THE ART AND SOUL OF POV

It's a sad fact: you—a writer—have very little time to grab a reader and do it so well, they're compelled to keep reading. You might have as much as five pages for that first reader (the agent, or the editor), but it's even more brutal in a bookstore. Most readers who browse, who get enticed enough to pick up the book (as a result of the title / name / or cover which pulls them in) and read the back copy (often not written by the writer) don't even bother to open the book—their mind is often made up based on things outside the author's control. Few authors can mandate what their covers look like, and few have title approval. A higher percentage contributes to the back cover copy, but that's still edited to fit the space and often tweaked by people in marketing who've never even read the book. The one thing a writer does control is the writing, and if a browser bothers to pick up the book in the bookstore or click on an excerpt on the web, then you, as the author, have precious little time to grab their attention.

One of the first tools we have at our disposal is POV: point of view. Now, that might seem obvious, and it might seem like a surface choice. Do you write in first person? Or third? Close third or more distant third? Omniscient? Or maybe even second person? (Please don't.) (Just my personal bugaboo.)

Those are weighty decisions that affect almost everything else you will do in the book. There are pros and cons to each, when you're considering your story. (We'll talk about those in a moment.) But there's another entire facet to POV that a lot of people fail to utilize to the potential they have at hand, and that is that POV also stands for persistence of vision. In pure physiological terms, persistence of vision is defined as:

"The phenomenon where the retina retains an image for a brief split-second after the image was actually seen, and lends itself to animation by fostering the illusion of motion when we view images in closely-timed sequence to one another. We don't notice the fractional skips between images because that persistence fills in the momentary gap to make the motion seem seamless."

Now, technically, that specific theory works in conjunction with other physiological mechanisms at work to help our eye understand film as it progresses frame-by-frame, but we don't need all of that for our purposes here. Just keep in mind the fact that there is a tendency of the eye—or our inner perceptual ability—to hang onto images in sequence *which then builds a larger image, an impression of movement, an impression of reality.*

This is how we build characters: image by image until we have created a series of images associated with that character. The images we choose to utilize when showing that character need, therefore, to be consistent with that character's point of view, and that's going to be affected by that character's background, job, economic situation, personal histories, health, etc. – **the soul of the character needs to bleed through every word choice you make while in their point of view.**

Here's what I mean by that: whether you've chosen first, second, third or omniscient point of view, you have to show us the character, without always *telling* us about the character. One of the things I see many writers—even long established writers—do that is robbing their work of

impact is that they tell me a great deal about the characters as the characters show up in the scene. What that does is inform me intellectually—but it doesn't bring the person alive, doesn't make them feel real. If they had utilized point of view carefully, however, they could have shown me things about the character that only that character in that book would have seen in that particular way, which makes that character real. It's a combination of point of view (whether it's 1st, 3rd, etc.) and "persistence of vision" – *how* that character sees *what* they see and *how they interpret what they're seeing*. No two characters in any book should see the world in the same exact way. None of us do in real life.

I'll give you a couple of examples. Let's say that there's a small bistro in the neighborhood: worn black and white square tiles, old mahogany bar, small tables with red checkered table cloths crowded as close together as possible, vases on the tables of real flowers, probably droopy white daisies, something affordable. Every table has the typical salt/pepper shakers, ketchup, Parmesan cheese, packets of sweetener for the tea that most people order there. There are a few patrons scattered about, a bartender whose seen better days, and overhead lighting that doesn't seem to be making much of an effort.

Okay, let's stop there for a moment. You probably were able to see the place, because I gave you enough visual cues to lead your eye. What I also did was give you cues in the same approximate order that you would normally take in on your own, if you should walk through that door. That's important, that order. You'll do yourself a major favor if you think about specific powerful details as you enter the room. Ask yourself, what's the impact point? What's the first thing the eye grabs? It's usually color (black and white worn checkered floor, mahogany bar, white daisies, ketchup bottles, etc.). Next, it's lighting and space—does the space seem crowded, spacious, etc., and what is the quality of the lighting.

And even so, we've only done maybe half the job that we could do for that space. Because right now, you have no idea who's seeing that space. It's a generic description. It's visual, sure, but when you don't have much space to grab your reader, you've got to give them much more than just visual. You've got to give them character and attitude, too.

