



An In-Depth Analysis

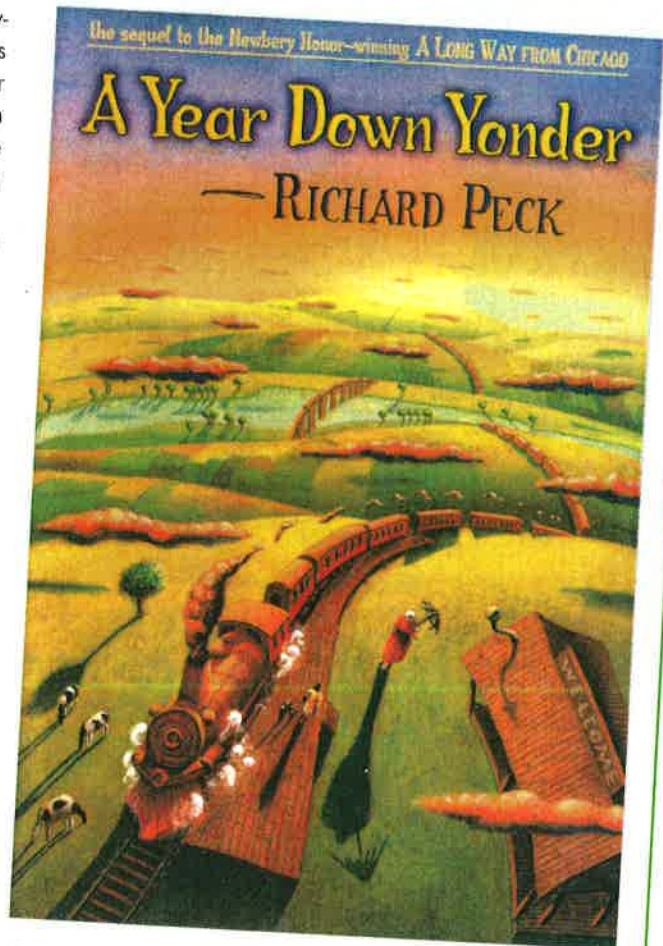
Point of View in One Book

The point of view developed in Richard Peck's 2001 Newbery Medal winner, *A Year Down Yonder*, enables readers to analyze the effectiveness of several of the purposes for establishing a point of view. Readers may also develop an understanding of the techniques the author used to make them care about the characters and what will happen in the story.

First, the author builds on his previous book, *A Long Way From Chicago*, which was a 1999 Newbery Honor book and a National Book Award finalist. In the first book, the author develops the characters of two children who during each summer of the Depression travel from Chicago to a small town in southern Illinois to visit their grandmother. Peck involves readers by making them care about the boy and the girl. Through the details he chooses to describe, we have a strong feeling about the backgrounds, values, and perspectives of the main characters, especially the feisty grandmother.

In *A Year Down Yonder*, Peck focuses on 15-year-old Mary Alice and her grandmother, who spend a year together during the recession of 1937. The book begins as Mary Alice is asked to live with her grandmother after her father loses his job. Let us begin our discussion of point of view with Lauber's (1991) concern that a major purpose of point of view is to make readers care about the characters and how the story will develop. A considerable portion of Peck's novel is told through Mary Alice's point of view. Most readers will immediately sympathize with her and understand her feelings when she thinks: "Oh, didn't I feel sorry for myself when the Wabash Railroad's Blue Bird train steamed into Grandma's town. . . . My trunk thumped out onto the platform from the baggage car ahead. There I stood at the end of the world with all I had left. Bootsie [her cat] and my radio" (p. 4). In the first chapter, Peck develops Mary Alice's point of view about the town as a place where everyone knows everything about you, about going to a school where she knows nobody and where the students do not want to make friends with a new girl they consider a rich city girl, about missing her brother who always stuck up for her, and about her view of her grandmother who has definite opinions of her own and is considered not only feisty but also difficult to get along with.

Tracing how Peck uses Mary Alice's changing point of view about her grandmother is an interesting way to show the importance of point of view. Through Mary Alice's point of view, we understand how she goes from someone who fears her grandmother and does not want to be with her to someone who understands and respects her grand-



Cover from *A Year Down Yonder*, by Richard Peck. Cover art copyright © 2000 by Steve Cieslawski. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers.

mother's actions, beliefs, and values. Early in the novel, Peck describes Grandma's actions toward Halloween tricksters, her interpretation of being able to gather all the nuts on the ground in a neighbor's yard, and her attitude toward borrowing pumpkins from a neighbor's garden and then baking them into pies to donate to a school function. We discover through Mary Alice's point of view that "to Grandma, Halloween wasn't so much trick-or-treat as it was vittles and vengeance. Though she'd have called it justice" (p. 38).

