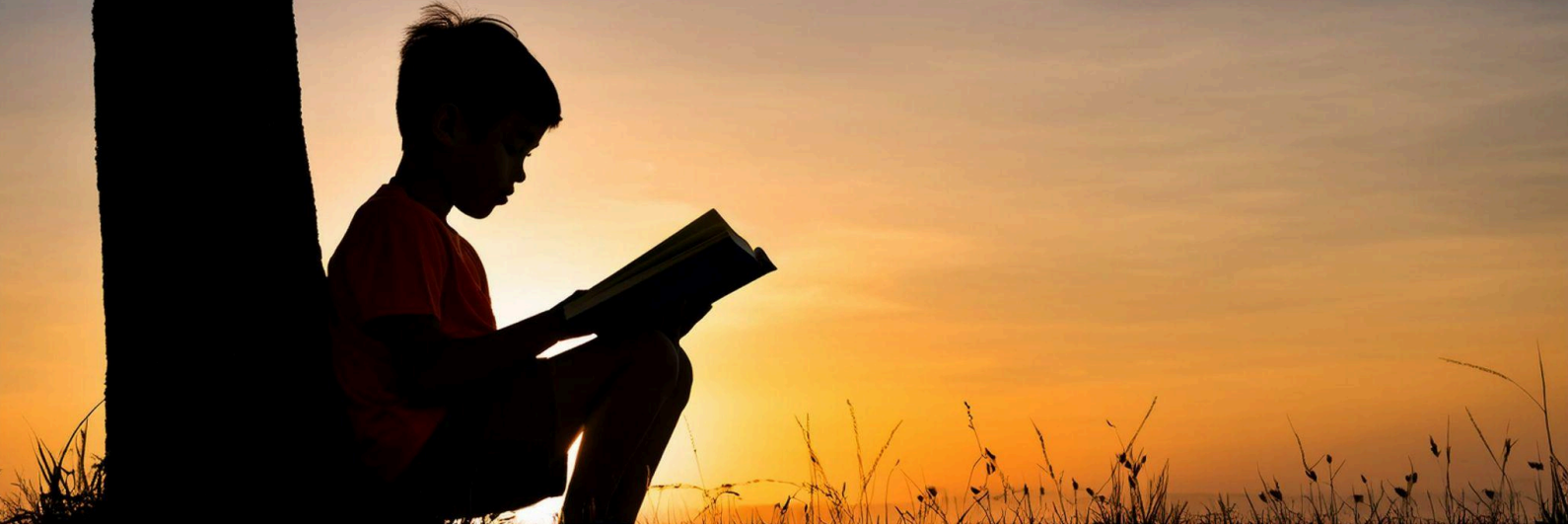

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A Practice-Based Research Approach to Selecting Point of View in a Young Adult Fantasy Novel

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Abstract
This article presents a practice-based research approach to selecting point of view (POV) for a Young Adult (YA) fantasy novel. Recognising that POV selection is project-specific and that theoretical frameworks alone are insufficient, this research moved beyond prescriptive models to discover a point of view appropriate to the overall poetics of the novel.
I experimented with different POVs to explore which option best supported a vision for a novel that invited empathy and imagination through three elements: the 'narrative self', the 'self in the story', and the 'gap between the two'. I ultimately found a close third-person POV to be most appropriate, but the research process highlighted the pressures of multiple other influences such as personal preferences and abilities, genre conventions, and authorial intentions. The article concludes with reflections on the usefulness and feasibility of taking a project-specific approach to POV selection.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people*, *ya fantasy fiction*, *point of view*, *empathy*, *practice-based research*

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Introduction

This article explains how I developed and tested a point of view strategy for my practice-based research novel: a Young Adult (YA) fantasy titled *The Dragon's Scales*. The novel follows Serena, a teenage protagonist navigating an immersive fantasy world as she comes of age and comes to see herself more clearly. My aim was to select a point of view that best creates space for the reader to have imaginative empathetic engagement with Serena. By point of view (POV), I mean the narrative perspective through which a story is told: the kind and degree of access the reader has to a character's thoughts, perceptions and experiences. In this article, I consider first-person, limited third-person, and omniscient third-person, as these are accessible and familiar to the contemporary YA fantasy readership for whom I am writing.

