

# The Wordsmith's Guide to Voice and Style

Angie Hodapp, Nelson Literary Agency

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## Introduction

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Why are voice and style important?

Why is voice so difficult?

Exercise: Voice of your choice

Six components of voice

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

Voice can be defined as...

1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_
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## How a writer reveals self through narrative • *Worldview, biases, themes*

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What does it mean to write what you know?

Exercise: Personal themes

Exercise: Writer, know thyself!

Exercise: Your id lists

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## How a writer writes • *Style*

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Genres

- Crime (mystery, thriller, suspense...)
- Speculative (science fiction, fantasy, horror...)
- Romance (contemporary, historical, some WF and chick lit...)
- Mainstream (book club, literary, historical, humor...)
- *See the full list of 316 BISAC codes for fiction at [bisg.org/fiction](http://bisg.org/fiction)*

Voice

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Market

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

What if books were shelved not by genre but by voice?

- Absurdist, ironic, satirical
- Adventurous, heroic, swashbuckling
- Aggressive, angry, confrontational
- Artistic, lyrical, poetic
- Bittersweet, nostalgic, sentimental
- Bleak, depressing, hopeless, sad
- Calm, idyllic, pastoral, peaceful
- Cerebral, intellectual, thought-provoking
- Childlike, innocent, naïve
- Creepy, foreboding, menacing, sinister
- Erotic, lustful, sensual, sexy
- Funny, humorous
- Hopeful, lighthearted, optimistic
- Jaded, world-weary
- Romantic, sweet, wistful
- Sarcastic, snarky

What should writers establish on page one?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Examples of voice in opening pages and discussion

The four categories of reader appeal

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Exercise: A voice-based prologue

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### **How a character speaks • *Dialogue***

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Dialects, accents, and phonetic gymnastics  
*What* characters say, not *how* they say it  
Examples

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### **How a character thinks • *Internalizations, analysis***

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Exercise: Putting it all together  
(*voice, context, character development, internalization, dialogue*)

**Write a scene between two characters using only these six lines of dialogue exactly as written. Before you write, you have some decisions to make!**

Decide who each character is as a person in the world.

Character 1 \_\_\_\_\_  
Character 2 \_\_\_\_\_

What is their relationship to each other? (*Level of respect or regard, how long they've known each other, romantic tension, imbalance of power, desire to impress or repel, indifference, etc.*)

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Which character will be your POV?

- Character 1 first person
- Character 1 third person
- Character 2 first person
- Character 2 third person
- Other (Omniscient? Second person?)

States of mind based on what's at stake for each character (refer to states-of-mind list):

Character 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Character 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Setting: \_\_\_\_\_

Genre: \_\_\_\_\_

Voice:

- Literary
- Upmarket
- Commercial

Market

- Adult
- Young Adult
- Middle Grade
- Chapter Book

## The Dialogue

"Did you bring my money?"

"Relax. I brought your money."

"Where is it? Give it to me."

"Not yet. We've got some things to talk about first."

"I already told you everything I know."

"Not everything."

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## Additional exercises

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- Think of two people in your life. Imagine that you have had a very bad day or experience and you've just told each about it separately. What would their response be, how would they sound, and how would they deliver their response?
- Change a passage from a book you love into the voice of another book you love. You can't change the events—only your use of language.
- Convert your favorite third-person narrative into first person. Or vice versa.

When I was a junior in college, I took an expository writing course taught by a graduate student named Trey Greer. On the first day of class, he assigned a five-hundred-word essay: describe something, anything. At the time, I was convinced that I was a real writer, an undiscovered Eudora Welty or William Faulkner. Understand, I had absolutely no interest in writing. I wanted to be a Writer; and so I put off the work of the essay until the last possible moment. The night before it was due, I went grocery shopping. And sitting outside the Winn-Dixie, perched on top of a hundred-pound bag of Purina dog chow, was a woman with a tambourine.

“Girl,” she said, when I walked past her, “give me some of that change.”

I stopped and stared at her.

“That’s all right,” she said, “go on and look at Bernice. She don’t care.” She beat the tambourine softly against her thigh and started to sing a song about the moon rising up in the night sky like a gold coin and how it was hanging up there all shiny and new and nobody was able to get hold of it and spend it. She called it a “smug old moon.”

