**Alison Kent’s Take on Head Hopping**

People who often follow our [message boards](http://www.likesbooks.com/boards.html#1) will know that point of view, especially head-hopping, can be a hot topic at *AAR*.

First, let’s define a couple of terms. Point of view, or POV, refers to whose senses a scene is filtered through. Head-hopping means switching from the POV of one character to another in the middle of a scene. Multiple POV means that the book explores the point of view of more than one character. A book can have multiple POVs without having head-hopping. Omniscient POV means that the scenes aren’t told through the viewpoint of a single character. In books with omniscient POV, scenes are described as though through the eyes of a camera - this POV is rare in most popular fiction today.

I can be a stickler for point of view. I will often complain about head-hopping in my reviews, or praise a book for its masterful point of view. To me, switching viewpoints is like changing lanes. You have to do it now and then. Sometimes, you have to change lanes to avoid accidents. But if you change lanes all the time, without any logic, you can wind up in a terrible pileup.

Harlequin Temptations author Alison Kent also feels strongly about point of view; we'd like to share this article she wrote about it with you. I'll be interjecting my own POV throughout the piece - in order to prevent confusion, when you see the color **purple**, that's me.

***-- Anne Marble***

“Well then who's on first?” *“Yes!”* “I mean the fellow's name!” *“Who!”* “The guy on first!” *“Who!”* “The first baseman!”*“Who!”* “The guy playing first!” *“Who is on first!”* “Now whaddya askin' me for?” *“I'm telling you Who is on first.”*“Well, I'm asking ***you*** who's on first!” *“That's the man's name.”* “That's who's name?” *“Yes.”* “Well go ahead and tell me.” *“Who.”*“The guy on first.” *“Who!”* “The first baseman.” *“Who is on first!”*

Confused, yet? As well you should be! Reading this classic comedy routine isn’t half as much fun or anywhere close to being as clear as listening to Bud and Lou put voices and expressions to the words. Hearing the dialogue, the tones of voice, the inflections, etc. allows the audience to follow the conversational flow. A live performance does not require dialogue tags or other point of view designators to keep listeners straight as to Who's On First.

Laurie originally asked me to write an article on point of view after I posted to the *ATBF* message board during a recent [head-hopping debate](http://www.likesbooks.com/95.html#1). Reading the various comments reminded me of a discussion I was involved in several years ago. It was then that I first began to understand the power an author wields when she chooses her narrative viewpoint. Until that point, I was under several misconceptions . . . the first being that all readers read the same way.

Imagine my surprise to find that other readers do not immerse themselves in a story, in a viewpoint character's emotional landscape the same way I do. Does this make my reading experience more intense? Or discount the emotional response of others? Of course not! All this means is that the way my synapses fire preclude me from enjoying certain authors' writing styles as much as I enjoy others. And I know I'm not the only reader so genetically inclined.

I do not care how lyrical an author's prose, how taut the suspense, how intense the dramatic moments, how hot the sex, if she changes viewpoint within a scene she loses me. If she head-hops, she loses me. If she throws in a line of omniscient narrative, she loses me. All because of the way ***I*** read. Oh, sure. I can go back, pick up where I lost my train of thought, and rejoin the story already in progress. I can even thoroughly enjoy the story. But I will never regain the same relationship I had with these characters. From that moment on, I will notice and subconsciously bookmark every viewpoint change. Nothing the author does will prevent this from happening, no matter her skill, her sales records, her reviews. This is the nature of ***my*** thought process. Please allow me that. Please understand that. Please respect that.

**Some love omniscient POV, some hate it. Readers who grew up reading 19th-century novels often grow to prefer it. If you prefer third-person viewpoint, however, omniscient can be hard to get used to. Going from one character’s thoughts to the next makes some readers dizzy. Also, some writers who use omniscient POV add what is called “authorial intrusion.” For example, “Had Harold but known what he would find in the trunk, he might never have unlocked it.”**

**One of the best current examples of a writer who was a master of omniscient POV is the late Patrick O’Brian, author of naval adventure novels. His novels are beloved by critics and readers alike. But if you’re not used to that sort of viewpoint style, his works can be a challenge to read. Another example of omniscient viewpoint can be found in the Harry Potter books - this POV seems to be more acceptable in children’s books. In romance, a recent example of an author who uses omniscient is Eloisa James. I enjoyed the way she used omniscient viewpoint in**[**Potent Pleasures**](http://www.likesbooks.com/marble50.html)**. But examining reader comments about Potent Pleasures will show you that some readers don’t appreciate the omniscient viewpoint at all.**

