Your Story: Writing in the Devious Second Person

By A.L. Davis

… “you” is particularly devious, since it can refer to the protagonist, the narrator, the narratee, or the reader; authors using this form regularly play on this ambiguity as well as on its multiple possible meanings.


Use of the second person narrative mode throughout an entire novel is extremely rare, which is unsurprising as it is difficult to write and often troublesome to read.

The aversion to the “you” form is partly because it can be confusing and distracting – as alluded to by Richardson – but perhaps more so because its sustained use can be claustrophobic and considered dictatorial. Few readers like to be held within such a tight prism, to be led so firmly by the narration, to be told constantly what “you” have done, are now doing, or will yet do. As Jack Hodgins explained in A Passion for Narrative,

Attempts at the second person point of view can be noticeably unsuccessful … if it seems that the reader is intended to be the protagonist but refuses to cooperate. During a class discussion about a story written in the second person, one student said, “I went along with you when you told me I entered the room. I didn’t mind when you told me I accepted the drink. But when you told me that I put my hand on your thigh, I went ‘No way, pal. I’m outa this story right now!’” (1983, pp183-184).

Not only is second person rarely used in literary fiction, except in short bursts within a longer work, it has been comparatively lightly studied academically, perhaps because it is highly protean in nature, sometimes shifting its shape within a single sentence, and therefore hard to pin down. Perhaps too, it is because of the way second person can at times appropriate aspects of first and third person narration, yet is always one step away from either. This confounds the common methodology of thinking in binary opposites.

Under the right circumstances, however, there are undoubtedly things that can be achieved with second person narration that are unique and powerful. My creative practice research project – a novel tentatively entitled Your Story – aims to learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of this under-utilised narrative mode. Your Story is aimed at the lower end of the YA (Young Adult/teenage) market. It is set in a largely deserted modern city, beset with drought, regular dust storms and a breakdown of law and order. The main character is Emily, an apparently homeless teenage girl, with a gift for making her way
through locked doors. The plan is to maintain a second person, present tense voice throughout.

And what is this work-in-progress revealing from a craft point of view? That the difficulty goes beyond avoiding the over-use of the word “you”. The structure of almost every sentence is counter-intuitive; either first person or some form of third person free indirect discourse is the default setting for many writers; working in the second person is sometimes like trying to learn to write fiction anew.

How does one keep the camera angle “true”? Who exactly is telling the story; indeed, who exactly is the “you”? How far does one stretch the form – can the “you” know and see only what Emily directly knows and sees, or can it show slightly more, taking on either aspects of an omniscient narrator, or revealing parts of the character’s psyche of which she herself is not overtly aware?

Another authorial challenge is in presenting the often necessary ambiguity in the character’s actions, while so directly peering into her soul. Perhaps the biggest trap though is that of cleverness for its own sake. Second person is often used as a gimmick rather than a device to better serve the needs of the story, and in such cases, narration is likely to stand in the way of plot and characterisation.

So what are the needs of the story that second person might better serve here? Firstly, it is hoped that the voice is fresh and immediate. Combined with the present tense, it conveys that the action is unfolding for the character at exactly the same moment as the reader; that, in this dystopian society, the hand of fate is making all the major decisions, giving the protagonist (and to some extent the reader) far fewer options. The harsh world seems harsher. The character is almost living in the language of incarceration: “You will be transported to a prison and kept there for a period of time…”

There are undoubtedly logical and stylistic flaws in what I have completed so far. There is a lot to learn, and I’m far from definite that it will be possible to maintain the same eccentric, tightly controlled narrative voice for 40,000 words without relieving the reader at some point by breaking out of it (most second-person books use lists, reports, extended monologues by other characters, or other devices to achieve this.). But uncertainty is one of the things that fascinates me most about this creative research.

The exegetical portion of the PhD will attempt to cast more light on second-person narration by closely examining the way it is used and the affects it achieves in two novels: Peter Kocan’s *The Treatment* and Eddie Campbell’s *Alec: How to be an Artist*. Meanwhile, an extract from *Your Story* follows, picking up from the moment Emily opens the front door of a heavily fortified house.

*Bibliography*


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*Extract: Your Story*

# Seven

Two boys stare at you. The one who was standing on the wall the other day, and another. A little brother, by the look of him. Maybe five or six years old. Nuggety. With dimples. The boys have every expression on their faces. Surprise, disappointment. Building anger.

You have to be The Fox. To stare them down coldly.

The older boy clenches his fists and runs. You step from one foot to the other. It’s second nature, escaping from a fist, a kick. Even a knife.

He shakes his head. Probably wonders how it happened. How he ended up next to the door, with you safely down the hallway. He’s never dealt with a fox before.

‘Who are you?’ he yells. ‘What do you want?’

You look at him. At the other one. ‘I’m not one for answering questions.’ Your heart sprints but your voice sounds calm. Smooth too, even though there’s a dryness raging inside your throat.

‘Get out of our house,’ the boy growls, slamming his hand on the front door, trying to look menacing. ‘Get out or …’

‘Or?’ You smile. He doesn’t know menacing.