When she was done singing, she held the tambourine out to me and I dropped some money in it and turned around and went back home and wrote an essay describing her. I wrote down the words of the song that she sang. I described her broken fingernails (painted purple) and her blue eye shadow and how she sat atop the bag of dog chow as if it were a throne. I wrote how, after I dropped my money in the tambourine she said, “God bless you, baby.”

A week after I turned in the essay, Trey Greer read it aloud to the class.

“There is something extraordinary about this essay,” he said, “and I want you to tell me what it is.”

Extraordinary! Me! It was just as I had long suspected: I was a genius. I was born to be a Writer. I would be famous!

When Trey finished reading he said, “What is it that makes this essay worth our time?”

Nobody said anything.

“It’s not the writing,” he said. “There’s nothing extraordinary about that.”

Not the writing? I sank a little lower in my desk. What else could possibly make an essay extraordinary?

“I’ll tell you,” he said to the silent, bored class. “The person who wrote this actually took the time to see the person she was describing. That’s what writing is all about. Seeing. It is the sacred duty of the writer to pay attention, to see the world.”

So what? I didn’t want to see the world. I wanted the world to see me. Trey Greer, I decided, had no idea what he was talking about.

Not until years later when I finally made a commitment to writing, when I was fighting despair, wondering if I had the talent to do what I wanted to do, did those words come back to me. And what I thought was this: I cannot control whether or not I am talented, but I can pay attention. I can make an effort to see.

Because of Winn-Dixie is the result of that effort. It is a book populated with stray dogs and strange musicians, lonely children and lonelier adults. They are all the kind of people that, too often, get lost in the mainstream rush of life. Spending time with them was a revelation for me. What I discovered is that each time you look at the world and the people in it closely, imaginatively, the effort changes you. The world, under the microscope of your attention, opens up like a beautiful, strange flower and gives itself back to you in ways you could never imagine.

What stories are hiding behind the faces of the people who you walk past every day? What love? What hopes? What despair?

Trey Greer did know what he was talking about. Writing is seeing. It is paying attention.

I think of it this way: my characters sing songs and I stop to listen to them and when the song is done I give them my money and they say, "God bless you, baby."

And I feel that I have been blessed. Over and over again.

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### Advice from Kate DiCamillo

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- **WRITE.** This may seem like an obvious piece of advice, but there are a lot of people (and I was one of them for a very long time) who think that somehow they can become a writer without doing the work of writing. Make a commitment to yourself to write a little bit (a paragraph, a page, two pages) every day.
- **REWRITE.** You can't sit down and expect something golden and beautiful and wise to spring forth from your fingers the first time you write. You can, however, reasonably expect a piece of writing to get better each time you rewrite it. I can't emphasize this strongly enough; writing means rewriting.
- **READ.** You have no business wanting to be a writer unless you are a reader. You should read fantasies and essays, biographies and poetry, fables, and fairy tales. Read, read, read, read, read.
- **LOOK**—at the world around. Pay attention to details. Open your heart to what you see.
- **LISTEN**—to people when they talk. Everyone has a story. Eavesdrop. Join in conversations. Ask questions. And pay attention when people answer them.
- **BELIEVE IN YOURSELF**—there is no right or wrong way to tell a story. This is one reason that writing is so wonderful and terrifying: you have to find your own way. Be kind to yourself. Listen to other people. And then strike out on your own.

