Voice in Toni Cade Bambara’s “My Man Bovanne”
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“Music allows you to reach feelings you can’t reach by other means. The best writing does that too... In the most emotional moments of a story, writers are trying to sing.”
~Steve Almond

“Blind people got a hummin jones if you notice”—so begins Toni Cade Bambara’s story “My Man Bovanne,” a story, if you love to read or write fiction, is more than worthwhile to read over and over again, in how expertly it handles all craft elements. In this discussion, we’ll focus on “voice.”


“Voice,” or what we might call “language,” or “tone,” are different words for, simply put, how a story tells itself through its chosen syntax and diction—its word choice and how it arranges those words: the soul of writing.

When a story is told by a first-person narrator, the “voice” of the story is also the “voice” of the character themself. And how the narrator tells their story tells us much about the narrator and the narrator’s world as do the other elements of the story: its sensory detail, setting, character, plot, conflict, and so forth.

Here is the first paragraph of “My Man Bovanne” in its entirety:

“Blind people got a hummin jones if you notice. Which is understandable completely once you been around one and notice what no eyes will for you into to see people, and you get past the first time, which seems to come out of nowhere, and it’s like you in church again with fat-chest ladies and old gents gruntin a hum low in the throat to whatever the preacher be saying. Shakey Bee Bottom lip all swore up with Sweet Peach and me explainin how come the sweet-potato bread was a dollar-quarter this time stead of dollar regular and he say uh huh he understand, then he break into this thizzin kind of hum which is quiet, but fiercosome just the same, if you ain’t ready for it. Which I wasn’t. But I got used to it and the onliest time I had to say something bout it was when he was playin checkers on the stoop one time and he commenst to hummin quite churchy seem to me. So I says, ‘Look here Shakey Bee, I can’t beat you and Jesus too.’ He stop.”

Voice is established from the outset: we hear the woman’s—Hazel’s—voice through her diction and syntax, and from this can interpret place and background: yet even beyond, we can interpret character: here is someone who tells the truth, and who, we infer, will tell us as readers the truth, as well.
If we think about the famous first-person narrators from literature—Bone from “Bastard Out of Carolina” for instance, or Nick Carraway, or Holden Caulfield, or Kate Vaiden—each of them has their own unique voice, and could on voice recognition alone pick them out of a crowd.

Barbara Kingsolver, in fact, named “Kate Vaiden” as her favorite novel, and in many of her own novels—“The Bean Trees,” for example, or “The Poisonwood Bible”—uses narrators just as recognizable for their voice. In “The Poisonwood Bible,” for instance, she uses a sequence of five shifting first-person narrators—Orleanna Price and her four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May—and each of these narrators is completely recognizable by the first couple of sentences alone.

In first-person narration, the voice of our characters does much of the work of establishing character, place, and background: in third- or second-person narration, in which the author is speaking outside of the character, the voice of the story also carries just as much weight and influence.

Consider the short, staccato sentences of an Ernest Hemingway, or a Raymond Carver, for example, which rely on short sentences, a fewer selection of words, repetition of these words, or the use of shorter words. On the other hand, consider the work of such writers as Arundhati Roy or William Faulkner, and others, whose work features longer and more complex sentences, a wider vocabulary, and more multi-syllabic and compound words.

Within third-person narrations, the individual voices of the characters themselves, however, stand out (or should stand out) as distinct from the author’s voice itself.

For now, let’s restrict our discussion to first-person narration and character voice, and how we implement “voice” in our own work.

1. **The voice needs to ring true**

This doesn’t mean we can’t make it up, or use multiple voices that we know in real life and create one voice out of them, or vice versa, but we’ve all read stories in which the author could just not quite get the voice right, lapsing into cliché, or worse.

Very often this problem also arises when we try to be overly “literary,” to the point that our characters sound stilted, and won’t be believed as an actual human on an actual earth. This problem also arises when writers try to reach so far outside themselves (to someone with a socio-economic position, say, or with a different childhood, or with a different job, or from a different region, or a different culture or background, etc., etc.) that they cannot get the voice or the character right.

So when we’re creating voice for our characters, we need to make these voices ring as true as they are in real life and is why so many writing teachers suggest to “write what you know,” which I would amend, to, write voices that you know. And if you don’t know, find out, and then find readers who also know these voices well. If, as Steve Almond notes, the tone of our stories is a kind of music, we need to make sure we don’t hit flat notes.
What would our specific character actually say, or actually think in a given situation.

This involves keeping our ears wide open, out in the world. Paying attention to how the people in our lives talk: what words they choose and when, what things they talk around, and why, in our ongoing quest to create and invent characters who ring true to life, or for whom the reader is willing to suspend their disbelief and accept our characters as real characters in the context of the story: our ongoing goal as writers.

