
Seeing and Understanding: Narrative Technique in Berlie Doherty's *Dear Nobody*

John Murray

Berlie Doherty's young adult novel *Dear Nobody* was first published in 1991 and won the Carnegie Medal in the following year. It has since been made into a radio play, a television screen-play, and a theatre script, and has been translated into sixteen languages. The novel is still to be found in classrooms and school libraries; it deals sensitively and conservatively with the important social issue of teenage pregnancy and offers a gallery of characters whose reactions to it are varied but credible in modern Western societies. Doherty's dedication to the novel and comments about it on her website relate primarily to its personal and moral aspects, and these are probably the central considerations in classroom discussions of the text. A review by Nancy Vasilakis in *The Horn Book Magazine* in 1993, however, makes a brief reference to the structure of the narrative before going on to the usual consideration of theme and character:

The novel's structure is distancing at times, although the traumatic events take firm hold of the reader. Doherty's well-drawn characters, believable in their indecisiveness and self-interest, cope with the consequences of their actions and lurch toward solutions.
(1993, p.727).

More than a decade later, the distancing that Vasilakis seems to dislike might well be considered a virtue, and the complexity and artifice of the narrative would probably elicit much more comment than it did in 1993. Distancing is usually invoked in current discussion of the ethics of the relationship between author and reader in Young Adult fiction, and the application of narrative theory to literature written for children and young adults is also increasingly common in critical writing today.

Distancing discourages young adult readers, whose freedom to respond to literature should ideally approach that of adults, from too readily identifying with the focalizers of a narrative, and encourages 'the constitution of a reading self in interaction with the other constituted in and by the text' (Stephens 1992, p.81) thereby helping to establish a 'horizontal' rather than a 'vertical' power relationship between young adult readers and the author (Cadden 2000, p.146). *Dear Nobody* goes some of the way toward providing a 'horizontal' rather than a 'vertical' power

relationship between the author and young adult reader by means of a narrative that is surprisingly complex.

Dear Nobody shows many of the usual features of the Young Adult novel. Chris Marshall and Helen Garton are intelligent, lower middle-class students in their final year at school in Sheffield. Helen's pregnancy and the reactions to it of Chris's and Helen's families raise matters of sexual morality, illegitimacy, marriage, divorce, abortion, adoption, limitations placed on women — all of them involving questions to which there are no simple answers in a pluralist society, but all of them issues that are common in Young Adult fiction. Doherty employs the usual first-person narrative voice; when the novel opens with an unpaginated prologue the narratee seems to be close to the young adult reader. The narrator's 'burn off across the horizon' sounds like the talk of a young adult male; the reference to going into 'unknown territory' to 'meet ourselves' reinforces that impression, and in conjunction with comment about a journey and the narrator's being 'just a kid' ten months before, encourages the anticipation that the text will deal with the common theme of growing to adulthood. As the main body of the novel develops, however, the first-person narrative divides, some of it recounted by Chris, some of it by Helen. Each of these narratives contains reported narratives from Chris's father, aunt, and mother, and from Helen's grandfather and mother, and each of these has some bearing upon the situation of the protagonists. Such narrative complexity in a comparatively short novel produces predictable effects.

The divided narrative immediately overcomes a problem Stephens noted in 1992 and earlier: that 'the dominant practice amongst children's writers of employing a single focalizer is a continuing barrier to representing the *other* as anything but object' (Stephens 1992, p.82). Discrepancies between each narrator's account of the same event discourage unqualified acceptance of what either has to say. During a visit to Chris's mother, for example, Helen says, 'I wandered round the house because I felt too edgy to settle' (p.104) while Chris comments that 'Helen was the only calm one among us when we first arrived' (p.112). Their reactions to the same letter almost lead to a fight: 'I don't like the way she calls you Christopher, for a start' from Helen, and 'I thought that was brilliant' from Chris

(p.19), lead to 'I wish I hadn't shown it to you now' (p.20). Differences in their views of their relationship as Helen's pregnancy advances emphasize their separate experiences: Helen's decision that while she is ready to accept her child she is 'not ready for Chris' (p.122) cuts across his insistence that they 'should be together all the time now' (p.133), foreshadowing her increasingly urgent concern with her baby and his inability to focus on anything but Helen. Differences in their family backgrounds, in adult experiences expressed to each in reported narratives, and in their own experiences — especially following a break in their communication two-thirds of the way through the novel — encourage the constitution of a more critical 'reading self in interaction with the other[s] constituted in and by the text.' Complexity alone can offer young adult readers more likelihood of forming their own opinions than the single, first-person narrative entrenched in Young Adult fiction when *Dear Nobody* was first published — and can explain Vasilakis's comments about the novel's structure in 1993. Recent narrative theory, however, allows further analysis of the ways in which readers might 'see and understand' its narratives, and subtler explanation of ways in which such reading might form a 'reading self' able to question the assumptions of the text more readily. As Cadden and Schwenke Wyile point out, application of narrative theory stemming from critical discussion begun as long ago as 1984 enables us to 'say what we see and how we understand stories' (Cadden and Schwenke Wyile 2003, p.3) in ways that were unlikely a decade ago.