States of Mind • Angie Hodapp, Nelson Literary Agency

Abrasive	Cranky	Gullible	Obsequious	Sulking
Accusatory	Critical	Happy	Optimistic	Sympathetic
Aggressive	Cruel	Hard-hearted	Outraged	Thoughtful
Aggrieved	Curious	Harried	Outspoken	Tolerant
Ambivalent	Cynical	Hesitant	Panicked	Tragic
Amused	Defensive	Honest	Passionate	Trustworthy
Angry	Defiant	Humble	Pathetic	Unaffected
Animated	Demeaning	Humorous	Patronising	Unassuming
Anxious	Depressing	Hurried	Pensive	Uncertain
Apathetic	Derisive	Hypercritical	Perfunctory	Uneasy
Apologetic	Despairing	Impartial	Persuasive	Unsympathetic
Appreciative	Detached	Impassioned	Pessimistic	Untrustworthy
Ardent	Dignified	Imploring	Philosophical	Urgent
Arrogant	Diplomatic	Impressionable	Playful	Vindictive
Assertive	Direct	Inane	Pragmatic	Virtuous
Authentic	Disappointed	Incensed	Prejudiced	Whimsical
Authoritative	Disapproving	Incredulous	Pretentious	Witty
Awestruck	Dismay	Indifferent	Prickly	Wonderstruck
Belligerent	Disparaging	Indignant	Reflective	World-weary
Benevolent	Dispassionate	Informative	Regretful	Worried
Biased	Distressed	Inspirational	Resentful	Wry
Bitter	Docile	Intelligent	Resigned	
Bored	Dull	Intense	Restrained	
Bossy	Earnest	Intimate	Reticent	
Callous	Easygoing	Ironic	Reverent	
Candid	Egotistical	Irreverent	Righteous	
Caustic	Empathetic	Jaded	Sad	
Cautionary	Encouraging	Joyful	Sage	
Celebratory	Energetic	Judgmental	Sarcastic	
Charismatic	Enthusiastic	Kind	Satirical	
Charming	Evasive	Knowledgable	Scathing	
Chatty	Excited	Laudatory	Scattered	
Cheerful	Facetious	Light-hearted	Scornful	
Clever	Farcical	Loving	Secretive	
Cold	Flippant	Macabre	Self-effacing	
Colloquial	Forceful	Mean-spirited	Sensationalistic	
Comic	Formal	Miserable	Sentimental	
Compassionate	Frank	Mocking	Serious	
Compliant	Friendly	Modest	Sincere	
Concerned	Frustrated	Mourning	Skeptical	
Conciliatory	Gentle	Naïve	Snarky	
Condescending	Ghoulish	Narcissistic	Solemn	
Confident	Gloomy	Nasty	Sophisticated	
Confused	Grateful	Negative	Straightforward	
Contemptuous	Gregarious	Nostalgic	Stressed	
Conversational	Grim	Objective	Submissive	

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### Examples

[\*The Handmaid's Tale\*](#) by Margaret Atwood – upmarket dystopian/speculative, first person

[\*Book Lovers\*](#) by Emily Henry – contemporary romance, first person

[\*Gone Girl\*](#) by Gillian Flynn – domestic thriller, first person

[\*Everything Is Illuminated\*](#) by Jonathan Safran Foer – literary humor, first person

[\*Red Widow\*](#) by Alma Katsu – spy thriller, third person

[\*Snow Crash\*](#) by Neal Stephenson – cyberpunk, third person

[\*The Fifth Season\*](#) by NK Jemisin – science fantasy, second person

[\*Into the Woods\*](#) by Tana French – mystery/psychological thriller, first person

[\*Lone Women\*](#) by Victor LaValle – historical horror, third person

[\*My Grandmother Asked Me To Tell You She's Sorry\*](#) by Fredrik Backman – humor, third person

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*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood – upmarket dystopian/speculative, first person

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We slept in what had one been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

There was old sex in the room, and loneliness, and expectation of something without a shape or name.

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*Book Lovers* by Emily Henry – contemporary romance, first person

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When books are your life—or in case, your job—you get pretty good at guessing where a story is going. The tropes, the archetypes, the common plot twists all start to organize themselves into a catalogue inside your brain, divided by category and genre.

The husband is the killer.

The nerd gets a makeover, and without her glasses, she's smoking hot.

The guy gets the girl—or the other girl does.

Someone explains a complicated scientific concept, and someone else says, "In English please?"

The details may change from book to book, but there's nothing truly new under the sun.

Take, for example, the small-town love story.

The kind where a cynical hot shot from New York or Los Angeles gets shipped off to

Smalltown, USA—to, like, run a family-owned Christmas tree farm out of business to make room for a soulless corporation.

But while said City Person is in town, things don't go to plan. Because, *of course*, the Christmas tree farm—or bakery, or whatever the hero's been sent to destroy—is owned and operated by someone ridiculously attractive and suitably available for wooing.