2. Voice needs to reveal character

“So that’s how come I asked My Man Bovanne to dance,” the author Bambara writes/the character, Hazel, narrates. “He ain’t my man mind you, just a nice ole gent from the block that we all know cause he fixes things and the kids like him. Or used to fore Black Power got hold their minds and mess em around till they can’t be civil to old folks.”

Hazel’s voice creates not only her unique place, background, perspective, and point of view, but also reveals character. By hearing the character’s voice directly, and the way this particular character narrates their life, we learn what is important to them, and what isn’t. What they care about, and what they don’t care about. Notice in the story how Bambara has her narrator move in and out from the location (at the dance) and roams around in time and place. Also be aware that the author’s voice (Bambara) and the narrator’s voice in the story are not the same thing. As we create our characters, we also create their unique voices, apart from that of our own.

Consider the multiple characters from William Faulkner’s “As I Lay Dying.” Each one—Darl, for example, or Cora, or Vardaman—and there are fifteen of these separate narrators, has their own unique voice, their own unique way of speaking. By the end of the novel, for many of these characters we know whose voice we’re going into without even needing the name at the top of the chapter.

3. The voice needs to advance the tension and conflict in the story.

“But right away Joe Lee come up on us and frown for dancin so close to the man. My own son who knows what kind of warm I am about; and don’t grown men call me long distance and in the middle of the night for a little Mama comfort? But he frown. Which ain’t right since Bovanne can’t see and defend himself.”

Because we have a first-person narration here, it isn’t enough for the first-person narrator to simply be revealing their character, their setting(s), their life. If this is a story, the voice must be doing double-duty: working to advance tension and conflict, as well, through the narration. In addition, in “My Man Bovanne,” the voice also advances the theme of the story: the conflict between the younger and the older generation.

“Just a nice old man who fixes toasters and busted irons and bicycles and things and changes the lock on my door when my men friends get messy. Nice man. Which is not why they invited him. Grass roots you see. Me and Sister Taylor and the woman who does heads at Mamies and the man from the barber shop, we all there on account of we grass roots.”
The tension and the conflict of the story exists between Hazel and her children: Elo, Task, and Joe Lee. The theme of the story also is rooted in this tension. As Hazel narrates:

“And I ain’t never been souther than Brooklyn Battery and no more country than the window box on my fire escape. And just yesterday my kids tellin me to take them countrified rags off my head and be cool. And now can’t get Black enough to suit em.”

4. When there are multiple voices, each needs to be clear and distinct

In “My Man Bovanne,” we hear the voices of Elo, Task, and Joe Lee distinct from the voice of Hazel, and distinct again from the voice of the author, Toni Cade Bambara. Nowhere is this more exemplified than in this exchange, all narrated from the first-person point of view of Hazel, in which the children are taking their mother to task, no pun intended, over how close she was dancing with her partner:

“Task run a hand over his left ear like his father for the world and his father before that.
‘Like a bitch in heat,’ say Elo.
“Well uhh, I was goin to say like one of them sex-starved ladies gettin on in years and not too discriminating. Know what I mean?’
I don’t answer cause I’ll cry. Terrible thing when your own children talk to you like that. Pullin me out of the party and hustlin me into some stranger’s kitchen in the back of a bar just like the damn police.”

In this exchange, we hear the direct sharpness of Elo’s voice, and the diction he chooses. We also hear the more careful modulation of Task. Even though the children are saying almost exactly the same thing, with the same motive, their individual personalities are revealed deeply through their voices.

Voice, whether through a third-person, second-person, or first-person narration, and whether inside a character’s mind, or revealed externally through their speech, is an essential part of our writing, and one of the most fun, in that it gives us the task, no pun intended, to constantly be listening out in the world to how people talk.

Eleven Writing Exercises

   a) Write 55 words using the voice of someone that you know well. Fictionalize this person, but keep their voice.

   b) Write 55 words using the voice of your mother, or your father, or a parental figure.

   c) Write 55 words in the voice of a child you know well: or perhaps your own childhood voice. What things does this voice teach you about their character? How can this voice be used to tell a story?
d) Given the focus this month of writing a 500-word story, write 500 words in which there are two distinct voices in the story.

e) Write 500 words in a first-person narration that has two other characters, for a total of three characters. Give each character their own unique voice.

f) Just for fun: write 101 words using the voice of someone describing something, but they have no idea what they’ve just seen, and are getting it wrong.

g) Write a 300-word story in the voice of someone who speaks in an overly formalized way, whatever that means to you.

h) Write a 30-word story in the voice of someone who speaks in an overly informal way, whatever that means to you.

i) Put these two characters, from g) and h), together in a 200-word scene. Do these differing methods of speaking cause confusion or clarity? Conflict or peace? Observe why, and how!

j) Select a word at random from “My Man Bovanne” and use it to begin a 300-word scene. Don’t plan where this scene will go, just let it go there.

k) Write a 500-word scene in which the character’s voice changes halfway through once someone (who?) walks in the door.