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# CATCH AND RELEASE:

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STRATEGIES  
OF OVERT  
AND COVERT  
NARRATORIAL  
CONTROL

*by Sonya Larson*

## INTRODUCTION

After several years and many workshops, I noticed a pattern to the criticism I was getting on my stories. While readers called my fiction authoritative and confident, they complained that it could also feel “preordained,” as if pulled along a roller coaster that was somehow over-willed. Worse, they said, my fiction seemed to inhibit and even suffocate its own possibilities. In the words of one observer, “It needs to let go. It feels too controlled.”

I was puzzled. Just what was this business of control? Why was it sometimes a good thing and sometimes a bad thing? Why did readers struggle to specify what they meant, especially in terms of craft? And what could I make of this quandary when my writing process felt anything *but controlled*—just the messy, fumbling endeavor that I’ve always known?

I started noticing allusions to control in talk of fiction everywhere. As a source of praise (“Mr. Chabon... writes with astonishing poise and control”)<sup>1</sup> and punishment (“it’s an icy and overcontrolled exercise in coterie aestheticism”).<sup>2</sup> I heard of stories with pleurably little control (“Which came first, you have to wonder, the weird thoughts or the heedless, spilling words?”)<sup>3</sup> and of stories going apeshit (“I love *Moby Dick*,” said my friend, “but the whaling descriptions run off the rails”). I heard of stories getting lost (“Hilton meanders a bit, repeats himself, gets carried away and has to call himself to order”)<sup>4</sup> and getting cornered (“it gives predictable rise to... the novel’s forceful denouement”).<sup>5</sup> And I heard of stories made timid, as E.L. Doctorow said of his own novel, *Big As Life*: “Norman Mailer once told me I didn’t go far enough in that book, and I think he’s right. I overcontrolled it.”<sup>6</sup> Like an underground stream, references to control trickle through the very language we use to describe fiction. But I found no

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essay or scholar who had parsed just what this means.

So, I set out to attempt exactly that. Two works in particular—*Jesus’ Son* by Denis Johnson, and *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki—offer strategies for establishing and modulating their appearances of control.

### NARRATORIAL CONTROL

First off, a simple question: What do we talk about when we talk about control?

We already know that readers implicitly describe control as a feature of fiction all the time. To explain what we see, we might imagine the author masterminding, improvising, forcing, bumbling, or calmly unspooling her story with the cunning ease of Zorro. In other words, we attribute the control we sense on the page to the author’s efforts to control, in both proportion and style. So, when we see a less controlled story, we might surmise that the author rushed, slapped it together, or was writing in a fit of passion. Of a highly controlled story, we imagine that the author labored all night, placed each word with a pair of tweezers, or shot forth her intentions like arrows to a target.

But as writers we know that this is not necessarily the case. Control that readers sense in a given scene or passage does not necessarily equate to the control we experienced while writing it. An uncontrolled effect may in fact be highly controlled, and vice versa. Furthermore, most writers

at work feel both in control and not, the entire process an exquisite minefield of certainties and mysteries, failed attempts and unexpected gems, hard-fought moments and unintended consequences.

More generally, we may imagine different stances of power toward and within our work, assigning relative degrees of agency to a story’s characters, narrator, and even ourselves as the author. Writers have long debated what these dynamics could (or should) look like. At one extreme, we have ancient Greeks claiming to be mere vessels for the will of muses; at the other we have Nabokov, who famously called his characters his “galley slaves.”<sup>7</sup>

Today, most authors of literary fiction prefer to imagine themselves at least partially led along by their characters’ unexpected complexities, which neither the narrator nor even the author may fully understand. “To make something fully known,” writes Robert Boswell in *The Half-Known World*, “is to make it unreal.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, this approach prioritizes character as the story’s primary figure of control. If the author has particular aesthetic, philosophical, or political goals, they are secondary to the will of character, giving rise to the term “character-driven fiction.” We are wary of stories that appear to reverse this order, using characters to serve the will of the author or narrative. Charles Baxter describes such authorial overcontrol in his essay, “On Defamiliarization”:

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Narratorial control behaves as a sense of consciousness directing the piece's progression.

