



## Start writing fiction

### *Narrative and structural techniques*

#### **Narrator:**

Story structure. Michele Roberts, Louis de Bernieres and Alex Garland talk about structuring devices in some of their novels.

#### **Michele Roberts:**

The chapter headings in *Daughters of the House* are there for a very particular reason to do with that story. One of the women who's the main - there are two main narrators and one of them is called Leonie - she's very materialistic, rather possessive and greedy, and she's making a list of the contents of the house she lives in because she wants to make sure she can keep them. And they're under threat, she thinks, from her cousin Therese, who's returning home after a long absence. So those chapter headings are simply lists of Leonie's possessions, but also they're a way for the novel, and for me the writer, to linger over particular things in the house and conjure out their stories. For instance, if you look at an old linen cupboard in the corner of the dining room, the two little girls, once they've opened the doors of it, can look at the sheets in there or the napkin rings or the plates, and remember certain events in family life - certain traumas, certain crises. So the chapter headings I think help the characters tell the story.

#### **Louis de Bernieres:**

I tend to structure novels according to imaginary geometric considerations so my first novel - *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts* I thought of as a trident where you had three story lines merging into one, and my second one I thought of being more like a branch with little twigs coming off it, or maybe like a river with little streams coming in, so you had a main story with subsidiary stories coming in from the side. My third novel I think I rather grandly conceived it as being like the *Eroica* symphony, which is not exactly geometric! I can't remember now whether that worked out very well but it did give me a template. And *Corelli* I was thinking of it as a solid as a as a as a pyramid, so it started with a very, very broad base and lots and lots of characters and as time went by it narrowed down till you only had one or two left.

#### **Alex Garland:**

There's something about structure I really like, um I like the aspect of it that's like a puzzle and in *The Tesseract* I gave myself an unbelievably rigid structure, a much more rigid structure than probably comes across in reading it, so things like the opening page of each of the three sections will actually mirror the other opening three pages in lots and lots of different ways and that continues at sort of punctuation points throughout those sections. The thing about, it's almost like making a low budget film - the fact that you don't have lots of money that you can draw on and you don't have a great expanse sort of stretching ahead of you of freedom, forces you to think really, really hard about how to fit what you want to fit in there, how to do, and it's just twisting your own arm behind your back to make you be imaginative about it.

#### **Narrator:**

Narrative time. Louis de Bernieres and Michele Roberts.

#### **Louis de Bernieres:**

Working out the time-scale is actually is a very big problem, if you're going to bring characters back after a long period in which nothing happens then people think you've rushed the ending of your book, which was a common complaint about *Captain Corelli*. The book I'm writing at the moment I'm determined that it should end in 1923 and consequently I've got to go

through, sort of, I don't know, two ethnic cleansings and three wars in order to get there and you begin to think - you know, 'damn it, why, why did I make this decision!' So sometimes you're trapped by what's imposed on you by your by your own timing. But generally speaking if your stories are going well, in the same way a character develops it develops itself the time-scale or the range of the time seems also to define itself and you don't necessarily have to plan it.

**Michele Roberts:**

The wonderful thing about writing prose, whether you choose to use the present tense or the past tense or a mixture, you've got to put one word next to another - it's a linear form and it does in a sense make your eye travel down a page, over a page, from a beginning to an end, however experimental you are, that's what the eye does, that's how words are put together. So of course each sentence has built into it a past, and there's a kind of sorrow in that for a writer because I think writers often want to be like artists - to put everything on the canvas at once. But we can't do that. Then when you start to organise your sentences into bigger structures which you might call stories or novels, you've got enormous decisions to make about the gap in time, particularly if you're using the past tense, between the teller of the story; where is she now, and the story she's telling.

Now some writers I think, and I've done it myself, would use a completely innocent or naïve telling; I may be 30 years old, but I'm telling you about what it was like to be five as though there's no gap in between. And I'm going to try and recreate the language and feeling of a five year old. A more sophisticated or experimental way of telling that story might be to exploit the gap and to let your 30 year old narrator not let on that she's 30, but not let on where she's coming from or what's happened between being five and being 30. She might decide to be an unreliable narrator, she might decide therefore to keep back certain crucial items of information in the interests of making a more playful, or powerful, or moving story. So I think that if you are to be a narrator of any power at all, you need to think about the past and how you're using it in the present of your writing.

