

# Reliable Narrators

Tom Williams

*THE HIT*

Jere Hoar

Context Books

<http://www.contextbooks.com>

304 pages; cloth, \$24.95

*THE END OF FREE LOVE*

Susan Steinberg

FC2

<http://fc2.org>

230 pages; paper, \$13.95

Invariably, when I ask a student in a creative writing workshop why she chose first person for her story's point of view, the answer is, "Because first person is more *real*." A questionable assertion, to be sure, and it always leads me back to the words of my undergraduate creative writing instructor, who firmly believed that first person is popular among novices because "you don't have to check your grammar." But whether explained by a need for verisimilitude or as a means of avoiding the dreariness of grammar handbooks, the first-person narrator still strikes me as the riskiest point-of-view choice that anyone—novice or veteran writer—can make. After all, first person brings with it Henry James's condemnation; the master found it "barbaric" in any long fiction. There is the eternal question of "unreliability" that so troubles any reader of Poe or Gilman, Junot Diaz or Sandra Cisneros. There is the unavoidable conflation of narrator and author by the reader, requiring more than one workshop member to holler: "I'm not the narrator." And there is, in my estimation, the outright artifice of first person. Just who is this "I"? Is she speaking to me? Or is she "writing"? I asked these questions when I

was fifteen, and they still seem applicable and sound criticism to any first-person fiction. Yet, for all its potential shortcomings, when first person is done well—by Melville, Welty, Ellison, or Camus—I forget all the artifice and find myself spirited more fully, perhaps more than with any other point of view, into the world of the story. And in Jere Hoar's first novel *The Hit* and Susan Steinberg's debut collection of stories, *The End of Free Love*, both writers manage to create first-person narrators who simply will not, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, let the reader go.

Hoar's novel comes with much praise from a host of macho writers: McGuane, Harrison, Hannah, and Grisham all contribute a blurb to the book jacket. As well, Hoar, a longtime professor of journalism at Ole Miss, earned considerable honors with his first book, *Body Parts*, a collection of stories published in 1997. But had none of this hype accompanied this rather handsome volume (a word of praise should be extended to Context Books for that), *The Hit* would still insinuate itself with the reader immediately. Employing a present-tense prologue that ends with the line "My story should be written in blood," Hoar sets up a structure and plot for this literary thriller that answers well the questions "Whodunnit?" and "Why?" His first-person narrator, a Vietnam veteran named Luke Carr, is ostensibly "writing" the "notebooks" that make up the book for therapeutic reasons (Carr is in a VA hospital in the prologue). Yet it is clear from the get-go that Carr

shares much in common with the hard-boiled narrators of Jim Thomson and James M. Cain. Able to toss off stinging one-liners—"She was a hell-of-a-looking woman"—and drink bourbon with the best, Carr is also complex and erudite—his knowledge of hunting-related art is a welcome wrinkle—which helps keep *The Hit*, for the most part, far from the realm of cliché.

Hoar's novel is, however, filled with the requisite fistfights, gunplay, double-crosses, and a femme fatale (the "hell-of-a-looking woman," Kinnerly Morris) one comes to expect from noir thrillers, yet it also features a comic cast of secondary characters, a perfectly rendered Mississippi landscape, and one of the most loyal dogs of American literature. At times, it seems ambiguous if Hoar is parodying the genre or playing it straight (either way, he certainly seems to be having a good time). But

what continues to make *The Hit* a book one alternately wants to speed through and savor is the quality of Luke Carr's voice. Grim, rueful, and unexpectedly humorous, Luke Carr "writes" his story in a way that foreshadows his doom yet allows us to hope and believe that somehow, maybe, he'll get out okay. Yet, he tells us: "In life as in algebra you solve for the unknown. There is always an unknown. Someone hates you or wants what you have. Someone from your regrettable past. Or the friend of relative you least suspect." Since so many

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thrillers with flimsy plots are tagged with the phrase "suspenseful," it's almost too common a term to apply to as good a book as *The Hit*. But suspenseful it is, as Jere Hoar has found in Luke Carr the perfect voice and character to unravel a mystery with anything but a neat ending.

In *The End of Free Love*, Susan Steinberg supplies the reader with what FC2 readers have come to expect: unpredictable fiction that explores and remakes convention, all the while dazzling with comic touches and startling with discovery. But Steinberg's debut collection of fiction stakes out its own space in the FC2 heavens, as the eighteen stories, taken singly or as a whole, never allow a moment's breath. I think it of the highest praise to say I read this collection straight through, for once inside I could not escape the uneasy reality of these fictions.

Not all of the stories are written in first person, but all are composed in a relentless prose that would only be cheapened by calling it poetic. I say this because in truth Steinberg's prose sounds like nothing but itself. It is often said that a writer has found her own voice, but Steinberg seems to have discovered *voices* all her own. Seductive first lines—"This is not about the hammer dug up from the yard" begins "Saturday"—are followed by circuitous logic and dazzling turns of phrase. Dark as can be on some pages, with a sense of menace lurking beneath every façade, these stories still manage to be enlivened by Steinberg's incredible precision and wit, as evidenced by these lines from

the title story:

Our mothers cried, kids!  
We're not kids we say.  
We're souls with limbs.

In most first collections, it's easy to find a few gems among the failed workshop experiments, but in *The End of Free Love*, Steinberg seems impossibly secure with a variety of narrative strategies. Whether the stories are arranged in numbered "crots," as in "Isla," or in choppy, enigmatic paragraphs, as in "What Makes You Think," or further still, when told in one long rush of a sentence, as in "testing," or "Standstill," one never gets the sense that Steinberg ever makes a false step. I just kept following and following this odd assembly of narrators—bored Jewish girls, comic book fanatics, loners, and victims alike—wondering what made them so compelling and what made this masterful book so impossible to shake. Essentially, the stories are plotless yet tightly controlled. Even a story like "Standstill," which seems to teeter on the brink of collapse, maintains the kind of taut intensity one sees in Beckett's fiction: "...I beg you lady, don't flinch, I beg you, let me touch you lady, this is the front of the line now, and believe me lady, it gets no better." And if anyone can find a better concluding story than Steinberg's ironic "Opening," I'd like to see it. No one who reads *The End of Free Love* will forget the feverish experience of these brief glimpses into the minds and lives of so many eccentric narrators any time soon.

In sum, the first-person narrator is still thriving. Both Hoar and Steinberg create for their readers a vision into the mystery of personality, writing stories that reveal just who their tellers are as well as indicating why such tales must be told. Perhaps the most overused phrase for promoting a book is that one "cannot put it down," yet for totally unlike reasons, *The End of Free Love* and *The Hit* defiantly offer readers an opportunity to retreat from the everyday and utterly involve themselves in the lives of these fascinating narrators until the very end.

*Editor of Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies, Tom Williams has reviewed several books for ABR, and his own fiction has recently appeared in Nightsun, Evansville Review, and Indiana Review.*