We perceive it as the story's guiding hand or guiding wisdom, and its fluctuations a source of assuredness, slyness, boldness, or wild abandon.

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But the story had begun to read itself too early, and before long it was always and only about one thing, with the result that all the details fit in perfectly. All the arrows pointed in the same direction... Its meaning is overdetermined and the characters overparented. When writers overparent their characters, they understand them too quickly. Such characters aren't contradictory or misfitted. The writer has decided what her story is about too early and has concentrated too fixedly on that one truth.<sup>9</sup>

Many writers—myself included—agree with this perspective, while others embrace alternative models of control as a political claim about the meaning and purpose of art. Regardless, these are matters of *authorial control*, or the author's experience of control in her process, approach, and means of making choices. Authorial control varies for every author, and likely varies for every piece by that author, and across different stages of composition and revision.

But readers of finished fiction cannot infer what journey of authorial control brought the final product into being. We can guess and form theories, but to know for sure we'd need the author herself to tell us. So, it's vital to separate authorial control from what I'll call *narratorial control*: control as a quality in the story's narration, regardless of how it arrived there. Though we often merge the two concepts, they do not necessarily align. For this essay, I'll look only at narratorial control.

Narratorial control behaves as a sense of consciousness directing the piece's progression. We perceive it as the story's guiding hand or guiding wisdom, and its fluctuations a source of assuredness, slyness, boldness, or wild abandon. Consider, for example, the following first lines of Amy Hempel's "Rapture of the Deep" against Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart*. Both openings use psychic distance and situated time to establish characters and setting. But they evoke different styles of control of the narration itself.

Here's Hempel: "I was the one they sent when it was Halloween night and Miss Locey couldn't move. I am not a nurse. I am barely a typist. But she didn't need me to type, or to take the shorthand I don't have, either."<sup>10</sup> Hempel's clipped tone, straightforward syntax, and no-frills diction give these lines an aura of cool containment.

Contrast this with Lispector: "Her father's typewriter went clack-clack... clack-clack-clack...The clock awoke in dustless tin-dlen. The silence dragged out zzzzzz. What did the wardrobe say? clothes-clothes-clothes. No, no."<sup>11</sup> A disorienting point of view, rhythm, and unconventional diction and syntax make this narration seem wilder and more unhinged. Next to Hempel, it appears comparatively less controlled—or, perhaps, differently controlled. Each author uses craft to suggest a manner of control in her work, though between them that control differs greatly in style and degree.

I don't think we should imagine narratorial control as a discrete tool,

deployable in the way we might deploy figurative language or free indirect style. Rather, it is a literary effect—like atmosphere or suspense—that emerges from several craft elements acting in concert with one another. If we can create atmosphere by modulating sensory detail, description, diction, and tone, we can also create *effects* of narratorial control by modulating multiple craft elements at once. It is a set of interactions; it is not the dancers but the dance.

Presumably there are infinite strategies by which authors can achieve desired styles and degrees of narratorial control, but I found two used by Johnson and Ozeki especially illuminating: the use of prose texture, and the use of structural direction.

#### CONTROL THROUGH PROSE TEXTURE

I've long admired Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* for many reasons, chief of which is its interesting (and elusive) dynamic of control. It's one of those books that makes me ask not *How?* but *How come?* How come this works? The book defies so many standards of craft that I often feel it "shouldn't" work. So why do I trust my reading experience—and so deeply—when it gives me so many reasons not to?

The characters of *Jesus' Son* are wholly out of control. Homeless, addicted to drugs, and mired in rollercoaster relationships, they stumble through life so cognitively compromised that the narrator can barely keep track of what's happening. They don't know how they arrived in this house or that hospital; they don't know the guy who's sleeping in their car. They can't remember the names of their very best friends. The book's narration mirrors this anarchy, jettisoning all the usual cohesive elements of fiction—clear causality, chronology, motivation, etc. But throughout it all, effects of narratorial control permeate the book, giving cohesion to what could easily be a mess.