Here's where I tell you the warning of how many manuscripts and scripts—when I was a screenwriter—that I read where I got several pages into a story that had lush description, and several pages in, I still did not know more about that character who was in those scenes than I did when I started the manuscript. If I can get several pages into your story and not know your character? You have failed. That's harsh, but it's the truth. Do not waste my time, as a reader. Do not fritter away your opportunity describing crap for the sake of "setting the scene." Setting the scene is a waste of time if you don't clue me in to who you're setting the scene for / with. Whose point of view it is. Give me attitude, give me character in what they're choosing to share with me, and you'll pique my interest.

So let's go back to that bistro and think about that setting. *[edited to add: We are going to assume this is NOT the beginning of our story, because I don't want to confuse this issue with opening lines in a pOV -- that's something I'll cover in the next workshop.]* Let's say that your main character is a cop, walking into that scene. A cop is going to see that bistro much differently than a down-and-out-of-work twenty-year-old who's been on the grift, looking for a

little cash-under-the-table job. A cop's point of view—whether you utilize the mechanics of first person or third or omniscient—his point of view, his "vision" is going to have a specific kind of attitude, a wariness, an assessment, that is different from any other character walking into that same bistro.

We'll use first person here. (First person is generally used when you want the reader to very closely identify with the character and not have any ability to know more than what the character knows in that moment. It's typical of first person stories to be told through the point of view of the main character for the length of the work, but there are exceptions—a narrator, for example, or multiple first-person characters, where the POVs switch between characters, usually with each subsequent chapter.) Here's the unedited, unpolished, off-the-top-of-my-pointy-head example:

I hated that damned bell on the door; every eye in the place turned toward me when I entered, and it felt like a target painted dead center mass for the few seconds it took me to move through the door, through the thick greasy smell of fried bacon and stale beer, move the twenty-one steps across the scuffed checkerboard tile to a table in the back where I could look out over the place. The lighting was crap—like it had given up trying last century and nobody bothered to notice. It made everything I had to do here tonight that much harder. Didn't help that I couldn't wear my vest here, and here is where I'd most likely get shot. Fucked, that's what that was.

Murray was hunched behind the bar as usual, working a rag on some invisible spot on the bar, hardly listening to some grifter kid try his spiel about how much he needed work while he was surreptitiously trying to lift the wallet of the old man sitting next to him, just below Murray's line of sight. I gave Murray a nod and eyeballed the kid—let him stop the idiot. I sure as hell wasn't blowing my cover for petty theft.

The chair wobbled—this was the worst of the rickety tables. There were two college girls at my favorite spot, the one closest to the easiest exit; they were wailing about boyfriends who done them wrong, each looking to try to top the other one. I could tell 'em each that they were going to keep gettin' crap from guys if they hung out at shitholes like this. We were three-and-a-half blocks into hell-and-gone cheap-ass territory, barely on the outskirts of ghetto. I could've told 'em to go over to Charlie's, over on sixth. They had better food, better beer, slightly better idiots willing to fork over dough for the pleasure of listening to them whine. Didn't bother though. Girls like that never learn.

As soon as I'd walked in, I'd counted seven people in the room besides me: Murray, the kid, the old man, the two girls made five. I hated the way the tables crowded together, stained tablecloths barely cleaned from previous patrons. It made moving fast, getting to my gun, just that much more of a hassle. I hated hassle. I hated a lot of things, but I really fucking hated hassle. I'd discounted the five I already mentioned as soon as I saw 'em. That meant that one of the two people left was the asshole I was looking for, the perp trying to hire a hit-man to solve a problem. I was the hit-man. Or at least, that was my role tonight. I looked it. Smelled like it— smelled like six days of booze and cigarettes crammed into one. Well, that's how I usually looked and smelled. Probably why the sarge wanted me for the job.

Of the two people left in the room, the lady near the front window was a contender, but not likely—she just looked too worn out to give a good damn about having anyone killed. I pegged her as a cleaning lady, coming off a rough night, too tired to do much more than scrape at her burned toast and runny eggs. She had dust on her gray sweater and smudges on her too-thin face and gray eyes that looked beaten. That left the shiny happy broad over in the opposite corner. The redhead who kept reapplying her lipstick pulled from a purse the size of a postage stamp, using her mirror to scope out the room. She wasn't completely dim, then. That's a problem. I don't mind stupid criminals. It's when they're stupid-but-think-they're-clever that someone usually gets hurt.