**Allison Kent now continues with some thoughts about omniscient POV, and how writers who use omniscient can make the viewpoint switches too confusing.**

I don't mind an omniscient narrator, but once a story moves into the head of a character, I don't want to be pulled out. Other readers enjoy the story from a distance, observing the goings-on much as in a movie, shifting between various characters within the same scene. Visually, this works for me. On paper, it does not. I don't want to know that she finds the raspberry sorbet perfectly sweet while he thinks it too tart. This is a sensory contradiction and causes me to switch reading gears. Moments into the visceral sensation of cold raspberry on my tongue, my mouth purses like I'm sucking on a lemon. I don't become a character when I read, but I do share his or her experiences. And I do so through the author's use of point of view.

Which brings me to another issue. Again, this is a reading / writing preference I have, one I don't expect every reader / author to share. But it is one I feel is not often explored as a possible weak link between reader and character. The use of emotional tags. If as a reader / author, I am in a particular character's point of view, I don't need to be reminded of it through emotional tags such as she felt, she thought, she wondered. Consider the differences between these sentences:

*She felt a shiver of apprehension whisper over her skin.*

*A shiver of apprehension whispered over her skin .*

*Apprehension shivered over her skin with a whisper.*

In the first example, the action taking place is "feeling". In the second, "whispering". The third, "shivering". Which action is the most compelling? Which evokes the strongest reader response? This is a classic comparison of telling with an inactive verb (felt) versus showing with an active verb (whisper / shiver). Showing an action, an emotional or physical response, provides more immediacy, more connection with the viewpoint character.

**Now we come to a tricky part. Some readers hate bouncing back and forth from the hero to the valet to the cook to the chef. Others enjoy a novel thoroughly only if the author gives them insight into what the secondary characters, and even the minor characters, are thinking. Choosing the correct viewpoint characters can be tricky. Every author has to decide whether or not too many viewpoint scenes from the cook will spoil the broth. And every author knows that whatever she chooses, some readers will disagree with her style of viewpoint.**

**And what about the hero and heroine? In most romances published today, both the hero and heroine are partners in viewpoint. When do you give the viewpoint to the hero, and when do you let the heroine’s POV take over the scene instead? Choosing the wrong viewpoint character can unbalance an otherwise emotional scene. Alison Kent has some thoughts about that.**

And which character does the reader most want to connect with? The one with the most at stake in the scene, right? Is this best done by showing the scene through that character's point of view? Or through the point of view of the character observing the at stake character's reactions? I was taught early in my career that the former is the most effective way to write a scene. I've since come to believe the latter - for one simple reason. A skillful author can show you what a character is feeling through the eyes of an observer. In doing so, she provides the reader an emotional identification with both characters . . . which so many readers seem to want, and so many authors cite as the reason for switching viewpoints midstream, er, scene. The thing is, switching viewpoints is not the most effective way to give both characters’ emotional reactions. A viewpoint character exposing his soul can only give the reader his feelings. If he’s immersed in the emotional drama of the moment, he won’t even notice who else is in the same room. His focus will be solely on his experience - and rightly so. On the other hand, an observing character can react to the other’s joy / grief / anger, giving the reader a double-edged jolt, two emotional responses for the price of one viewpoint.

Take a look at this short snippet from the beginning of Ruth Wind's [In the Midnight Rain](http://www.likesbooks.com/mari108.html):

"We've been waiting for you."

Ellie took a breath against the sudden wish to stand straighter, toss her head, somehow be prettier. "You somehow don't look the way I pictured you, Dr. Reynard," she said mildly.

"Call me Blue. Nobody calls me anything but Blue around here." He inclined his head, and a wash of that thick, wavy hair touched his shoulder. "You're not what I was expecting, either, to tell you the truth."

"I'll tell if you will."

He paused, then gave her a slow grin, one that hid all the darkness and brought out the charm. "A woman named Ellie who writes biographies says middle-aged librarian to me." The grin said he knew she'd forgive him.

"Ditto," Ellie said. "A man who spends all his free time talking trash in a blues newsgroups with a whisky at his elbow - I was thinking a Keith Richards lookalike. Middle-aged and worn out."

