

Meeting 10 3 May 2017, Corsham

Empathy and saying 'I': first person in fiction/non-fiction, memoir, therapy and academic writing

A larger than usual group - around 38 people - met in the Barn at 11 am on 31 May. Since choices about narrating in first or third person are relevant to creative writers, the meeting was opened to 10 MA Creative Students. Following on from novelist Dr Tracy Brain's paper on empathy and second person in fiction, this session explored first person and empathy. How does it feel to write 'I', and how does using first person change our writing? How do others feel when they hear, or read, an 'I'?

11.00 Welcome, coffee and tea, introductions.

11.15 Speakers

1) Novelist & lecturer Kylie Fitzpatrick on writing in the first person

Dr Kylie Fitzpatrick has a background in television production as a script editor and researcher in Britain, America and Australia, works as a manuscript editor and mentor, and tutors on the Creative Writing undergraduate degree course at Bath Spa University, having graduated from our own MA and PhD programmes. Kylie has written four books, most recently *The Silver Thread*, a historical novel with social and political dimensions, and has a research interest in creative writing for therapeutic purposes and for wellbeing.

In a thoughtful paper, Kylie reminded us that failure to empathise is a key part of most social problems: crime, racism, and psychiatric and neurological conditions such as autism and depression. She is now part of an informal research group at BSU investigating the links between creative expression and mental health. In her own fiction she at first unconsciously avoided using first person, apart from on one narrative strand in her first novel, *Tapestry*, from which she read a passage. In more recent work she has begun experimenting with first person 'as a means of accessing a deeper integrity of expression'. Kylie said our brains respond to the signals of language, so when we use the first-person, the pronoun 'I', as a vehicle for narration, we become empathic because we are associating the consciousness of a fictional other with our own experience. The brain treats fictional stimulus in the same way as it does real life events, so it responds as though the fictional 'I' on the page is the 'I' it recognises as self. Readers similarly respond to first person narration with a closer involvement in what they are reading. Kylie said that in cases of trauma, empathy was often a casualty. When we are traumatised, anxious or depressed, we are unable to feel connected, or part of the collective. She asked whether traumatic memories, caused by a breakdown in certain brain systems, might be reshaped by constructing an imaginary, more positive conclusion? Writing narrative is arguably the best means of constructing imaginary conclusions. First person narration could be a means to reconnect with our 'whole' selves and thus with another's pain or joy.

2) Professor Fay Weldon on writing in different persons

Fay Weldon has written more than thirty novels and books of short stories, work that is always new and different and yet recognisably hers. Her early novel about gender, *Down Among the Women* (1971) was a big influence on the thinking of later

generations of women, as were *Puffball* and *The Heart of the Country*. Her clever, witty novels look outwards at contemporary society but also tell their tale through her characters' secret thoughts. She has a new book out this year with Head of Zeus, a revisiting of one of her best-known and most successful books, *The Life and Loves of A She Devil*: it's called *Death of a She Devil*.

Fay spoke about using first or third person narration in different contexts and for different reasons. In her new (2017) book, *Death of a She Devil*, she 'shifts in voice throughout the book (roughly every two pages)'. She read from the beginning of the book, 'starting with the emotional dreamy right brain 'I' person, thus getting to the reader's empathy hub right away', then moving on to various 'more business-like plot-deliverers' which were meant to 'engage the more rational left-brain part of the reader's brain.' Fay also spoke about the different toll that writing first person takes. Writing in the first person she sometimes found exhausting and painful, which is why at one difficult point in her autobiography, *Auto da Fay*, she moved into third person because the writing 'seemed more than one could endure'. However though she said she herself had undergone years of therapy, much of what she said was practical and upbeat, emphasizing the technical and skill-based part of writing rather than the unconscious or emotional aspects. Could books be thought experiments or dramatized arguments, and might characters represent opposing ideas?

3) Linda Blair, writer, journalist and clinical psychologist, on first person in therapy and writing

Linda Blair was one of our group's founding members. Educated at Wellesley College, Harvard, and the Institute of Psychiatry in London, she has worked as a clinical psychologist for over 35 years in the NHS, the Medical Research Council, Cambridge and Bath Universities, and in private practice. She has written four books, most recently *The Key to Calm* (2014); her fifth, *Siblings* (Crimson/White Ladder) is out 2 October, with book talks at Cheltenham on 12 October and at Topping's, Bath, on 17 October. She's a frequent public speaker in schools and universities and a regular BBC radio broadcaster, and has taken part in a number of TV programmes. Linda writes a weekly column, 'Mind Healing', for *The Daily Telegraph*. She is doing her PhD at BSU, supervised by Bambo Soyinka and Richard Kerridge.

Though now a successful journalist who has written regularly for the *Guardian*, the *Times* and now the *Daily Telegraph*, Linda spoke frankly about the use of first person in her own clinical practice as a psychologist. In the clinical setting it's important to avoid formulations like 'I think', 'I believe', 'I suggest' etc., in order to allow the client to tell their story their way. 'I wonder' is acceptable, but other than that, interested questions are best—in other words, second person! Linda also said she felt it was unwise for the therapist to refer to their own experience or personal life. But hours of repressing the first person during clinic was acutely exhausting and draining, she said. On the way home from clinic she would have to make a conscious effort to 'detox', to imagine leaving various parts of what she had been told at points in the route. If clients over-use the first person, she said it was important for the therapist to ask at appropriate junctures how the client imagined others were feeling as well, to encourage them to 'decentre' (put themselves in the shoes of others), because this reawakens empathy—and that in turn often imparts hope ('There are other ways I can feel'). Other patients, especially those with low self-esteem or those who've

suffered badly in the past and coped by repressing their emotions, need encouragement to talk frankly in the first person about themselves. During her MA Creative Writing, Linda decided to write in the first person, to talk honestly about her own difficulties raising a child with cystic fibrosis. As a result, she now knows how therapeutic it can be to release personal pain.