My understanding of empathy draws on Keen's well-known definition as 'the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition' (2007, p.521). My thinking on imagination aligns with David Lynch's notion of 'room to dream' (Lynch, 2007; Lynch & McKenna, 2018) and is also informed by decades of engagement with Buddhist philosophy and meditation practice.

To support my inquiry, and as the primary focus of this article, I developed the 'Three Aspects Model of Character'. This is a working model for identifying different dimensions through which a character is rendered and encountered by the reader, and for exploring how point of view can open space for imaginative and empathetic engagement. These aspects helped me stay alert to how point of view shapes the reader's empathetic access to my character.

This model identifies three key aspects of a character which shape how the reader engages with them. The three aspects referred to in the model's name are:

The Three Aspects Model of Character

1. The Narrative Self: the character's conscious self-concept; how they see themselves, what they believe, and the story they tell about who they are.
2. The 'Self in the Story': the broader, contingent self which emerges with the story-world.
3. The Gap: the space between those two.

Foregrounding these aspects became a practical tool in the writing process. It helped me clarify what kind of insight each point of view could offer, and how it might enable the growth arc central to the novel.

This model was shaped not only through creative experimentation but also through theoretical provocation and close reading within the genre. My fiction

research focused on YA fantasy novels featuring active, courageous young female protagonists who grow through internal and external journeys: Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), Garth Nix's *Sabriel* (2009), and Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (2001). These works helped me reflect on how different point of view strategies shape a reader's experience of character. They feature coming of age, self-discovery, and the challenges of negotiating one's identity in relation to the wider world. Vránová highlights the convergence of YA and fantasy genres in their emphasis on identity formation, noting the propensity for readers to 'search for identity, which is particularly facilitated by their journey into the possible worlds and the sense of otherness which is common to both genres' (2023, p. 131). This concern with how identity is constructed and negotiated makes YA fantasy a rich space for exploring how point of view can open up imaginative and empathetic engagement, especially through the tension between how a character sees themselves and who they are within the broader story world.

When I first turned to theory to help guide my choice of POV in *The Dragon's Scales*, I was surprised to find that one of my key influences, Wayne Booth, expressed scepticism about POV's primacy. He was critical of the schematic approach in earlier narratology, where 'classifications and descriptions' often selectively inferred from previous works were used to 'formulate useful principles' that he found 'overly prescriptive' and ultimately unhelpful (Booth, 1996, p.172). This encouraged me in my quest to research point of view for myself and to see whether practice-based research might contribute insights into more project-specific ways to approach POV.

A Note on Methodology

I am using a practice-based research methodology, specifically following Skains (2018), who conceptualises research as a dynamic, recursive process in which creative and analytical practices are interdependent and nested within one another. My research has been iterative and practice-based. It has included reference to theoretical research (on literature, empathy and young adult development), creative practice, my reading of others' creative works, as well as critical analysis of, and reflection on, all these and how they interrelate.

For this article I initially attempted to model the iterative practice-based research approach chronologically but found no way to do it cogently without introducing in-authenticity. Smith and Dean refer to the way critical research and practice co-inform in such work as forming an 'iterative cyclical web' (2009, p.1). This image captures the difficulty I had in conveying the process of knowledge generation linearly. The work was too complex to be untangled and laid out neatly while retaining any sense of the original relationships of the parts.

I therefore abandoned strict chronology. The following sections are structured thematically. Each one focuses on one of the three aspects in the model introduced above (the narrative self, the 'self in the story' and the gap between the two) and explores it conceptually through reference to one of my chosen fiction touchstones

and a POV. This structure is a way to give a base for all nine of these elements without fragmenting the discussion too far. It is not intended as a claim to a necessary connection between the aspect under discussion and a particular point of view or work of fiction. I do, however, discuss such connections within the sections where relevant. The focus here is on understanding the three aspects.

I then describe the selection of POV for my novel in 'Making a Choice'. I have borrowed an auto-ethnographic style most strongly in this part as it was useful for foregrounding subjectivity, both to more easily convey my research process and to deal with the issues of non-linearity alluded to earlier. It should be noted that the focus of interest and inquiry, however, remains on the choosing of a point of view, and not on myself as the author.