Chris's narrative is of two kinds. One consists of two brief sections of narrative, set at the same time and framing the main, dual narrative, the second of them revealing the narratee to be Amy, the child whose conception, gestation, and birth are the basis of the plot. Chris's other narrative consists of segments of the main narrative that he recounts from the same standpoint as that of the frame narrative — after the time at which its events take place — and as a character in it. **In Genette's terms**, his is an extradiegetic and autodiegetic narrative. Helen's narrative is also of two kinds. One is a brief letter at the end of the text, set a little later than Chris's frame narrative, with Chris as addressee. The other is her contribution to the main narrative, in her case an epistolary one also addressed to Amy (as 'Dear Nobody'). She recounts the narrative from inside it at the

time of narration, and as a character — hers is intradiegetic and autodiegetic, in Genette's formulation.

There are further differences. Although both narratives are what Schwenke Wyile calls 'engaging' (Schwenke Wyile 2003, p.116), in that their retrospection 'invites [readers] to consider themselves in, or close to, the position of the protagonist' and desires to 'bring readers back to the feelings of the character/focalizer' at the time of the events of the narrative (Schwenke Wyile 2003, p.116), Helen's epistolary narrative is much closer to those events in time, and is 'immediate-engaging'. By contrast, Chris's 'distant-engaging' narrative is recounted from a time almost ten months after that of the beginning of the novel and comments fairly often on its events from the perspective of that time — for example, 'I keep remembering it' (p. 4), and, 'Looking back on that holiday in France' (p.149) — to produce a variety of effects, including foreshadowing and moral commentary. Nikolajeva offers another way of expressing this difference: as that between the experiencing self and the narrating self (Nikolajeva 2002, p.177).

Helen's epistolary narrative is that of an 'experiencing self'; it 'involve[s] readers in the awareness of consciousness as it is constructed' (Nikolajeva 2002, p.178). Her early reactions to the possibility of pregnancy range from 'I'm so frightened' (p.47), to 'Now will you go away?' (p. 71), to 'Dear Nobody. You did not ask for this. I have nothing to give you. Nothing. With all my heart I'm sorry' (p. 83), to 'Little Nobody. I won't let go of you now' (p. 93). A vital feature of Helen's narrative is that its consistent focus on her child as addressee offers readers an insight into the experience of pregnancy and into the intimacy of her relationship with her baby more immediately than other kinds of narrative could. Her fears, hopes, miseries, and joys arise in an unpredictable order, and the events of the narrative and her reflection on them are too close in time for her views to be anything but provisional. Her story nicely demonstrates the truism that no man can know what pregnancy feels like, but also that no woman who has not experienced pregnancy can know either. As Helen expresses it, there is 'something of a conspiracy' among pregnant women, 'as if they [are] members of a secret society' (p. 93). The 'real, sharing, hopeless, pitying sort of look' (p. 168) of a young, possibly unmarried mother

whose baby is screaming on a bus offers a less sanguine view of Helen's situation, but simultaneously leads to an expression of her best friend's inability to share in her experience of pregnancy and her own fellow-feeling with another young mother: 'But Ruthlyn and I were miles apart by then. Miles and miles' (p. 168).

Helen's decision (vital, of course, to the plot) to break her relationship with Chris is founded on her certainty that 'every inch' of her wants her baby, and that she is focused inward 'like a bud with all its perfume and colour locked inside it' (p. 122) to such an extent that she cannot commit herself to anybody else. Even her final letter to Chris is present-oriented, focusing on 'this moment in my life' (p. 200) and on her baby rather than on her own development over time. Yet despite the capacity of the narrative of her 'experiencing self' to offer a fuller insight into her subjectivity than a more distancing narrative, it is 'unlikely to be truly "reliable"'. First, it is based solely on one character's point of view; second, it is expressed so soon after the event that it is both biased and incomplete.' (Schwenke Wyile 1999, p. 197).

