

RELIABILITY

By Mike Klaassen

Usually, the reader can rely on the narrator of a story to tell the truth, at least the truth as the narrator perceives it. Sometimes an author causes the narrator to misrepresent events or offer his interpretation of the truth. This introduces an element of uncertainty, which could force the reader to struggle to separate “fact” from “fiction.” Such narration might feature exaggeration, bragging, mental defense mechanisms, mental illness, immature or otherwise limited points of view, or deliberate deception. Unreliable narration is usually associated with first-person narration.¹ A narrator may be either reliable or unreliable.

Stories told in the third person usually have a reliable narrator because an unreliable third-person narrator would seriously annoy the reader. Although a third-person *narrator* is generally expected to be reliable, a *viewpoint character* may be as unreliable as the author chooses to make him. Unreliability can manifest itself in the form of a point-of-view character who is in a state of denial regarding a personal weakness that prevents him from achieving his goals. Overcoming such a personal flaw could be the basis of an internal plot. For example, in my young-adult novel *Cracks*, the main character views his foster parents as being so unreasonable and overbearing that he runs away. As the story progresses, he recognizes their behavior as being acts of love.

Most stories are told with a reliable narrator, but unreliable narration provides the author with additional opportunities to challenge and entertain the reader.

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ⁱ Wikipedia, "Unreliable Narrator," May 4, 2017.