Fuckhead, the narrator and protagonist of "Work," is a drug-addled young man in the Pacific Northwest who joins his friend, Wayne, to steal copper wire from the walls of abandoned houses. The story opens as follows:

I'd been staying at the Holiday Inn with my girlfriend, honestly the most beautiful woman I'd ever known, for three days under a phony name, shooting heroin. We made love in the bed, ate steaks at the restaurant, shot up in the john, puked, cried, accused one another, begged of one another, forgave, promised, and carried one another to heaven.<sup>12</sup>

Fuckhead goes through chaos at the Holiday Inn, but as a narrator he depicts the scene with a prose style of strong control. Quick and repetitive actions, summarized in a list, harness the bedlam into an ordered form. Though technically in past tense, the listed verbs—particularly the abstract "forgave" and "promised"<sup>13</sup>—suggest

habituation, and the weary sense that Fuckhead has been in this situation many times before. He knows how this pattern goes, and he knows how to narrate it. He narrates with seasoned control amidst an out-of-control situation.

The tight texture of Johnson's prose underscores this effect. Parallel syntax gives each clause a repeated shape and sound, connecting verbs and prepositional phrases like drumbeats: "We made love *in the bed*, ate steaks *at the restaurant*, shot up *in the john*."<sup>14</sup> This rhythm then accelerates with abrupt, single-word clauses—"puked," "cried," "forgave," "promised."<sup>15</sup> The cacophony of "steaks," "puked," "shot up," "john," "accused," and "begged"<sup>16</sup> make hard, physical sounds that emphasize their own presence. The direct rhymes of "accused *one another*, begged of *one another*," and "carried *one another* to heaven"<sup>17</sup> finish this passage with such mirrored exactitude that they



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draw attention to their own symmetry. This prose style commands, and is uninterested in subtleties.

Thus, the story sets up a pattern of compressed action and pronounced prose texture. From them we get strong narratorial control, despite an atmosphere of total disorder. The passage continues:

But there was a fight. I stood outside the motel hitchhiking,

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...the presence of narratorial control—whether overt or covert, prominent or discreet—helps to form the promise that a story will travel forward in an interesting way, and to someplace worthwhile.

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dressed up in a hurry, shirtless under my jacket, with the wind crying through my earring. A bus came. I climbed aboard and sat on the plastic seat while the things of our city turned in the windows like the images in a slot machine.

Once, as we stood arguing at a streetcorner, I punched her in the stomach. She doubled over and broke down crying. A car full of young college men stopped beside us.

"She's feeling sick," I told them.

"Bullshit," one of them said.

"You elbowed her right in the gut."

"He did, he did, he did," she said, weeping.

I don't remember what I said to them. I remember loneliness crushing first my lungs, then my heart, then my balls. They put her in the car with them and drove away.

But she came back.

This morning, after the fight, after sitting on the bus for several blocks with a thoughtless, red mind, I jumped down and walked into the Vine.<sup>18</sup>

Here, the narration opens up, away from compressed lists of action and into a scene. But the prose continues its pattern of short, declarative clauses and straightforward, subject-verb constructions: "I stood," "A bus came," "I climbed," "Once, as we stood," "She doubled over," "A car full," "She's feeling," "You elbowed," "He did," "I don't remember," "I remember," "They put," and "But she came."<sup>19</sup> Altogether they create a sense of driving certitude. Only one phrase depicts uncertainty, arriving at the emotional height of the passage: "I don't remember what I said to them."<sup>20</sup> But even

Fuckhead's subsequent emotion is expressed with the syntax of ordering and indexing: "I remember loneliness crushing *first* my lungs, *then* my heart, *then* my balls."<sup>21</sup>

#### CONTROL THROUGH STRUCTURAL DIRECTION

Ruth Ozeki's novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, is a very high custody book, to borrow Robert Boswell's term,<sup>22</sup> and I found the narration by turns assertive and bossy, as if confidently leading characters down paths that they didn't necessarily choose themselves. My wariness, however, wasn't just about the book. I had a hunch that this concern was exactly what readers had expressed about my own work—a joint feeling of enjoying the ride and straining under the seatbelt.

The novel concerns sixteen-year-old Nao Yasutani, a Japanese girl whose diary washes ashore on a remote island in the Pacific Northwest. A writer named Ruth finds the diary and begins to read it. Ruth becomes increasingly hungry to uncover the mystery of Nao's fate, which might stem from the recent 2011 tsunami or—from the diary's insinuations—may have ended in Nao's suicide, as her own father attempted many times.