The Narrative Self

Given that the narrative self is defined here as the story the character tells about themselves, it is directly and ontologically uniquely realised in first-person point of view. In this mode, the character does not merely appear to tell their story; they are telling it. The material encountered by the reader is the self-narration, not a rendering of it. Close third-person, particularly the free indirect style can simulate the intimacy of first-person, but it remains structurally external: the character is still being narrated, not narrating themselves. This marks a qualitative, not just a stylistic, difference between first-person POV and any other.

Tomi Adeyemi's main character Zeile in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) exemplifies a YA fantasy, first-person POV. We are firmly in Zeile's head and empathise with her in the early chapters, on her own terms. By young adulthood readers have long since developed Theory of Mind and can appreciate the pleasures of fiction that come from 'mind reading' (Zunshine, 2006). It is not only possible but almost irresistible to empathise with the narrative self which Zeile communicates with us, so closely are we aligned with this character. The book presents us with her version of events narrated in her voice, including her own expressed beliefs about herself and what things mean to her: 'I can't let Baba and Tzain know how frightened I truly am. It'll only make it worse for all of us. But as my fingers start to shake, I don't know if it's from the cold or my terror.' (Adeyemi, 2018, p.502).

In other genres we might be wary of deliberate or pathological unreliable narration (or even expect it as one of the pleasures of the story). In fantasy I don't believe this is a genre expectation and we expect the character to be straight with us as far as they are able. A journey (both metaphorical/internal and literal/geographical) and growth through the trials of the road are expectations of fantasy. Mendlesohn identifies 'the journey' as a recognised 'function-trope' in portal-quest fantasies, 'usually interpreted as a metaphor for a coming of age' that 'provides a space for the protagonists to grow up' (2008, p. 7). This observation resonates with other quest fantasies, such as my own, that centre a journey but do not include the portal element.

These expectations lead us to anticipate a perspectival or deeper change in the character. It could be a misperception or a misbehaviour (usually both) that is set up to change in the novel and a reader is likely to look to discern this. For example, in the above narration from Zeile, she tells us that 'it'll only be worse for all of us' if people know she is frightened (Adeyemi, 2018, p.502). This narrative presents this as a fact, not an account of a fact, not a belief. However, we understand this to be a belief, not a fact, and might suspect that it hints at something she is wrong about and has to learn. This helps to retain dimension and doubt even while the narrative is subsumed in the perspective of the first-person narrator and enjoys primary access to the narrative self.

The 'Self in the Story'

The 'self in the story' is the character's contingent arising with the story. Here, we do not imagine the character as a discrete 'self' navigating a narrative world. Instead, there is no clear inside or outside, no fixed boundary between character and context. Distinction between self and story dissolves. The 'self in the story' is not impacted by a cold wind, in fact the cold wind describes the 'self in the story' and is inseparable from it and is it. The character is not acted upon by and active in the world; they are made with it. This understanding draws on Buddhist insight into interdependent origination: the idea that phenomena, including the self, do not arise independently but emerge in mutual co-constitution with everything else (see e.g., Garfield, 1995). I have engaged with this way of looking at the 'self in the story' throughout my research but I acknowledge that the idea is not a solid one to grasp. A more familiar and accessible alternative might be to think of a broadly contextualised self, with a complex array of inputs and outputs. The discussion is designed to remain intelligible without requiring the reader to abandon the idea of a discrete, conceptualised self, as I have.

This aspect is where first-person starts to show its limitations. Even though we are still exploring the self, it is no longer clear that the character is best placed to convey this level. Early in *Children of Blood and Bone*, Zeile's perspective frames everything. We are given no room to see outside her awareness. A broader view can be shown skilfully, using dialogue or other people's reactions. In Zeile's case, in line with her very physical story we get lots of description that feels direct and visceral such as in the many fight scenes, 'I stumble back and hunch over, wheezing as nausea climbs up my throat' (Adeyemi, 2018, p.203) which helps us to imagine the scene and 'the self in the story'. We are bound though to what she is aware of and how she sees it, we know that what we are encountering is what she deems salient to her, and her narrative.

This also applies to how emotional states are conveyed. As Weisz (2023) notes, first-person narration that directly states emotions can sometimes inhibit emotional connection, compared to approaches that allow the reader to infer feeling from the situation. Eliciting empathy, then, often works better when the emotional context is rendered through the world and action rather than filtered through the character's explicit awareness.