Back in the city, the lead *has* a romantic partner. Someone ruthless who encourages him to do what he's set out to do and ruin some lives in exchange for that big promotion. He feels calls from her, during which she interrupts him, barking heartless advice from the seat of her Peloton bike.

You can tell she's evil because her hair is an unnatural blonde, slicked back à la Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, and also, she hates Christmas decorations.

As the hero spends more time with the charming baker/seamstress/tree farm...*person*, things change for him. He learns the true meaning of life!

[...]

That's my life. The trope that governs my days. The archetype over which my details are superimposed.

I'm the city person. Not the one who meets the hot farmer. The *other* one.

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*Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn – domestic thriller, first person

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When I think of my wife, I always think of her head. The shape of it, to begin with. The very first time I saw her, it was the back of the head I saw, and there was something lovely about it, the angles of it. Like a shiny, hard corn kernel or a riverbed fossil. She had with the Victorians would call a *finally shaped head*. You could imagine the skull quite easily.

I'd know her head anywhere.

And what's inside it. I think of that too: her mind. Her brain, all those coils, and her thoughts shuttling through those coils like fast, frantic centipedes. Like a child, I picture opening her skull, unspooling her brain and sifting through it, trying to catch and pin down her thoughts. *What are you thinking, Amy?* The question I've asked most often during our marriage, if not out loud, if not to the person who could answer. I suppose these questions stormcloud over every marriage: *What are you thinking? How are you feeling? Who are you? What have we done to each other? What will we do?*

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*Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer – literary humor, first person

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My legal name is Alexander Perchov. But all of my many friends dub me Alex, because that is the more flaccid-to-utter version of my legal name. Mother dubs me Alexis-stop-spleening me!, because I am always spleening her. If you want to know why I am always spleening her, it is because I am always elsewhere with friends, and disseminating so much currency, and performing so many things that can spleen a mother. Father used to dub me Shapka, for the fur hat I would don even in the summer month. He ceased dubbing me that because I ordered him to cease dubbing me that. It sounded boyish to me, and I have always thought of myself as very potent and generative. I have many girls, believe me, and they all have a different name for me. One dubs me Baby, not because I am a baby, but because she attends to me. Another dubs me All



Night. Do you want to know why? I have a girl who dubs me Currency, because I disseminate so much currency around her. She licks my chops for it. I have a miniature brother who dubs me Alli. I do not dig this name very much, but I dig him very much, so OK, I permit him to dub me Alli. As for his name, it is a Little Igor, but father dubs him Clumsy One, because he is always promenading into things. It was only four days previous that he made his eye blue from a mismanagement with a brick wall. If you're wondering what my bitch's name is, it is Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior. She has this name because Sammy Davis, Junior was Grandfather's beloved singer, and the bitch is his, not mine, because I am not the one who thinks he is blind.

As for me, I was sired in 1977, the same year as the hero of this story. In truth, my life has been very ordinary. As I mentioned before, I do many good things with my self and others, but they are ordinary things.

*Red Widow* by Alma Katsu – spy thriller, third person

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The gentleman in seat 2D was in medical distress when he boarded, the flight attendant is sure of it.

He was the first one on the plane, leading the rush of premium club members. She noticed he was already having trouble, stumbling in the narrow aisle, sweat visible on his face. He shoved his overnight bag into her arms to stow for him and asked for a drink right away, a vodka neat. She is used to this kind of treatment from business class passengers, especially on this hop from JFK to Reagan National, which is often full of VIPs, senators and businessmen. He looks to her like a politician, the worst of all. She knows better than to argue with him.

She brings him a glass of water, too, even though he didn't ask for it, in case he needs to cool off or take medication. He's not in great shape—three hundred pounds easy, squeezed into a suit at least two sizes too small. His face is pale, but there's a deep flush creeping up from under his collar.

He grumbles to himself throughout the boarding process, but is otherwise quiet. His cell phone is clutched in one hand as the rest of the passengers squeeze by, his face turned to the tiny window, shunning any possibility of contact. He pays no attention through the safety demonstration but then again no one does anymore, and the flight attendant stopped taking offense long ago.