While its prose is less clearly patterned than the opening of "Work," the book establishes strong control from its symmetrically alternating structure, as well as its almost singular focus on Nao's diary and all that it contains and suggests. At regular

intervals the book toggles between Nao's first-person narration via her diary, and Ruth's third-person narration of her life and comprehension of the diary. The "point of telling" also alternates, implying that Nao's narrative was constructed in the past, relative to Ruth's reading of that narrative. Such firm structure and clear focus give the book a sense of directional certainty, especially as Ruth seeks answers to her questions with the help of her husband and friends.

While the novel begins in the genre of realist fiction, it's also interested in the implications of a book's existence, and in the relationship between a writer writing and a reader reading. Ruth interacts with Nao's diary both as a reading experience and as an object that alters the progression of her daily life. The novel directs that same inquiry to us as Ozeki's readers, in its opening lines that double as Nao's diary: "As for me, right now I am ... listening to a sad chanson that is playing somewhere in your past, which is also my present, writing this and wondering about you, somewhere in my future. And if you're reading this, then maybe by now you're wondering about me, too."<sup>23</sup>

In authoring her diary, Nao's direct address of "you" includes both the novel's reader and the "you" of Ruth, as she becomes a character reading said diary. That the character of Ruth shares a name with the author Ruth Ozeki (and is also a writer) plays further with these ideas. Footnotes throughout Nao's diary, presumably written by Ruth the character in her attempt to clarify Japanese terms and concepts, lend an intratextual reading to the novel, positioning us as the *second* reader of Nao's diary—as if we are reading both the original diary and Ruth's annotated copy. The footnotes themselves emphasize structural control, as they track Ruth's attempts to make sense of Nao's text.

The novel's structure is so vital that it shapes the book's use of time, and

even its characters' relationships to one another. It implicitly establishes four periods of narrative time: the period of Nao's backstory, the period when she's recording that story in her diary, the period when Ruth reads the diary, and the period when we as readers are reading Ozeki's book. Relationships are similarly nested: Nao authors her diary, Ruth the character authors the diary's footnotes, and finally Ruth Ozeki authors the book we as readers hold in our hands. These nested eggs form yet another structural pattern, buttressing the novel's strongest source of narratorial control.

#### OVERT VS. COVERT CONTROL

While both Johnson and Ozeki establish firm narratorial control, the effect is not constant. Rather, it fluctuates—at times seemingly tightly controlled and at other times more meandering or wild.

For example, Johnson doesn't use prominent prose texture throughout *Jesus' Son*. In fact, the book's first story, "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," begins with such a different style that it hardly seems written by the same author:

A salesman who shared his liquor and steered while sleeping...A Cherokee filled with bourbon...A VW no more than a bubble of hashish fumes, captained by a college student...

And a family from Marshalltown who headonned and killed forever a man driving west out of Bethany, Missouri...<sup>24</sup>

The language here is comparatively loose. Ellipses hazily connect incomplete clauses. Sonically, the fragments surface no clear or repeating rhythm. We don't know how these images relate to one another, or even where we are in space or time. We don't even know who is observing them. Unlike "Work," this story's narration mirrors, rather than contains, Fuckhead's confusion.

So, would we say that this opening exhibits "less" narratorial control than that of "Work"? I say no. Instead, I think we're noticing a difference of style: that of overt versus covert control.

**Overt control** draws attention to itself. We can easily discern its patterns; it makes its mechanisms clear. The prose style that begins "Work" does exactly this, drawing attention to its symmetry, distinct rhythm, physical sounds, and linear logic. Overt control offers a sense of assuredness and confidence, and even the reminder that we're reading an artificial con-

struction—a fact that can be marveling to behold. Because of this, overt control may remind us of an authorial presence creating the story. We more easily (though perhaps mistakenly) attribute overt control to efforts of authorial control.

**Covert control**, by contrast, obscures its machinery. It is harder to notice and that is by design. It adheres more loosely—if at all—to discernible patterns of language, structure, or logic, and this conceals the source of the story's underlying cohesion. By hiding the author's hand, covert control can create an



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If we can create atmosphere by modulating sensory detail, description, diction, and tone, we can also create effects of narratorial control by modulating multiple craft elements at once. It is a set of interactions; it is not the dancers but the dance.

