Investigating Children’s Books:
John Stephens’ Narrative Theory of Point of View

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze two children’s books based on a true event titled Librarian of Basra: A true story from Iraq and Alia’s mission saving the books of Iraq through the lens of Stephens’ (1992) conception of point of view, as a critical part of his theory of narrative. Both of the books in question tell a remarkable story about an extraordinary heroine named Alia Muhammad Baker, a chief librarian in Basra city, whose great courage had helped to rescue almost the entire library collection days before it set to flame by the war. Both authors of the books Jeanette Winter (Librarian of Basra: A true story from Iraq) and Mark Alan Stamaty (Alia’s mission saving the books of Iraq) drew their inspirations to write their books from a cover story written by Shaila K. Dewan in the New York Times in 2003.

In her New York Times’s article, Shaila K. Dewan described how the library books were all over the places when she met Alia at her house. She described Alia a person who had a genuine love for books and library and loved sharing her love for books to people, sometimes even by breaking the library’s policy of not lending the books home. According to Dewan, Alia recounted the ordeals of how the books finally found their shelter in her place. As the war is approaching Basra, Alia felt growingly nervous, fearing that the library might be in danger. Upon learning that the governor flatly turned down her request for rescuing the books, Alia took pain quietly transferring the books to her house. Alia’s little mission immediately turned bold when as the newspaper described it “the beast of the war” escalated and the library was visibly in danger. Racing against the time, Alia and her restaurant owner friend Anis Muhammad co-coordinated the books rescue process, which also involved friends and people of the community. They used whatever means available, like curtains and sacks, to move the books to Anis’s restaurant, the safest place nearby. The rescue process was nearly completed when suddenly the library was engulfed with fire. They could only watch the fire burning the remaining books; their plea request to British army returned no response. Fortunately, thanks to Alia’s heroic effort, almost 30,000 books were safe. They temporarily resided at Alia’s until their permanent house of the new library of Basra is rebuilt.

Keywords: point of view, John Stephens, narratology, children’s literature, Basra, Librarian.

Introduction

There has been a consensus that children’s literature is an object created by adult authors of which they projected an image and message deemed ideal and valuable for children to subscribe to (e.g., Nodelman, 2008). In light of the view, this paper seeks to analyze two children’s books based on a true event through the lens of Stephens’ (1992) conception of point of view, as a critical part of his theory of narrative. Both of the books in question tell a remarkable story about an extraordinary heroine named Alia Muhammad Baker, a chief librarian in Basra city, whose great courage had helped to rescue almost the entire library collection days before it set to flame by the war. Both authors of the books Jeanette Winter (Librarian of Basra: A true story from Iraq) and Mark Alan Stamaty (Alia’s mission saving the books of Iraq) drew their inspirations to write their books from a cover story written by Shaila K. Dewan in the New York Times in 2003.

As mentioned at the beginning of the essay, the treatment of these two books utilizes Stephan’s notion of point of view in children’s literature as a theoretical framework. In Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction (1992) Stephens advances a theory of narrative that suggests, among other things, that the discourse of narratives must be viewed as a linguistic as well as narratological process. One way to do that is to take into account narration’s point of view, which Stephens characterizes as “the aspect of narration in which implicit authorial control of audience reading strategies is probably the most powerful.” (p. 26).

Stephens maintains that the effort to develop reading strategies for children entails enhancing of their capacity by adults such that the children can recognize narration’s point of view and how it is constructed in discourse. This is because, Stephens goes on to stress, an author’s implicit control in children’s literature is typically framed within a point of reference (discourse) he /she wants to highlight.

