

Using a Minor Character Monologue

I was having trouble with the main character's love interest. Sometimes, in fact, it's the good and attractive people who are hardest to write about in a novel.

I was having trouble with who the narrator's boyfriend really was. I knew how he looked and what he did, but I had always felt I didn't know him very well. He was from a different ethnic group from mine, and I needed a way to connect with him, to get to know him better. I had him write a dream, which was an interesting dream, but it didn't give me much about him, and then I drifted into something I could identify with, which was a difficult first day as a teacher.

This worked much better, but gave me a technical problem. The novel was first-person, so if I wanted to use the material that had come to me in the boyfriend's voice, I had to find a way to work in. I could simply have switched point-of-view to let him have a turn as the point-of-view character, but I find switching narrators to be a lazy way out that often feels "clunky" or amateurish. Instead, I decided to put his monologue into dialogue. In our eagerness to make dialogue seem natural, we sometimes neglect a thing that happens all the time in real life, which is when one person talks at great length about himself or herself. We are always telling one another long stories, right in the middle of otherwise equal exchanges of conversation.

Here's part of that scene from my novel *Trespassers*:

(The Narrator and Aaron are in a restaurant on Manhattan's Upper West Side. It's the late nineteen sixties, and he is telling about his teaching job, which he took in order to avoid being drafted.)

[Aaron said,] "I walked in there the first day, and they were all grinning and sitting on their desks saying, 'Hey Teach,' so I sat on my desk too, and pretty soon they were turning over desks, so I turned over a desk too to show I was on their wavelength- "

"Are you making this up?"

"No, this happened. I turned over a desk too, and we were all sitting on the undersides of the desks using the legs for controls and pretending they were cars. Then one of the boys starts pretending to shoot at the others, and then the principal walked in. This lady, my principal, is about six feet tall and built like a fullback- and she says 'Boys and Girls, we will all turn our seats right side up now and sit down like ladies and gentlemen.' When all the desks were right side up, and all the kids were at their seats, then she started laying into them. 'Boys and Girls,' she said, 'Let us wipe those smiles off our faces- '"

"She sounds awful."

"She's a genius. She said, 'Wipe off those smiles, and let me see no more smiles today, because you have not shown Mr. Labin that we know the meaning of respect.' And then she put a spelling lesson on the board and told them to copy it down word for word, and then she told me not to forget our little meeting at lunch hour. I figured I was going to be fired. But she just handed me a manila folder full of rexograph masters and told me to make enough copies for those kids to be busy every minute of every day until I figured out something better to do with them."

I added some more questions from the narrator in a later draft for “verisimilitude” (one of my favorite fancy words, meaning “for the appearance of reality”). The trick was to make her comments more than just filler like “oh?” or “tell me more.” In the end, the young man’s monologue and the narrator’s reaction to it gave me more understanding of their contrasting kinds of idealism. In the plot, too, the gap between them becomes increasingly significant, too, as the novel goes on.