**Narrator:**

Novelists talk about the importance of point of view and how they select it. Listen to Monique Roffey, Michele Roberts and Patricia Duncker.

**Monique Roffey:**

Point of view is something that you really need to get right, (a) you need to know about it, and if you don't know about it, find out about it. I think it's one of your most essential decisions up, up there with who're your protagonists, what is your story about, one of the top decisions you need to make right from the start is who's the narrator; how am I going to tell this story. I think it's an instinctual choice you know, how do you feel most comfortable, what kind of novel is it; I'm not an experimental writer so I have no interest in giving myself more hard work by writing in the first person or writing in the second person or writing as a dog or something, you know, really, that's just not something that I would ever recommend anyone do. Get comfortable, you're telling a story, it's as simple as that, and tell it in the most, in the easiest voice you can.

**Michele Roberts:**

The perspective of the narrative - it means finding out why the story should be told in this way or that way. Eventually, after a lot of waiting, and negative capability and dark night of the soul and not being able to do it, I begin I suppose to hear a voice. That's what it is, there's a voice telling or talking. And that's my way in. And then other voices might come in because I nearly always write novels with more than one voice telling the story. That's the kind of narrative I like.

**Patricia Duncker:**

I think point of view, I mean I would catch hold of that as being one of the most important decisions that you can make when you're writing prose fiction. Because when you've decided from whose point of view the story is going to be told, you've made a whole lot of other decisions, without even knowing it. You've committed yourself to things that the reader can't know, doesn't know, will only gradually know. If you do that without thinking it through, you're

going to be in trouble, so that when you make your decision about point of view and narrative voice, then a lot of other decisions fall into place.

**Narrator:**

Now hear from Abdulrazak Gurnah about his use of the first person in his novel *By the Sea*, a story of asylum seekers. One of his first person narrators asks whether anyone can tell their own story reliably, without self-importance.

**Abdulrazak Gurnah:**

What he was meaning when speaking that way was 'how can I tell a story which is uninflected, that is truthful, that is honest, and also speak as an "I", also speak as a first person.' So - can an "I" ever speak about anything where it concerns personal experience without putting the "I" first, without putting the "I" forward, defending the "I", protecting the "I" - can that happen? And I suspect probably no, but you know that doesn't really matter, I mean when you're writing using the first person narrator, you can just as well reveal the limitations, in terms of truth telling anyway, the limitations of this voice and that too is part of the writing. You can say - look this first person, this narrator is telling us X, Y and Z, but we don't really believe everything he tells us. It's that writing has to be truthful all the time, or indeed that it has to be truthful, because the very gaps that it leaves in themselves have meaning. Even the untruths have meaning.

**Narrator:**

He now discusses his decision to write that novel using alternating first person narrators.

**Abdulrazak Gurnah:**

The desire was to make first of all, to make two positions, and to make two positions that are not mediated by another voice, so they just speak, and where the conflict will appear in the narrative. Now this, they may pick up amongst themselves in the final part where they actually talk, or the reader might pick up and say, 'but that's not what so-and-so said'. The intention here was simply to say that if given an opportunity this is how we deliver our stories, and not really to make finer judgements than that, to say given opportunities, we make stories and indeed this is how we know ourselves. We don't know ourselves by reflection I don't think, nor do other people know us by what they observe of us. Often we know ourselves and other people by the stories we construct. We construct ourselves in stories, I think.

The other thing that I was interested in using two voices is that, of course they both come from the same place, but there's a kind of 'generation gap' difference between them. There's also another difference between them which is that one has been living in this place for the previous 30 or so years and the other one has been away, so I wanted to say, how do we see the same place differently depending on our experience. And you couldn't really do this by having a third voice that says 'this is what it was like for him and this is what it was like for him'. So I thought, if they speak for themselves, even if they're not speaking directly to their subject, this actually allows different experiences and different understandings of experience to come out without forcing the issue, without saying compare them please.