Lately, that someone had been me. I was battin' a thousand in shitty luck, and tonight, I had a bad feeling.

One day, I'm gonna learn to listen to that.

Okay, not that that's great, but I wanted to show you how that set up does several things in 650 words and what you "get" about that room is now significantly different than the generic version: 1) we know that room is being described by a very specific person with a very specific attitude, and (2) we know he's a cop—though he never actually tells us and (3) we know he's weighing and measuring everyone in the room, and how the room is laid out, (4) who might be carrying a weapon, (5) that he was in danger and knew it and (6) that he was going to do his job anyway. At the same time, you've gotten enough details to see the scene (the bistro)—and it's the same details as what I described earlier, but it's told with his very specific perception / attitude. That cop would count the people when he walked in, would assess the threat level, would look for ways to place himself in a position of retreat, should he need it, etc. Other patrons might not notice anything like that. Without actually telling you his attitude (I never said "he has a pessimistic attitude"), I showed it through his slant on what he saw, and how he perceived those things around him. That attitude has to be consistent throughout. Every time we're in his point of view, we should have his persistence of vision—his specific way of seeing the world—which does more to characterize him than all of the descriptive modifiers any author could attach to him.

Let's look at the same scene told through one of the other patron's eyes. This time, I'll use third person. (Third person is generally used when the author wants to convey a little bit more about the scene than a character might convey in the strict sense of "telling" the story. If an author wants the reader to know more than the protagonist knows, the author can switch to other characters' POV—generally done now in their own sections or their own chapters (but that's not a hard and fast rule, obviously)—which can reveal information that creates stress for the reader, because they know more about the danger the protagonist is in than the protagonist does—yet. And the reader feels tension as the protagonist catches up to that realization.) Now, I'm purposefully not doing dialog or action here, just a section of description to show point of view. Again, unedited, unpolished, off-my-pointy-head… here ya go:

It was a quaint place, as places go, for hiring a killer. She hadn't expected it to even have tablecloths, or actual silverware. She'd done a little bit of research before agreeing to meet with the killer-for-hire here: rundown little bistro out on the edge of civility, struggling to survive in

this economy. She felt for the place, really. She knew what it was to be struggling on the edge, barely able to make ends meet, trying to figure out a solution.

They'd done a fairly decent job, here: there were daisies in the vases on the tables. Sure, the vases were cheap—the kind you'd get at Wal-Mart, maybe, but there was nothing wrong with Wal-Mart. She didn't know why people always said Wal-Mart with their noses in the air, like they were too good for the place. She bet every one of those people secretly shopped there and didn't want to admit they were the same as regular, normal people. She just really didn't understand people like that. Staring down their noses at perfectly good vases, for example, acting all high and mighty. People like that? Were no good. No good at all. She wanted to give them a piece of her mind, sometimes, and she bit back the words. It didn't make for a good alibi to be the kind of person who stuck out in people's memory as having been angry. No, no, she'd just bide her time. Her time would come.

But she liked the little white daisies. Real flowers instead of plastic. They were trying hard to be pleasing. The whole place was, really, with its warm red walls and polished woods and determination to be clean. They hadn't given up, given in to the harsh realities of life. Not even that waitress in the kitchen who'd looked harried, who'd worked hard to keep the tables bussed and the orders coming out quickly, who'd been crying her eyes out over something bad that had happened this past week, she'd said, as she apologized for sobbing over her order. She had wanted to soothe the girl, to empathize. Empathizing, though, made you memorable. She knew better than to be memorable.

She'd been waiting for the killer for the last hour, coming in early to get a feel for the customers—which ones were the regulars (the old guy at the bar looked like he'd grown there since the fifties… she was actually surprised when he was able to stand to go to the restroom)… and the not-so-regulars… the hussy who kept applying her lipstick, checking out the room. Probably some floozy, waiting for some woman's husband to come along, checking out all of the angles, making sure the wife wasn't hanging around in the shadows, about to catch them. She was probably someone in the process of breaking up a home, that slut.