As the plane taxis onto the runway, she checks the manifest. His name is Yaromir Popov and he came to JFK via an Aeroflot flight from Heathrow. A Russian businessman, then.

No sooner has the Airbus A330 lifted into the night sky than the Russian starts having problems. From the jump seat in the galley, the flight attendant sees his face has turned bright pink and that he's having difficulty breathing. Could he be choking on something? He hasn't pressed the call button so it might just be garden-variety anxiety. Takeoffs are the worst for many passengers. She counts the minutes until the fasten seatbelt signs go off.

The flight to Washington, DC, will be quick. Because the plane is barely one-third full, the airline cut back on flight attendants. Tonight, it's just her and another woman, the bare minimum. Still, there's plenty for them to take care of and she doesn't think about Popov again until it's time to take drink orders. By then, he's gotten worse. He is shaking in his seat and on the verge of convulsions. His eyes bulge, and his bright red face is shiny from sweat.

She is glad the cabin is dark and the plane practically empty. She doesn't want to alarm the rest of the passengers. Most have their heads down anyway, trying to catch a quick nap on the

ninety-minute trip.

She leans over him, bringing her face close to his so she can check for the smell of alcohol. “Are you okay, Sir? Is there something I can do for you?”

He opens his mouth but no words come out, only a gurgling, choking noise.

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*Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson – cyberpunk, third person

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The Deliverator belongs to an elite order, a hollowed subcategory. He’s got esprit up to here. Right now, he is preparing to carry out his third mission of the night. His uniform is black as activated charcoal, filtering the very light out of the air. A bullet will bounce off its arachnofiber weave like a wren hitting a patio door, but excess perspiration wafts through it like a breeze through a freshly napalmed forest. Where his body has bony extremities, the suit has sintered armor: feels like gritty jello, protects like a stack of telephone books.

When they gave him the job, they gave him a gun. The Deliverator never deals in cash, but someone might come after him anyway—might want his car, or his cargo. The gun is tiny, aerostyled, lightweight, the kind of gun a fashion designer would carry; it fires teensy darts that fly at five times the velocity of an SR-71 spy plane, and when you get done using it, you have to plug it into the cigarette lighter, because it runs on electricity.

The Deliverator never pulled that gun in anger, or in fear. He pulled it once in Gila Highlands. Some punks in Gila Highlands, a fancy Burbclave, wanted themselves a delivery, and they didn’t want to pay for it. Thought they would impress the Deliverator with a baseball bat. The Deliverator took out his gun, centered its laser doohickey on that poised Louisville Slugger, fired it. The recoil was immense, as though the weapon had blown up in his hand. The middle third of the baseball bat turned into a column of burning sawdust accelerating in all directions like a bursting star. Punk ended up holding this bat handle with milky smoke pouring out the end. Stupid look on his face. Didn’t get nothing but trouble from the Deliverator.

Since then the Deliverator has kept the gun in the glove compartment and relied, instead, on a matched set of samurai swords, which have always been his weapon of choice anyhow. The punks and Gila Highlands weren’t afraid of the gun, so the Deliverator was forced to use it. But the swords need no demonstrations.

The Deliverator’s car has enough potential energy packed into its batteries to fire a pound of bacon into the Astroid Belt. Unlike a bimbo box or a Burb beater, the Deliverator’s car unloads that power through gaping, gleaming, polished sphincters. When the Deliverator puts the hammer down, shit happens. You want to talk contact patches? Your car’s tires have tiny contact patches, talk to the asphalt in four places the size of your tongue. The Deliverator’s car has big sticky tires with contact patches the size of a fat lady’s thighs. The Deliverator is in touch with the road, starts like a bad day, stops on a peseta.

Why is the Deliverator so equipped? Because people rely on him. He is a role model. This is America. People do whatever the fuck they feel like doing, you got a problem with that? Because they have a right to. And because they have guns and no one can fucking stop them. As a result, this country has one of the worst economies in the world. [...] There’s only four things we do better than anyone else: music, movies, microcode, high-speed pizza delivery.

[...]