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illusion that the story and its characters are operating of their own accord, an effect that Raymond Carver sought in his own work. "I was interested in having stories that worked invisibly," he once said. "They would work without the author obtruding ... I wanted things to operate on their own, so to speak."<sup>25</sup> While less perceptible than overt control, covert effects are no less valid or powerful.

Covert control can make way for a story's surprise, vulnerability, and sense of freedom. It sustains the factors that keep readers guessing, and can offer a sense of elusiveness and expansion. "Car Crashing While Hitchhiking" begins covertly and continues this style with its ongoing language of uncertainty. "I was standing out here in the night, with the baby, for some reason, in my arms,"<sup>26</sup> says Fuckhead after a car accident, adding, "It must have still been raining, but I remember nothing about the weather."<sup>27</sup> Time and again he tries to reorient his narration in time: "But before any of this, that afternoon,"<sup>28</sup> he says, "And later, as I've said . . ."<sup>29</sup> While the story calibrates its elements precisely, Fuckhead's confused language makes his narration seem anything but.

#### RUPTURING CONTROL: JOHNSON

Both Johnson and Ozeki establish overt narratorial control, modulating it in smaller ways as their stories go along. But Johnson's "Work" reaches its climax, I noticed that it does something far more dramatic: its overt con-

trol appears to loosen, as if suddenly releasing its grip.

Midway through the story, Johnson's pattern of prominent texture starts to wobble. Cacophonous language depicts Fuckhead and Wayne breaking into houses, using a crowbar to "pry points in the seams of the wall and [tear] away the Sheetrock."<sup>30</sup> Declarative phrasing explains how they "exposed some of the wiring in its white plastic jacket," then "ripped it free of its connection, pulled it out, and bunched it up."<sup>31</sup> But then the men glance out the window, and see a strange image on the river outside:

This boat was pulling behind itself a tremendous triangle kite on a rope. From the kite, up in the air a hundred feet or so, a woman was suspended, belted in somehow, I would have guessed. She had long red hair. She was delicate and white, and naked except for her beautiful hair. I don't know what she was thinking as she floated past these ruins.<sup>32</sup>

New, looser language emerges in this moment. As they watch the woman—who turns out to be Wayne's ex-wife—the sentences ease their thumping rhythms and hard sounds. The cacophony of "pry points," "Sheetrock," "white plastic jacket," "ripped it free," "pulled it out," and "bunched it up"<sup>33</sup> shifts to the elongated sounds of "pulling," "tremendous," "suspended," "delicate," "beautiful," and "floated."<sup>34</sup> Fuckhead expresses new uncertainty in his diction, describing "a hundred feet or so," "belted in some-

how," "I would have guessed," and "I don't know what she was thinking."<sup>35</sup> These shifts give the passage a more dreamlike and ephemeral register, all prompted by the sight of a woman whom Wayne once loved and lost.

These slight but important shifts in prose texture foreshadow the story's pivotal moment. After a narrowly avoided bar fight, Fuckhead suddenly recalls a memory of his own ex-wife:

And then came one of those moments. I remember living through one when I was eighteen and spending the afternoon in bed with my first wife, before we were married. Our naked bodies started glowing, and the air turned such a strange color I thought my life must be leaving me, and with every young fiber and cell I wanted to hold on to it for another breath. A clattering sound was tearing up my head as I staggered upright and opened the door on a vision I will never see again: Where are my women now, with their sweet wet words and ways, and the miraculous balls of hail popping in a green translucence in the yards?

We put on our clothes, she and I, and walked out into a town flooded ankle-deep with white, buoyant stones. Birth should have been like that.