She was in the middle of thinking about changing her hired-killer order to a two-fer when the skeevy guy came in, creeping across the room like some sort of nasty beetle, his eyes shifting around, taking everything in, looking at her, passing her over as just another fixture. It was probably the dust on her sweater, the smudges on her face, the sturdy cleaning-lady shoes that had done it. It was what she'd intended, to be forgettable. Still, it rankled. She'd apparently been forgettable to Harry, too, with him cheating on her with another hussy, just like that one over there in the corner.

The skeevy guy was reflected in the big picture window, since it was dark outside. She watched him without being obvious about it, and he looked tense. He checked out everyone in the place, over and over, waiting. Nodded to the bartender about something she couldn't see. She thought maybe he was the killer-for-hire, but there was something odd about him. Something a little too TV-villain perfect, and little warning bells went off in her head. Maybe he was a cop.

He was already making his way over to the hussy, and she watched, eating her bad eggs—they really could do a lot better in this place with a decent cook—and the skeevy guy asked the girl, "So, you looking for me?"

The girl screamed, then, and jumped up and did the damndest thing: she shot the guy. Twice. And then ran.

Okay, that's 725 words, and we have an entirely different POV: we're in third person, and specifically getting that person's attitudes about life, about her surroundings, about the people there, the details that she would notice that the cop wouldn't. We're seeing her point of view as well as her persistence of vision: her take on that world. Nowhere does she tell us what she does for a living (but we get the details–her focus on cleanliness). Nowhere do I give you her slant on life, but you can tell it's a bit schizophrenic—empathizes with the place, loves the daisies, but is obviously contemplating killing not just Harry, her husband, but some random woman who she feels is a hussy. We know a great deal about that woman just from what we see through her vision. How she sees her world and the details she picks out matter. They're tools for you to use.

We could keep going with the other characters, playing with other forms of point of view. Omniscient has the advantage of giving us a lot more information than the protagonist usually has, and as such, can sometimes create a lot of tension (we see the bomb beneath their seat that they have no clue is there)… but it can also leave us feeling a bit detached, emotionally, from the characters if not handled very carefully. There's also the risk of losing or confusing the reader with too much head-hopping (moving back and forth between character's POVs)—which you can do in omniscient, but it is a real risk, and the reader has to be carefully led (the segues better be fabulous).

The pros and cons of the mechanics of point of view—which one you choose to use—have to be weighed carefully. If you want us to be in the shoes of the protagonist, then we can't know more than he or she knows, and that in and of itself can create a lot of obstacles. One, for example, would be: how do you show important stuff that he needs to see which is a clue, but not have him pick up on the clue right now (which might mean he either looks dumb or he'd figure it out too soon and oops, the story is over). This issue definitely applies to first person, but can apply to third person, if the only point of view in the book is that one person.

The drawback to third person is that while yes, you have the ability to show some of the things the character doesn't quite pick up on, you run the risk of the reader being too far out ahead of the character and getting frustrated with the story as the character catches up.

The pros to using omniscient is, of course, scope: big epics, S/F/F (where there's a tremendous amount of world-building), and period pieces can truly benefit from omniscient. The pros to first person is that immediacy of emotion / reaction—the reader tends to more closely identify with the character. The benefit of third is that you have some of the advantages of first (that close identification with the character), but you have a bit more ease in switching into another character's point of view (and I'd generally recommend doing that with a section break or a

chapter break when you make the switch, just to keep the voices of each character clear). The disadvantage to multiple point of view characters (third person or omniscient) is that, if you're doing your job right, you're creating different voices (styles of thinking/speaking/seeing the world) for each character. (This is not to be confused with "voice" of the overall project. That's a different subject for a different day.) If you're utilizing POV well—giving us the attitudes and details that only that character could give us, then when you switch into another character's point of view, we should be able to tell it just from what they relate to us and how they are seeing their world.

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If you have an example from a work-in-progress — feel free to post and ask. I'll try to get to everyone today. (Short samples, please! I'll ask questions if I need more info.)

Or, I'd *love* to see examples from any work (your own, or someone you want to quote — please give author and book reference so I can find them!). A couple of sentences to show the above at work, where you really "get" the character from their POV by how they present their world.