The Deliverator stands tall, your pie in thirty minutes or you can have it free, shoot the driver, take his car, file a class-action suit. The Deliverator has been working this job for six

months, a rich and lengthy tenure by his standards, and has never delivered a pizza in more than twenty-one minutes.

*The Fifth Season* by NK Jemisin – science fantasy, second person

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You are she. She is you. You are Essun. Remember? The woman whose son is dead.

You're an orogene who's been living in the little nothing town of Tirimo for ten years. Only three people here know what you are, and two of them you gave birth to.

Well. One left who knows, now.

For the past ten years you've lived as ordinary life as possible. You came to Tirimo from elsewhere; the townsfolk don't really care where or why. Since you were obviously well educated, you became a teacher at the local creche for children aged ten to thirteen. You're neither the best teacher nor the worst; the children forget you when they move on, but they learn. The butcher probably knows your name because she likes to flirt with you. The baker doesn't because you're quiet, and because like everyone else in town he just thinks of you as Jija's wife. Jija's a Tirimo man born and bred, a stoneknapper of the Resistant use-caste; everyone knows and likes him, so they like you peripherally. He's the foreground of the painting that is your life together. You're the background. You like it that way.

You're the mother of two children, but now one of them is dead and the other is missing. Maybe she's dead, too. You discover all of this when you come home from work one day. House empty, too quiet, tiny little boy all bloody and bruised on the den floor.

And you...shut down. You don't mean to. It's just a bit much, isn't it? Too much. You've been through a lot, you're very strong, but there are limits to what even you can bear.

Two days pass before anyone comes for you.

You've spent them in the house with your dead son.

[...]

Late the next day, someone knocks at the house's front door. You do not stir yourself to answer it. That would require you to wonder who is there and whether you should let them in. Thinking of these things would make you consider your son's corpse under the blanket, and why would you want to do that? You ignore the door knock.

Someone bangs at the window in the front room. Persistent. You ignore this, too.

Finally, someone breaks the glass on the house's back door. You hear footsteps in the hallway between Uche's room and that of Nassun, your daughter.

(Nassun, your daughter.)

The footsteps reach the den and stop. "Essun?"

You know this voice. Young, male. Familiar, and soothing in a familiar way. Lerna, Makenba's boy from down the road, who went away for a few years and came back a doctor. He's not a boy anymore, hasn't been for a while, so you remind yourself again to start thinking of him as a man.

Oops, thinking. Carefully, you stop.

He inhales, and your skin reverberates with his horror when he draws near enough to see Uche. Remarkably, he does not cry out. Nor does he touch you, though he moves to Uche's other side and peers at you intently. Trying to see what's going on inside you? *Nothing, nothing*. He then peels back the blanket for a good look at Uche's body. *Nothing, nothing*. He pulls the blanket up again, this time over your son's face.

“He doesn’t like that,” you say. It’s your first time speaking in two days. Feels strange. “He’s afraid of the dark.”

After a moment’s silence, Lerna pulls the sheet back down to just below Uche’s eyes.

“Thank you,” you say.

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*Into the Woods* by Tana French – mystery/psychological thriller, first person

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What I want you to remember is that I am a detective. Our relationship with truth is fundamental but cracked, refracting confusingly like fragmented glass. It is the core of our careers, the endgame of every move we make, and we pursue it with strategies painstakingly constructed of lies and concealment and every variation on deception. The truth is the most desirable woman in the world and we are the most jealous lovers, reflexively denying anyone else the simplest glimpse of her. We betray her routinely, spending hours and days stupor-deep in lies, and then turn back to her holding out the lover’s ultimate Mobius strip: *But I only did it because I love you so much.*

I have a pretty knack for imagery, especially a cheap, facile kind. Don’t let me fool you into seeing us as a bunch of parfit gentil knights galloping off in doublets after Lady Truth on her white palfrey. What we do is crude, crass and nasty. A girl gives her boyfriend an alibi for the evening when we suspect him of robbing a north-side Centra and stabbing the clerk. I flirt with her at first, telling her I can see why he would want to stay home when he’s got her; she is peroxidized and greasy, with the flat, stunted features of generations of malnutrition, and privately I am thinking that if I were her boyfriend I would be relieved to trade her even for a hairy cellmate named Razor. Then I tell her we found marked bills from the till in his classy white tracksuit bottoms, and he’s claiming that she went out that evening and gave them to him when she got back.