Peck continues to develop a plot that focuses on Mary Alice's growing understanding of and respect for her feisty grandmother's actions, beliefs, and values. By the end of the book, we as readers care about both Mary Alice and

her grandmother and what will happen to them. The closeness of the two characters is revealed when Mary Alice leaves school during a tornado alert because she wants to “come home” and make sure that her grandmother is all right. This closeness is again reinforced when Mary Alice realizes: “Sometimes I thought I was turning into her. I had to watch out not to talk like her. And I was to cook like her for all the years to come” (p. 123). This closeness is again highlighted through Mary Alice’s first-person point of view when she declares, “Grandma, I don’t want to go back to Chicago. I want to stay here with you” (p. 126).

By developing this relationship through Mary Alice’s point of view, Peck helps us understand the changes that al-

low Mary Alice to progress from someone who thought she was at the end of the world with no one to care about her to a character who shows considerable love, respect, and admiration for her grandmother. Peck’s last two pages are situated in the future when, years later, Mary Alice returns to her grandmother’s house to be married.

As students of children’s literature, you may wish to consider how Peck uses point of view to develop characterizations and plot in *A Long Way From Chicago*. Could you predict any of the happenings in *A Year Down Yonder*? Does Peck use any of the same techniques to develop point of view in *A Long Way From Chicago*?

as the two characters try to overcome Kezi’s honorable but reckless decision to offer her own life so that her father can keep his oath and her aunt will not be sacrificed. By using this technique, the author helps readers understand Kezi’s strong character and desire to live.

Avi’s *Nothing but the Truth: A Documentary Novel* stimulates interesting discussions about point of view and fosters responses to literature. The book, a fictional novel written in documentary format, allows readers to interpret each incident, draw their own conclusions about the truthfulness of the documents, and decide which characters change the most. As a consequence, readers gain insights into how emotions can define and distort the truth.

As children read this novel, they can analyze how Avi documents various reactions to and points of view on the same incident through the use of memos, letters, diary pages, discussions, phone and personal conversations, speeches, and telegrams. Avi also develops characters, conflicts, and various emotional responses through these same documents. Consequently, the book can be used to stimulate personal responses among readers.

An author has several options when selecting point of view. A *first-person* point of view speaks through the “I” of one of the characters. An author who wishes to use a first-person narrative must decide which character’s actions and feelings should influence the story. An *objective* point of view lets actions speak for themselves; the author describes only the characters’ actions, and readers must infer the characters’ thoughts and feelings.

An *omniscient* point of view tells the story in the third person (“they,” “he,” or “she”). The author is not restricted to the knowledge, experiences, and feelings of one person; the feelings and thoughts of all characters can be revealed. A *limited omniscient* point of view, however, concentrates on the experiences of one character but has the option to be all-knowing about other characters. A limited omniscient point of view may clarify conflicts and actions that would be less understandable in a first-person narrative.

Although no point of view is preferred for all children’s literature, an author’s choice can affect how much children of certain ages believe and enjoy a story. Contemporary realistic fiction for children age 8 and older often uses a first-person or a limited omniscient point of view that focuses on one child’s experiences. Older children often empathize with one character if they have had similar experiences.

Consistency of point of view encourages readers to believe in a story. Such belief is especially crucial in modern fantasy, where readers are introduced to imaginary worlds, unusual characters, and magical incidents. A writer may describe a setting as if it were being viewed by a character only a few inches tall. To be believable, however, the story cannot stray from the viewpoint of the tiny character: The character’s actions, the responses of others toward the character, and the setting must be consistent.



The Right Book for Each Child

Because of developmental stages, children have different personal and literary needs at different ages. Children in the same age group or at the same stage of development also have diverse interests and reading abilities that you must consider. Understanding why and what children read is necessary in order to help them select materials that stimulate their interests and enjoyment. Studies show that the most powerful

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Go to the Assignments and Activities section for Chapter 3 in the **MyEducationKit** for your course and complete the activity entitled Criteria for Quality Book Selection.