A limited third-person narrative can achieve this. It keeps us tethered to the character's experience, yet allows narration beyond their conscious framing. In *Sabriel* (Nix, 2009), we are aligned with Sabriel's point of view but encounter her in a scene that is not hers to narrate:

> Two long arms sprang out from it, reaching towards Sabriel's sprawling body, talons growing from the hands, raking the stone with deep gouges as they scrabbled towards her, like spiders scuttling to their prey; only to fall short by a yard or more. (p.193)

The sentence pulls us into her situation through physicality, image and metaphor. We feel fear and tension not because Sabriel tells us what she feels, but because we see her body vulnerable and threatened.

This is a moment of the 'self in the story'. Sabriel is not describing the scene; she is in it. The narration, slightly distanced, allows us to feel with her through what the world is doing, not what she says about it. This engagement, I argue, is harder to achieve in first-person, where the character must mediate the scene through self-expression. In third-person, empathy can arise from the interplay between character and context: a mutual arising of self and story.

The Gap Between The Narrative Self and The 'Self in the Story'

The final aspect in the Three Aspects Model of Character is the gap between the character's narrative self and the fuller picture of them in the story world. This is a place where the character's blind spots, contradictions and potential for change can emerge, perceptible to the reader even if not to the character.

An omniscient third-person narrator can expose this gap explicitly, but this risks undercutting the imaginative space for the reader. It can, however, also be shown with subtlety and with no such overt telling, as in Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (2001) in a chapter where the young orphan Lyra learns that the captivating Mrs Coulter has offered to look after her (p. 71). Here, the narrator reveals Lyra's growing enchantment with Mrs Coulter through evocative external description, portraying Lyra's fascination in rich detail while also signalling to the reader that something is amiss. Although Lyra sincerely believes, and says in dialogue, that Mrs Coulter is 'wonderful' (Pullman, 2001, p. 69), the narration hints at an unsettling undertone that Lyra herself cannot perceive.

This space, where the character's understanding falls short, can be a powerful site of empathy. We do not only feel for an excited little girl who genuinely believes a glamorous adult has her best interests at heart, nor solely for a girl unknowingly falling under the influence of someone who does not. Rather, we feel something particular in the tension between these two positions. The imaginative and emotional engagement lives in that gap: we are moved by what Lyra feels, and also by what she does not yet see. This layered empathy allows us to hold her truth and her vulnerability at once, and to experience a deeper kind of care, sharpened by dramatic irony.

Making My Choice

While my creative and theoretical reading was not enough to make the decision on POV, it remained an important and ongoing part of the process throughout my practice-based research. This involved moving forward into writing and engaging with the three aspects while keeping the focus on my intention: creating space for empathy.

I immediately ran into difficulties with providing a broad picture of my characters 'self in the story' and the gap between this and the narrative self when using a single first-person perspective. This became particularly clear to me in the case of comical dramatic irony which is difficult to do unobtrusively in first-person point of view. For example, in one scene my main character, Serena, who is a storyteller, believes she is being convincing when telling a tall tale to an audience. Humour is derived from the discrepancy between this belief (plus her building conviction and hubris) and the fact that her story is so transparently false to her audience. It is difficult to do this in first-person as it requires the insertion of some unnatural exposition and observation into Serena's narrative to signal the discrepancy. In practice, this strain on the narrative inhibited the empathetic connection, even with the narrative self.

One way to retain a high potential for irony while using first-person POV is through using multiple first-person perspectives, where one character can alert us to states of affairs unknown to another. Adeyemi (2018) does this and this style is popular and well accepted within the genre. I considered multiple first-person perspectives, but quickly abandoned the idea. In this case I was led more by my research inquiry (and my own limitations) than by a creative impulse. Here I was looking at how our empathetic and imaginative engagement with Serena was impacted by POV choice using the Three Aspects Model of Character. Adding another POV character would require reframing and would add a complexity that I did not need.