I do it so convincingly, with such delicate crosshatching of discomfort and compassion at her man’s betrayal, that finally her faith in four shared years disintegrates like a sand castle and through tears and snot, while her man sits with my partner in the next interview room saying nothing except “Fuck off, I was home with Jackie,” she tells me everything from the time he left the house to the details of his sexual shortcomings. Then I pat her gently on the shoulder and give her a tissue and a cup of tea, and a statement sheet.

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*Lone Women* by Victor LaValle (3<sup>rd</sup> person)

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There are two kinds of people in this world: those who live with shame, and those who die from it. On Tuesday, Adelaide Henry would’ve called herself the former, but by Wednesday she wasn’t as sure. If she was trying to live, then why would she be walking through her family’s farmhouse carrying an Atlas jar of gasoline, pouring that gasoline on the kitchen floor, the dining table, dousing the settee in the den? And after she emptied the first Atlas jar, why go back to the kitchen for the other jar, then climb the stairs to the second floor, listening to the splash of gasoline on every step? Was she planning to live, or trying to die?

There were twenty-seven Black farming families in California’s Lucerne Valley in 1915. Adelaide and her parents had been one of them. After today there would only be twenty-six.

Adelaide reached the second-floor landing. She hardly smelled the gasoline anymore. Her

hands were covered in fresh wounds, but she felt no pain. There were two bedrooms on the second floor: her bedroom and her parents’.

Adelaide’s parents were lured west by the promise of the land in this valley. The federal government encouraged Americans to Homestead California. The native population had been decimated, cleared off the property. Now it was time to give it all away. This invitation was one of the few that the United States extended to even its Negro citizens, and after 1866, the African Society put out a call to “colonize” southern of California. The Henrys were among the hundreds who came. They weren’t going to get a fair shot in Arkansas, that was for damn sure. The federal government called this homesteading.

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*My Grandmother Asked Me To Tell You She’s Sorry* by Fredrik Backman – humor, third person

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Every seven-year-old deserves a superhero. That’s just how it is.

Anyone who doesn’t agree needs their head examined.

That’s what granny says, at least.

Elsa is seven, going on eight. She knows she isn’t especially good at being seven. She knows she’s different. Her headmaster says she needs to “fall into line” in order to achieve “a better fit with her peers.” Other adults describe her as “very grown-up for her age.” Elsa knows this is just another way of saying “massively annoying for her age,” because they only tend to say this when she corrects them for mispronouncing “déjà vu” or not being able to tell the difference between “me” and “I” at the end of a sentence. Smart-asses usually can’t, hence the “grown-up for her age comment,” generally said with a strained smile at her parents. As if she has a mental impairment, as if Elsa has shown them up by not being totally thick just because she’s seven. And that’s why she doesn’t have any friends except Granny. Because all the other seven-year-olds in her school are as idiotic as seven-year-olds tend to be, but Elsa is different.

She shouldn’t take any notice of what those muppets think, says Granny. Because all the best people are different—look at superheroes. After all, if superpowers were normal, everyone would have them.

Granny is seventy-seven years old, going on seventy-eight. She’s not very good at it either. You can tell she’s old because her face looks like newspaper stuffed into wet shoes, but no one ever accuses granny of being grown-up for her age. “Perky,” people sometimes say to Elsa’s mum, looking either fairly worried or fairly angry as mom sighs and asks how many how much she owes for the damages. Or when Granny’s smoking at the hospital sets the fire alarm off and she starts ranting and raving about how “everything *has to be* so bloody politically correct these days!” when the security guards make her extinguish her cigarette. [...] Or that time those prim men wearing spectacles started ringing all the doorbells and wanting to talk about God and Jesus in heaven, and Granny stood on her balcony with her dressing gown flapping open, shooting at them with her paintball gun, and Britt-Marie couldn’t quite decide if she was most annoyed about the paintball-gun thing or the not-wearing-anything-under-the-dressing-gown thing, but she reported both to the police just to be on the safe side.