‘Or …,’ the boy stutters, ‘or … our dad will chase you out.’

‘I’m not seeing him anywhere.’ You have a right to be here, to take what you want. You have to believe it.

‘He’s out. At the supermarket. He’ll be back soon.’

The little one hides behind his big brother. ‘Yes,’ he adds in a tiny voice. ‘Soon.’

You smile again and move down the hall. You need to find the
kitchen, slake your thirst. The boy is running after you. You sense him over your shoulder. Push off your left foot, through a doorway. Into a bedroom.

You hear the boy fall over in the hallway. Seconds later he’s back on his feet, blocking the doorway. Determined. Got to give him that.

You smile again. ‘Hold your horses, kiddo. I’m not going to hurt you.’

‘No, because I’m going to throw you out. Right now.’ He rushes forward, but he’s not quick enough, tough enough, hungry enough. He’s never had to survive on the street, for sure. A quick step sideways from you, and he loses his footing on the edge of a mattress. You make it to the kitchen.

‘Get out!’ he shrieks, closely behind.

Rifle through the cupboards, look as calm as you can. There are jars of water on the bench. They look cloudy but you’ll drink from them if there’s no better choice.

‘I’m seeing you’ve traded most things,’ you say, opening the cupboard doors quickly, one after the other, filling the room with dust. ‘A couple of saucepans left … I’m liking this one, nice and big. A few tins of food, a small collection of water jars. Not very much, is it?’

The big boy holds the little one closely. ‘Get out of our house!’ he shouts.

‘Yes, you keep saying that.’ You eye every corner of the room, looking for any advantage. Any useful knowledge. Anything that might help a fox survive. ‘It’s Sunday morning, by the way.’

‘So what?’

There are white mugs on the table, filled with water. Your insides are cracking with dryness. But you can’t look too desperate. Pride perhaps. Yet important.

You put your hand around one of the mugs, and stick your other hand inside. Slap the water across your face. Sigh with the coolness. ‘If there’s one time for being sure no supermarket is open, it’s Sunday morning.’

The water runs down your neck, soaking the top of your dress. Cooling it. ‘If I had to guess, I’d say it’s two little boys telling one big lie. Your father hasn’t just slipped down to the supermarket. You’re all on your lonesome ownsome.’
The older boy steps forward. ‘That’s our water. Leave it.’

‘Who’s being Mr Meany?’ You pick up the second mug and take a large gulp. It’s life, flowing back into you. Pause and let it soak in. ‘A young lady goes strolling into the wrong house by accident when she’s trying to visit a friend, and you deny her a freshen up and a tiny sip of water.’

‘You didn’t stroll in by accident.’ It’s the older boy. ‘The door was locked.’

‘With the bar across it,’ adds the little brother. ‘Only we know how to open it. Dad made it like that in case one of us was ever locked out.’

‘I like you, littl’un,’ you say. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Don’t tell her anything, Beeper.’

Beeper, eh. The big boy is blushing. You force a small laugh. ‘Is Beeper really a name?’

‘It’s my name!’ The little one peers out from behind his brother. ‘Sort of.’

‘Cute.’ You can’t help but notice he’s about the same height as Laurissa. The same age too. But foxes aren’t soft. They can’t be sentimental. ‘And what’s your big bro’s name?’

The Beeper boy shakes his head.

‘Hmm,’ you say. Your mind is elsewhere. The first bedroom was bare. It’s only a small house, but there must be others. ‘Loyalty,’ you sigh to no-one in particular. ‘You don’t see much of that these days.’

Back into the hall, towards the front door. Look to the right, into another bedroom. ‘How long’s he been gone, your dad?’

Beeper shakes his head again. His cheeks redden. ‘Two nights,’ he whispers.

‘Quiet!’ yells his brother.

‘We’re going out to find him.’

‘Beeper!’ the big boy growls. ‘I told you!’

You’re inside the room. There’s a double bed, a wardrobe. Work your
way through the drawers, not sure what you are looking for. Maybe you should have simply grabbed the food and gone. Maybe the father really will come back at any moment.

‘Who are you?’ The older boy demands. ‘What do you want?’ He watches from the door. But he’s not about to rush forward this time. Not by the look of him.

‘As I said, kiddo, I’m not one for answering questions.’

He’s in the room now too, on the other side of the bed. Looking at the bottom of the wardrobe. Something of value must be there. He knocks over a red chair. ‘If I give you something, will you go?’ he says. ‘Some tins of food. Some more water?’

‘Don’t need a thing in the world,’ you lie. Your mind is racing. There could be more to gain at this house than just food. Instinct says it’s time to go.

‘As it turns out,’ you announce, ‘I’m leaving anyway. Lots to do. But I might come back visiting some other time.’

‘Don’t you dare!’

You grin. ‘I’ll be doing as I like. Bye, little Bceper. You too, Mr Whatever-Your-Name-Is.’

You step past the boys, saunter down the hallway, through the open door, out of the house. The older boy follows closely. He slams the front door behind you.

Through the empty yard you walk, shoulders back, head held high. And ready to cry.

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