In Stephan’s view, there are two major characteristics of point of view, perceptual and conceptual. While the former denotes a “vantage point from which something is represented as being visualized,” the latter refers to “all intratextual acts of interpretation of all kinds” (p. 27). It is important to notice that for Stephens, perceptual point of view is concerned with the way in which “phenomena are focalized by some perceiving agent,” whom Stephens calls “focalizer.” (27) Ultimately, authors will assign focalizer and orchestrate alternately among characters and narrator(s) deemed strategic to serve their own discourse(s). Discourse in this sense can be best understood as “the complex process of encoding (a) story which involves choices of vocabulary, of syntax, of order of presentation, of how narrating voice is to be oriented toward what is narrated...” (p.17) Conceptual point of
view, by contrast, deals with various interpretations based on other stimuli, the actions of other characters, or the ideological stance of focalizer. In this sense, perceptual and conceptual points of view are separated one another but at the same time interrelated with each other. In other words, point of view, according to Stephens, always involves a focalization by process of visualization followed by a conceptual frame. Having briefly described Stephens’s account of point view, this paper will use it as the theoretical tools to examine The Librarian of Basra and Alia’s Mission Saving the Books in Iraq in subsequent sections.

The Librarian of Basra by Jeanette Winter

In the librarian of Basra, the narrator’s point of view (narrator-focalized) dominates the first pages of the book, which clearly illustrates the perceptual point of view. Gradually, narrator and characters take turn switching focalization depending on what best serves the authorial intention. Narrator-focalized briefly orients readers with the narratives. This is evident, for instance, in the blurb on the back of the book's dust jacket:

Alia Muhamad Baker is the Librarian in Basra, Iraq. For fourteen years, her library has been a meeting place for those who love books. Until now. Now war has come, and Alia fears that the library—along with the thirty thousand books within it—will be destroyed forever.

In a war-stricken country where civilians—especially women—have little power, this true story about a librarian’s struggle to save her community’s priceless collection of books reminds us all how, throughout the world, the love of literature and the respect for knowledge know no boundaries.

In the first chunk of sentences, narrator-focalized (focalizer) introduces narratees (readers) with the character who is described as ‘the librarian of Basra’ (Figure.1) Using a definite article, focalizer immediately wants to convey to the readers a sense of closeness to the character. The focalizer’s emphatic tone gets apparent in the next sentence. The focalizer uses ‘fears’—a verb word that suggests internal thinking—when describing the character’s feeling. In the second chunk, the focalizer switches to the conceptual point of view in which the narrator highlights the moral of the story the readers can arguably relate to. Using the words ‘reminds us,’ the focalizer directly talks to the readers the message of the story, implying an ideological position of the focalizer, that is, an admiration of strong women and a love of books. In the first page, the visualization of the character and setting is more concrete. Inside a square-shape frame is a picture of a muslim-wearing women holding books close to her heart foregrounds a city with typical Middle East trees (i.e. date trees). The text beneath reads:

Alia Muhammad Baker is the librarian of Basra, a port city in the sand-swept country of Iraq.

The focalized narrator repeats earlier information, offering conceptual point of view about the character, which now, with the illustration, becomes visually more vivid for the readers. What is new in this page is the point of noticing from the story setting. That is the city of Basra. The focalizer describes Basra as ‘a port city.’ The illustration in the background coupled with the text enhances the port city of Basra as an additional point of noticing in the story.

Turning page, conceptual point of view moves to a library setting. Alia and other fellow Iraqis of different genders and appearances look engaged in an animated interaction inside a room filled with arranged bookshelves. The page reads:

Her library is a meeting place for all who love books. They discuss matters of the world and matters of the spirit. Earlier in the dust jacket, the focalizer has hinted about the library that serves as people’s meeting place. In this page, a bustling library of Basra as the focalizer’s point of noticing is even more apparent.
Multiple focalizations: Narrator and characters focalizations

In the next page, the illustration dramatically changes. The same people, who earlier look at ease, now appear frantic. A dark background enhances the tense mood of the characters; they simultaneously voice their concerns:

"Will planes with bombs fill the sky? Will bombs fall here? Will soldiers with guns fill the streets? Who among us will die? Will our families survive? What can we do?"

The text is then followed by a text that reads:

"Until now—now, they talk only of war."

The narrator still serves as a focalizer. But now, the focalization multiplies to include the story characters. The character’s focalization suggests an authentic narration (lived experiences) that enhances conceptual point of view about the war that is only slightly mentioned at the front (dust jacket). According to Stephan (1992), having multiple focalizers within one narrative is a common practice in children’s literature. To put it differently, text focalization moves between narrator and characters. As for the text, it is interesting to highlight that narrator uses the word ‘now’ that, according to Stephan (1992), indicates “closeness (proximal deictics)” (p. 28) between focalizer and readers.