Genre also had an impact here. I am writing immersive fantasy, in the sense laid out in Farah Mendlesohn's widely used taxonomy (2002, p.175), wherein both we and the characters are in the fantasy world from the beginning and accept and assume it as normal. This caused a problem for me. In an unfamiliar fantastical setting, we lack knowledge of the ordinary world to contrast with the character's narrated version. We cannot easily see what she is missing or misreading and thus struggle to appreciate the gap between her self-narrative and a broader 'self in the world' which we have no access to. Her perspective may be internally consistent but that doesn't mean it aligns with the fuller reality of the story-world.

Outside of the Three Aspects Model of Character, I also don't find that the narrowness of a first-person point of view and what I love about immersive fantasy work well together. Encountering expansive novel worlds is one of the great joys of immersive fantasy. First-person limits the scope of my vision of the world, giving me access only to one person's view of it.

I felt constrained in first-person, continuously writing to the gap between perception and (fictive) reality, in this case the narrative self and the 'self in the story'. This might sound ideal, but I want this imagining to take place through empathy

with the character in the story-world not at a genre-inappropriate more technical sentence level. I found I simply could not focus on my fun, fantasy adventure. I was absorbed in designing sentences in which the character said one thing but revealed another. And again, on the writing side, in a mirror of this, it became a cognitive technical task not the intuitive, imaginative one that inspires me. Struggle with such constraints helped me to realise that it was necessary to loosen my grip on my three aspect framework when writing in practice. The cognitive load of considering the three aspects while writing in first-person was unworkable for me.

As Caldecott (2022) asserts in a critical account of her own creative writing, the question of how a piece of writing works includes the question 'How do *I make* this piece of writing work?' (p.12, my italics).

I was unable to make the first-person work; it did not fit the poetics of the novel. When I read it back, it was plain to me that this wasn't the story I was writing. For example in the draft sentence, 'My dung covered boots squelched as I approached. The innkeeper nudged the cushioned stool away' my primary experience of the sentence is 'self-consciousness'. In contrast, from a later draft, 'Her dung covered boots squelched as she approached. The innkeeper nudged the cushioned stool away' changes just two words but removes the primacy of the self-conscious element, thus allowing the underlying humour to be experienced instead. My previous preoccupation with communicating an absolutely clear, direct narrative self was allayed. I would convey self-narrative through dialogue, interiority and description by signalling clearly that this expressed Serena's sincere conscious POV.

I inherited a benefit from my practice of writing in first-person POV. I was not worried about finding a clear way to occasionally highlight the gap between the narrative self and the self in the story world anymore. My experiments with first-person, when this had been more of a problem, had led me to develop an appropriate way of showing this gap when I wanted to do it with clarity. I had a secondary character who travelled with my female main character and as the voice of the story is light and humorous, this had developed into a sort of buddy-comedy set-up. Using this second character to highlight the irony when the main character's expressed self diverged from what was really going on matched the lightly comic tone I had established (and also opened up possibilities for showing such things as closeness, conflict, acceptance, understanding). First-person was gone, but I had picked up a benefit from my time spent working on it.

So, I was down to the third-person options: limited-third and omniscient. This was a much harder choice. I felt they had different strengths in terms of allowing for empathy and imagination and my three aspects. In practicing I found the process and outcome of writing at all levels of narratorial distance satisfying, except for an extremely close-third (an almost 'disguised first-person' third-person) and I rejected it for constraining me in the same ways first-person had. Once again I felt the pressures of other considerations.

I felt a forceful aesthetic preference, this time in favour of distant omniscient narration, which is a voice that works well with fantasy. I like to think of it as 'authorial granddad voice' – warm but 'above you'. However, my target audience is a young adult one. I think what I love in this voice – for example, whimsy – might be off-putting to a teen. Middle Grade and below has tended to remain more distant (excepting the dominance of the first-person diary narrative). YA fiction, however, has moved more towards first-person or close-third. This trend is reflected in a recent study of New York Times YA fiction bestsellers from 2020–2022, which found that over 70% were written in first-person narration (Wehmeier Giol, 2023, p.17). It might be a barrier to immediate empathetic connection to lose this familiar closeness with character. Moreover, there might simply be resistance to a style that has become more associated with Middle Grade than YA.