That moment in the bar, after the fight was narrowly averted, was like the green silence after the hailstorm.<sup>36</sup>

Here, language breaks from its tight patterns to express a moment of overwhelming emotion. Clauses elongate, and verbs and adjectives take on the swaying sound of gerunds: "living," "spending," "glowing," "leaving," "clattering," "tearing," and "popping."<sup>37</sup> Imagery becomes even more uncertain, describing the air's color only as "strange."<sup>38</sup> Tense shifts from past to future to present ("I staggered upright and opened the door on a vision I will never see again: Where are my women now ...?")<sup>39</sup> as if Fuckhead is struggling to orient himself in time even as he utters the sentence. The

rupture culminates with a startling question that intrudes on the paragraph's final sentence with an interrupting colon: "a vision I will never see again: *Where are my women now, with their sweet wet words and ways ... ?*"<sup>40</sup>

These perturbations deliver something remarkable: not the distraction of error, but the transcendence of extremity. The inconsistent tenses and nonsequitur question depict a moment so important that it appears to outpace its own narration. Fuckhead is losing control, in both his experience and his telling. His "errors" of grammar are like the threadbare edges that accompany the story's growth, as it shifts from gripping control to something more unmoored.

Nonsequiturs also disrupt the story's structural direction, throwing off-balance what was previously a straightforward scene. After the rupture moment, the story continues as such:

Somebody was buying a round of drinks. The cards were scattered on the table, face up, face down, and they seemed to foretell that whatever we did to one another would be washed away by liquor or explained away by sad songs.

Wayne was a part of all that.

The Vine was like a railroad club car that had somehow run itself off the tracks into a swamp of time where it awaited the blows of the wrecking ball. And the blows were really coming. Because of Urban Renewal, they were tearing up and throwing away the whole downtown.<sup>41</sup>

Here, nonsequitur sentences shift our attention from idea to idea without warning. We travel abruptly from Fuckhead's memory to the cards on the table, to a mention of Wayne, to comments on Urban Renewal. The conceptual gaps between these ideas invite questions: what exactly is the "all that"<sup>42</sup> that Wayne was a part of?

Why does Fuckhead think to say that, and at this moment in his storytelling? Though we're still in the same bar scene, the non-sequiturs disrupt the story's direction into something less patterned and predictable, like switchbacks up a mountain. We're still traveling forward, but the eventual destination is no longer clear.

From this point forward, the story's narratorial control is fundamentally altered. The pace slows dramatically to linger in the Vine, as Fuckhead and Wayne sip drinks after their long day's work. The language forgoes its staccato and declarative style, giving way to a series of emotive images that seem to stun the narrator, one by one: "And here we were, this afternoon, with nearly thirty dollars each, and our favorite, our very favorite person tending bar... We had money. We were grimy and tired. Usually we felt guilty and frightened, because

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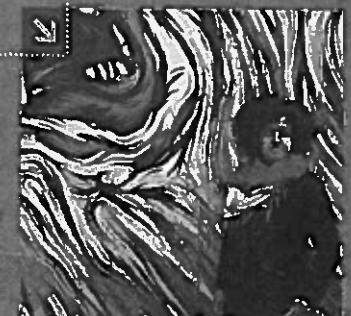
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...when we speak of narratorial control, we speak—on some level—of a story's willingness to establish and operate by its own set of rules.

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there was something wrong with us, and we didn't know what it was; but today we had the feeling of men who had worked."<sup>43</sup>

This passage doesn't depict dramatic events like shooting heroin or punching people. Instead Fuckhead is struck by the very mundanity of his situation, and by the simple, sane gesture of drinking after work. His taste of normalcy is poignant precisely because he can never seem to find it. The story that began with chaos ends with momentary respite, a tiny break from Fuckhead's lifelong fear that "there was something wrong with us, and we didn't know what it was."<sup>44</sup>

What forms this arch is not action and consequence, nor a character experiencing personal change. Instead, Fuckhead's narration itself appears to shake loose from its overt control, forging an unexpected shape and great emotional power. With this rupture Johnson casts off the overt texture of his prose, as if that confident style cannot contain the staggering emotions that Fuckhead struggles to express.

This seems difficult to pull off. Suddenly ditching overt control seems like a recipe for making a story appear to "lose its way" or "run off the rails." I racked my brain over how Johnson made this transition feel natural and not random, until I noticed that his connotation of language cleverly prepares us for this trajectory all along.

