

Know-It-All

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Now's a good time to remember that without us authors, stories and novels would contain nothing but a series of blank pages. In our small, two-dimensional world of ink on paper, we truly are omnipotent and omniscient. Nothing is on the page unless we choose to put it there, choose through our editing to let it stay. Having said that, being fully aware of our powers, why would any of us give them away?

Yet when I was in graduate school I learned that if there were one point of view that had been put in a drawer with a lock on it, it would be old-fashioned omniscience. The thinking was that realism and omniscience just couldn't get along. We aren't omniscient, omnipotent beings, so any fiction featuring such powers would have to ring false. Even the comic book heroes of our childhood had limits to their powers.

Then it happened that sometime in the early 80's, a friend put a copy of Milan Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting in my hands. Here was a guy who hadn't heard that omniscience was *out*.

Let's back up a step, though. At some point, the course of British and American fiction went down the road of realism, chasing it about as far as it could go, the interior monologue as practiced by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. It's worth asking, what are novels such as Ulysses and Mrs. Dalloway about? It's a harder question to answer than it seems: we spend long periods of our time inside the heads of Leopold Bloom and Clarissa Dalloway, learn their thoughts, their wishes, their worries, come to know them so fully they seem to rise off the page in three dimensions. That's something. Something admirable.

Meanwhile back in Europe: The novel of ideas remained alive and well. These novels look very different from the realistic novel. Think of Kafka, say, whose stories and novels are twentieth century fables of a sort. Or Thomas Mann whose The Magic Mountain strikes me as a novel so freighted with ideas that I often picture it in panels from a Classics Illustrated comic book wherein Hans Castorp and his fellow inmates in a tuberculosis sanatorium debate questions of war and peace to the point that the bubbles full of words simply squash the characters to the very edge of the frame. And so on through Robert Musil, Thomas Bernhard and other European writers hanging heavy ideas around the necks of their characters.

Most of us Americans have not read these writers. They require patience and persistence. Which gets me back to Milan Kundera. I'll mention two other Kundera titles: The Unbearable Lightness of Being and The Joke because both suggest Kundera's comic touch, which like Kafka's might be funny, but might not be. And to the point of this consideration of omniscience: both are pretty much indifferent to the issues of point of view and realism.

Like any tool, omniscience can be used and abused. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, we see how well this method serves Kundera. We meet Mirek, a disaffected ex-Communist, who would like nothing better than recover a packet of love letters he's written in his youth to Zdena. He claims he wants the letters back because they might be politically compromising in the Czechoslovakia of the time, but our narrator won't let that version stand. Mirek's aims are constantly undercut by the narrator's interjections: "Mirek was not telling the truth." "But Mirek is wrong!" Because, as it turns out Mirek is embarrassed to have been involved with Zdena because she is ugly. That's why he wants those letters back, to destroy the evidence of his young passion for this woman.

Many of Kundera's ideas in these Czech novels revolve around the questions of how people create various degrees of self-deception. The Kundera narrator allows the characters to inflate their disingenuous balloons and then pops them. Kundera's narrator would suggest that Mirek doesn't know his own motives; the narrator knows better. Readers are caught between the two. But the narrator is the more powerful presence. And this narrator goes on, to offer mini-essays on the nature of laughter, on popular music, on other European novelists. That's the power of the omniscient and omnipotent narrator.

This, then, is a very different kind of novel, about as far from The Sun Also Rises as a novel might go. But I (and others—Alice Munro cited Kundera as one of the writers she was reading at about the same time) found it liberating. The locked drawer of omniscience was pried open. The permission a writer grants herself through the use of omniscient point of view can really open a story out to put competing versions of "reality" into play, a notion that is just as relevant in the West as it was in the old Soviet Bloc. We readers, we people living in the world, must decide which version of things seems closer to the truth.

As I said, though, every tool can be abused, too. By the time Kundera writes Immortality, he allows his narrator too much power. This figure, by now comfortably identifying himself as Milan Kundera (and writing in French, too, not his native Czech), is now a little drunk on his power. He interacts with the other characters, teasingly offers readers his version of events contrary to the characters', makes us understand that what happens is what he'll allow to happen. Not so different from The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, except the moral quandaries of the characters have been lessened. Behind Kundera's laughter, there had always been high seriousness. In Immortality, the serious questions have been reduced; the omniscient narrator seems more a demonstration of the power a writer can wield over characters and readers. Maybe that's what killed omniscience in the first place.

Fortunately, the drawer once pried open, won't easily be shut again. The cautiously narrow points of view that drove realism are still useful, still viable, still the most likely points of view a writer will use and a reader will encounter. But omniscience, applied with care, opens a wonderfully wide aperture for a writer to pass his

narrator and characters through, and aperture a reader can look through into a more complicated world.