I was approaching this 'problem' of choosing a POV by using the narrative self, self in the story and the gap between these two to evoke empathy and space for imagination. It is small wonder that I became enamoured with Pullman's daemon device. This creative and novel concept allowed for the externalisation of part, but not all, of Lyra's self. Biwu Shang goes so far as to call it 'a physical manifestation of a person's soul' in a discussion on the link between humans and their daemons who are 'often manifesting a character's emotions or needs' (2024, p.377). The nature of their partially shared consciousness is explored in the imagination of readers. We experience a diffused self in a way that is never explicitly defined. My writing practice produced nothing so wonderful but daydreaming about this did trigger other ideas connected with my creative practice research including one linked to the reading and writing I had been doing around POV.

My approach had been to seek some sort of strong distinction between the narrative self and the self in the story world, with that distinction supporting clarity in the gap between the two. While I hadn't meant to look for hard lines, it is obviously implicit in the way I designed my approach. In reading and writing, however, I discovered I found room to imagine when there was ambiguity. I found that, excluding the extreme ends of narratorial distance and closeness, where narration became either fully objective or entirely merged with the character's consciousness, third person allowed for this useful ambiguity. I can write intuitively and experiment with not being clear on whether, for example, a belief or emotion is understood by the narrative self. The earlier example can be tweaked to re-assert Serena's self-consciousness if needed through addition of, for example, interiority and a free indirect style: 'Her dung covered boots squelched as she approached. Surely nobody could hear them over the noise. The innkeeper nudged the cushioned stool away.' Playing with this, I finally opted for a close but-not-too-close third-person point of view.

A close third-person allows me to show the narrative self (albeit less completely than first-person allows) and the 'self in the world' (albeit slightly less naturally than omniscient third) and the gap between the two. I am able to invoke empathy, through a position which works for my writing style and the type of story I am telling. I am writing

a fun, fantasy adventure and showing the environment, the body, senses, feelings and interactions through a limited third-person POV is best able to open up imaginative space for empathy.

Outcomes

Thinking in terms of a character's narrative self, their 'self in the story' and the gap between the two can be helpful in choosing POV in a YA fantasy novel. Purposeful writing practice that is mindful of this framework can help generate simulations specific to the writer and their work, enabling reflection on which point of view allows empathetic access to the two different presentations of self and how best to create space for empathy and imagination between them.

In practice, this framework became less a rigid guide and more a generative starting point. It catalysed a practice-based research process in which both creative and research-led drives exerted pressure, sometimes generative, sometimes resistive. At times, I allowed the creative process to lead, loosening my grip on the conceptual framing to follow instinct. At other times, I prioritised the research inquiry (for example, choosing not to add an additional POV despite narrative appeal). These shifts are visible in my notes and in the autoethnographic material, and echo Smith and Dean's (2009) concept of the 'iterative cyclic web' in which practice informs research and research reshapes practice.

Another example of how allowing fluidity between research and practice served the work came when creative resistance led me to ease off strict adherence to the model I had created. This led to a discovery that at times ambiguity on the level of Serena's self knowledge enhanced empathy more than clarity on the three aspects did. Obscuring a character's self-awareness or withholding clear signals about what they know or feel sometimes created a more spacious reading experience, drawing the reader in more effectively than if the psychological architecture had been laid bare.

My commitment to the project's imaginative and empathetic intentions acted as a tether throughout these fluctuations, offering continuity and purpose when methodological clarity wavered. A strong sense of intention is a vital anchor in the wild seas of practice-based research.

I do not propose a single point of view as superior or recommend a fixed approach. On the contrary, my research reinforced the idea that finding the right POV depends highly on the project, the writer, and the moment. As Booth observed, theoretical discussions of POV have struggled to offer help with choosing a technique 'in a particular work' (Booth, 1996, p.171). But when taken alongside creative touchstones and reflective experimentation, theory and contextual understanding can support a playful, adaptive process for identifying what works.

Along the way, I also encountered other, intersecting pressures: the envisioned poetics of the work, the evolving aesthetic, genre expectations, the age of the reader, my personal preferences, and my skill and limitations as a writer. These all play a role in

what is possible and desirable. Sometimes it is necessary to prioritise one consideration over another; at other times, constraints spark creative solutions.

The Three Aspects Model of Character worked best, not as a strict framework, but as a generative prompt for an iterative process. Its value was not in providing definitive answers but in helping to orient and stimulate reflection, experimentation, and insight: supporting a choice of point of view that made space for empathy, felt artistically attuned to the work and was possible for me as a writer.

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