Chris's narrative, by contrast, is the work of a 'narrating self' (Nikolajeva 2002, p. 174) whose account of events explicitly sets them in a greater expanse of time, provides commentary and explanation for them based on hindsight, and states outright the ways in which they have found him wanting. Because the narrative is less immediate and more considered, it deters unquestioning identification with Chris. (Among alert readers, this difference might well alter their perception of Helen). Chris's narrative is a 'distant-engaging' one in that it makes 'overt acknowledgement of the time that has passed between the events being narrated and their telling' (Schwenke Wyile 1999, p. 189).

The unpaginated frame narrative begins with an account of Chris's vivid sense of change in himself: in the preceding January he was 'just a kid'; he has grown out of his old clothing; his room (that common locus of teenage identity) 'feels like someone else's,' and he is in a 'massive gap' between his 'old life and [his] future'. Later, he reflects on the significance of past moments: 'the focus of [his] life had shifted' (p. 2) from his father to Helen, whose stance at a moment of goodbye is 'like a pose for a photograph'

(p. 4) that he keeps remembering. Shifting from present to past tense in the opening paragraphs of the frame narrative contributes to the placement of its opening moment against a period of time that has been significant in the formation of Chris's current subjectivity.

Throughout the main body of Chris's narrative the use of commentary directs readers' attention to the long-term effects of events as well as to the events themselves. Sometimes it indicates a significant moment (p. 4), or a change of some significance that later reflection has made clear to him: 'I don't think I would have dared to ask those questions about my mother if it hadn't been for what had happened between Helen and me' (p. 15). At other times it comments on Helen's narrative: 'That was the first of Helen's Dear Nobody letters, and reading it was like opening the door on a nightmare' (p. 37). Commentary also forewarns readers of negative events: 'I wish I hadn't' (p. 136), and indicates the moral choices that Chris will make later in the narrative: 'Looking back on that holiday in France, I can only explain what happened by blaming it on circumstances. I'm not making excuses for myself' (p. 149). It is also used to suggest Chris's capacity to separate sexual activity from interpersonal commitment (p. 164), his inability to recognize that a remark had been intended for him rather than Helen or Amy (p. 171), and his developing ability to make difficult personal choices, such as writing to Bryn to interdict any further communication (p. 190). Although Chris's narrative includes such remarks on its shape and moral significance, details such as his inability to understand that his teacher's remark, 'Poor kid' (p. 171), might apply to him as well as to Helen provide an opening to elicit readers' sympathy but also enable them to see his continuing immaturity. His final comments, addressed to Amy, but by extension to young adult readers, confirm that opinion. Far from claiming growth to maturity, they explicitly state his inability to comprehend the responsibility of fatherhood, his fear of it, and his need to grow up: 'Helen is right. I'm not ready for you, or for her. I'm not yet ready for myself' (p. 199).

Because of Doherty's narrative choices — letters of the experiencing self and narrative of the narrating self — the narrator does not 'disappear' in either case, allowing young adult readers to consider each narrator's accounts

of events, forcing them to make choices, and helping them to suspend judgment about the actions of both Chris and Helen. Chris's immaturity and his episode with Bryn are set against Helen's decision to cease contact with him and her anger at his unfaithfulness. Both narrators come from families whose past experiences have shaped their reactions to the pregnancy that is the central fact of the novel: family break-up in Chris's case, illegitimacy in Helen's. Both young people are under pressure to take advantage of educational opportunities; both have mothers who do not, at first, support them lovingly. Even the stories told by adult characters that impinge on the ethical core of the narrative, such as Mrs Garton's account of her illegitimacy and Jill's account of her abortion, are mediated for readers by the consciousness of one of the narrators.

This is not to say that Doherty provides a completely 'horizontal' rather than 'vertical' power relationship between the author and young adult reader. Her use of imagery, such as that of Helen's modelling a tiny clay figure (p. 56) and of the dead baby bird she encounters on her way to the clinic (p. 88), and other elements in the text, such as Chris's letter to Helen (pp. 84-85) and Jill's story of her own abortion (pp. 74-75), as well as the outcome of the novel and its final words, clearly indicate Doherty's position with regard to termination of Helen's pregnancy. But analysis of the narrative choices Doherty has made in *Dear Nobody* provides a clear account of the ways those choices encourage formation of a 'reading self' that has a consciously critical relationship to the other selves constituted by the text of the novel, and of the consequent openness of that reading self to reflect upon the 'indecisiveness and self-interest' — and the moral and personal dilemmas — of the young couple that Nancy Vasilakis remarked upon more than a decade ago.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

John Murray was Associate Professor in the School of Arts and Sciences in ACU national until 2003. His research interests include the ethics of the relationship between writers and readers of Young Adult fiction.