A surprised chuckle rolled out of him. "Dissipated, maybe," he said, lifting a finger. "Worn and ragged by hard living, definitely. But I don't spend all my time on the computer. Just nighttime."

This excerpt is all written in Ellie's point of view. As a reader, I feel her need to "somehow be prettier" standing in front of Blue Reynard. But I also feel his surprise at this woman who is nothing like he expected. A surprise that intrigues him and, if only for the moment, lifts his spirits. Yet something about that surprise - maybe the reference to his darkness?-makes me think he's happy with his spirits the way they are, thankyouverymuch. He doesn't need to have them lifted. Then again, maybe I'm reading him all wrong. Maybe the clues I'm picking up have been deftly and purposefully dropped by the author to make me wonder about Blue's true response to Ellie. And isn't that the point? If the author were to switch point of view here in this scene, what would compel me to keep reading into the next? I'd know exactly what was on Blue's mind, and the tension of the moment would be diffused.

Here’s a second example from my Harlequin Temptation, [Four Men and a Lady](http://www.likesbooks.com/colleen15.html). This is a flashback scene, where the hero and heroine are high school juniors.

“Look,” she began again, only to be cut short by a long rectangle of light thrown from the game room door. She looked up; Ben’s silhouette--tall and broad shouldered, that of a man--filled the frame as if backlit by a bright sun.

Tension rolled from him in waves, in the rigid way he held his head, in the firm fixed grip he had on the door facing, in the no-nonsense way he stood there and waited wearing a designer logo T-shirt and stylishly ripped jeans.

He’d never had Heidi’s problem of control. She tended to bite her tongue way after the fact. Which made it easy for her to recognize that very struggle within him now.

“Where the hell have y’all been?” he asked in that too deep voice that had Heidi closing her eyes for strength. Why did he have to be so . . . so . . . dang it, she couldn’t even narrow what she thought about him down to one word.

“Hang on to your shorts, Ace,” she yelled back, not bothering to spare Ben a direct eye contact glance. Looking up, she gave Quentin a half smile, a lift of one shoulder and then she said, “I’m fine. And I’m sorry. Let’s go practice.”

They did, for two hours without a break. To Heidi every second, every minute dragged. She didn’t want to be here tonight more than any of the other times in her life when she’d wished she were some place else.

She tried so hard to let the music take her away. But every time she felt she’d conquered the emotional bombs of the day, a fierce pounding detonated behind her eyes, fired against her temples, exploded inside her skull.

The headache couldn’t be blamed on her internal battle. The source was clearly external: Ben was mad and his drums were loud. Instinctively, she knew the reason. He’d heard second or third or fourth hand gossip of Maryann Stafford’s tales.

Heidi couldn’t stand the tension a minute more. She opened her eyes and glanced his way; his gaze was fixed her direction. He followed every move, his mouth set hard, his eyes flinty, sweat-drenched locks of his hair whipping about his face as he ripped into the rhythm of the song.

This wasn’t like Ben. To be this wild, his attention focused elsewhere while instinct drove the beat. She knew him well enough not to be frightened of whatever he had on his mind, but she was uneasy. Uneasy enough to call it quits.

She set down her sax mid-note. The rest of the song fizzled one player at a time. The drums were the last to cease.

Again, this scene is told entirely in one point of view: Heidi’s. As an author, I could easily have moved into Ben’s head and told the reader what he was thinking. But showing him through Heidi’s eyes brings a heightened intensity to the scene because:

1) It gives the reader a chance to participate in the story by taking a guess at what will happen next, and  
2) It keeps them reading to find out if they got it right!

Moving into Ben’s head in this scene would be a bucket of cold water on the moment. When strict point of view is not maintained, not only is the intensity lost, but readers who read as I do are robbed of this incredible opportunity to take part in the story. The author has given the reader the answer instead of giving her the chance to solve the puzzle all on her own.

**As regular visitors to the message boards will know, some readers don’t agree with this technique. They prefer to know what the hero is thinking instead of reading clues. This doesn’t mean that their choices are wrong - it simply means that they will probably like different authors than the point of view “purists.”**

**Of course, Alison Kent realizes that there are no easy answers in the point of view debate. She knows that everyone has a different point of view…**

And that, dear reader, is the subtly formidable power of point of view, one that will continue to be debated as long as there are readers to read what authors write.

***-- Alison Kent***

1. What do you think about this topic? Would you prefer to know what everyone is thinking, or do you like when the author drops clues/hints that allow you to infer their emotions?