators," saying that they are "criminally under researched," and suggesting this might be because adult books with child narrators risk being treated as if they are children's books and are therefore academically devalued and deemed unworthy of critical attention. Koranda notes that two of the most frequently discussed child-narrated novels in the first decade of the new millennium, Marisha Pessl's *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* and Jonathan Safran Foer *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, were met with accusations of being "cloying, gimmicky, mannered, precious, faux-innocent, forced, unbelievable, exasperating, show-offy, and just plain annoying."

I noticed, in my own searches, some of these same complaints pop up in comment threads on various blogs and websites. I can't help but wonder if these criticisms result from readers, perhaps unknowingly, holding child narrators to a different, and higher, standard of "authenticity" than adult narrators. In other words, denying them equal rights as personas, or illusions. Michael Seraphinoff says, "The discerning readers will understand that [a child narrator] is a figure of literary invention, that his narration is the literary product of the adult researcher, organizer, and arranger of his story." Gornick more forcefully reminds us that as writers of personal essay and memoir we are obligated not only to construct a voice, but to correct for our own:

To tell that tale, I soon discovered, I had to find the right tone of voice; the one I habitually lived with wouldn't do at all: it whined, it grated, it accused; above all, it accused. Then there was the matter of syntax: my own ordinary, everyday sentence—fragmented, interjecting, overriding—also wouldn't do; it had to be altered, modified, brought under control. And then I could see, this as soon as I began writing, that I needed to pull back—*way* back—from these people and these events to find the place where the story could draw a deep breath and take its own measure. In short, a useful point of view, one that would permit greater freedom of association—for that of course is that I have been describing—had to be brought along. What I didn't see, and that for a long while, was that this point of view could only emerge from a narrator who was me and at the same time not me.

I began to correct for myself. (21,22)

This self-correction—and the ability to intentionally differentiate between parts of a narrator that are us and parts that are not—does not happen automatically, and it may be easy to short shrift when writing an adult narrator for personal essay or memoir. It cannot, however, be accidentally overlooked when constructing a child narrator, or the results would be preposterous. And like them or not, most child narrators who find their way into the critical discourse are not, from a craft perspective, preposterous.

When I *have* read works with ineffective child narrators, it's almost always for the flaw of allowing the child too much adult judgment, especially at crucial moments in the narrative. I wonder, then, if the people who find arguably effective child narrators obnoxious also find real children less than delightful. Subjectivity and personal taste must play a hand here, no doubt. I revealed my bias in favor of children—real and imagined—at the outset of this essay. I could eat them up, I love them so. But what I want most from a narrator of any age is authority over the story and clear intention around what is revealed and when. And, since all narrators are illusions, and since the most mesmerizing narrators speak in voices produced through significant sound engineering, I have no greater difficulty suspending disbelief for the compelling voice of a child than for an adult.

Ultimately, an effective narrator should sound like a real person no more than literary dialogue should sound the way people actually talk—both would be unbearably boring on the page. What seems most important is that a narrator's voice be suited for the tenor of the material, sensitive to the pitch of the tale, and confident enough to withhold, misdirect, whisper, or even sing off-key if doing so will best reveal the truth. Perhaps what I most revere in the carefully wrought utterances of child narrators is how their little voices help me newly see—and therefore newly love—this mutilated world.

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