Since the beginning, metaphors embed this story with the connotation of mothering. The wind is "crying" as Fuckhead's girlfriend is "crying" and "weeping"<sup>45</sup> in the opening scene. Wayne "cradles" a sack of tools,<sup>46</sup> a river is "mothered" by "benevolent" clouds,<sup>47</sup> and the various women of the story are in turns "revered,"<sup>48</sup>

"sweet,"<sup>49</sup> and "like an angel."<sup>50</sup> As the story progresses, these connotations of women become increasingly literal: as Fuckhead's thinks of his girlfriend, sees Wayne's ex-wife, remembers his own ex-wife, and encounters his favorite bartender. These figures of speech express what Fuckhead himself cannot—his desperate desire for the comfort of women he's lost. Such language culminates when Fuckhead asks "Where are my women now?"<sup>51</sup> at the story's pivotal moment, making literal the question that has haunted the story from the beginning.

This question continues to resonate to the very end, where time once again shifts rapidly in a single paragraph:

The Vine had no jukebox, but a real stereo continually playing tunes of alcoholic self-pity and sentimental divorce. "Nurse," I sobbed. She poured doubles like an angel, right up to the lip of a cocktail glass, no measuring. "You have a lovely pitching arm." You had to go down to them like a hummingbird over a blossom. I saw her much later, not too many years ago, and when I smiled she seemed to believe I was making advances. But it was only that I remembered. I'll never forget you. Your husband will beat you with an extension cord and the bus will pull away leaving you standing there in tears, but you were my mother.<sup>52</sup>

Once again, the tense here shifts rapidly: from habitual, to past, to habitual, to past, to habitual, to remembering from a future position, to future, to future conditional, and finally back to past. This circuitous use of time acts like a camera lens twisting in and out of focus, trying to locate the exact memory it wants to preserve. It heightens the story's register, landing finally on the story's closing metaphor of the unnamed bartender as

Fuckhead's "mother."<sup>53</sup> This comparison is shocking in its loneliness, and yet also wholly earned, because Johnson's language has been leading us there all along. While language forms and ruptures the story's narratorial control, it also prepares for and eases this transition.

#### CONCLUSION

Before writing this essay, my attempts to discuss the appearance of control in fiction got very murky very quickly. My fellow writers and I lacked a framework or set of terms to think more clearly about the concept. Studying the work of Johnson and Ozeki surfaced for me a more meaningful way to regard the control that I perceive on the page. I'd sum it up like this:

Narratorial control is a literary effect, separate from authorial control, which behaves as a sense of consciousness directing the story's progression. It can range greatly in style and degree, and can operate overtly or covertly depending on the prominence and consistency of the story's aesthetic and narrative patterns.

Narratorial control can be rendered through patterns of prose texture, structural direction, or other elements of craft. It's possible to modulate its effects by mixing overt and covert control across different arenas, or by suddenly changing the style of control.

As I stand back and look at this description, I notice something interesting. It seems that when we speak of narratorial control, we speak—on

some level—of a story's willingness to establish and operate by its own set of rules. By this I mean that whatever its unique qualities of character, setting, conflict, or voice, the accrual of its patterns helps to form a sense of control. Another way of saying this is that such a story has integrity. It derives control from fully "owning" its terms, no matter what they are.

Narratorial control is very different from plot or momentum, but as a reader I feel it impacts me in a similar fashion. That's because the presence of narratorial control—whether overt or covert, prominent or discreet—helps to form the promise that a story will travel forward in an interesting way, and to someplace worthwhile. Plot or momentum as we know it don't necessarily have to be part of this promise. This is especially true when a narrator like *Fuckhead* is too confused to carry the threads of his story, or when a book like *A Tale for the Time Being* throws us footnotes and appendices and then changes what those mean too. Consciously or unconsciously, we look as readers for effects of narratorial control, in order to derive trust from them. We seek cues that a story *knows what it's doing*—no matter what, in fact, it's doing.

This business of readerly trust is why narratorial control is so important. John Gardner famously described the experience of reading great fiction as a "vivid and continuous dream," absent of "anything that would distract an intelligent, sensitive reader"<sup>54</sup> from this dream. But I'd argue that feeling momentarily pulled out or made aware of a story's mechanics doesn't necessarily dampen our reading interest. It may even intrigue us further, so long as we continue to feel—some-where and somehow—the cohesive effects of narratorial control. AWP

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