In the subsequent two pages, the focalization completely switches to the story character. In the illustration, a concerned looking Alia is talking to a passive-looking man (Figure. 2). The text reads:

"Alia worries that the fires of war will destroy the books, which are more precious to her than mountains of gold. The books are in every language—new books, ancient books, even a biography of Muhammad that is seven hundred years old. She asks the governor for permission to move them to a safe place. He refuses."

As the focalized character, Alia’s inner thinking about the survival of the library— that holds precious collection including those of Islamic prophet Muhammad—becomes point of noticing in this page. Alia focalization will enhance readers’ initial perception about the character (i.e. her motive) for more informed interpretations. For instance, readers could not help but feeling sympathetic with Alia when the passive governor declines Alia’s request for help. This part of narrative is worthy of notice for it serves as conceptual view and justification for Alia’s following actions.

In the next illustration, Alia is seen carrying piles of books to a car trunk. A dark sky with stars and a crescent moon suggests that Alia removes books from the library quietly in a dark night (Figure. 2). The text reads:

"So Alia takes matter into her own hands. Secretly, she brings books home every night, filling her car late after work."

By now, Alia’s focalization manages to draw readers’ sympathy that her action of sneaking out library books is for a justifiable reason. It assumes that readers are yet taking sided with Alia. Narrator-focalized reappears in the next few pages directing readers’ attention to the war’s growing tension. Alia’s focalization emerges once only to enhance the narrator’s focalization.

"The whispers of war grow louder. Government offices are moved into the library. Soldiers with guns wait on the roof. Only once Alia’s focalization interjects only to reinforce the narrator’s focalization. Alia waits—and fears the worst."

Narrator-focalized goes on directing readers’ attention at the approaching war. The illustration—civilians in the midst of firing jetfighters and war tanks—adds more detailed description enhancing readers’ initial perception about the war (Figure. 3). The text reads:

"Then…rumors become reality. The city is lit with a firestorm of bombs and gunfire."
It is interesting to point out that the narrator deliberately leaves out information about soldiers that strike against the government soldiers. Who the government army is fighting against thus is left unclear. For the next few pages, narrator-focalized is hardly present. Instead, Alia and other characters take over focalization. It begins with Alia who tell readers the chaotic scene during the war strike that leaves the library unattended, which ultimately results in Alia’s books rescue process:

*Alia watches as library worker, government workers, and soldier abandon the library. Only Alia is left to protect the books. She calls over the library wall to her friend Anis Muhammad, who owns a restaurant on the other side. “Can you help me save the books?”*

Alia’s focalization brings readers closer to the actual process of rescuing books by way of highlighting some possible facts: who help Alia? Anis Muhammad and people in her community; how do they rescue the books? by using simple means like curtains, crates, and sacks; where do they keep the books? by passing them over the wall and hide them at Anis’s restaurant. Overall, Alia’s focalization in this process as well as the illustration offer vivid visualization of the books rescue process that support to the desirable interpretation of the narrative (Figure.4). In the text two pages, narrator-focalized takes over the narrative visualizing the time lapse since the first day of the book rescue process. In the illustration, a concerned looking Alia foregrounds Anis Muhammad and two Caucasian soldiers whom each one of them carries a gun. And in the page is a picture of library building engulfed with fire.

*The books stay hidden as the war rages on. Then, nine days later, a fire burns the library to the ground.*

The focalization, then, switches to Anis Muhammad whose restaurant becomes a refugee house for library books. Anis vividly describes the day a group of soldiers inspect his restaurant. Although describing it with an intense tone, Anis focalization intentionally leaves soldiers identities unidentified. The illustration, however, clearly shows that the soldier is of Caucasian race (Western). Here, the text and illustration compliments each other to tell the narrative.

The focalization is back to Alia again. The point of noticing is the process of transferring books from Anis’s restaurant to Alia’s house. First, it takes a huge truck to carry 30,000 books. *So she hires a truck to bring all thirty thousand books to her house and to the houses of friends.* Second, it takes up the entire space of Alia’s house for the books (Figure.5). In Alia’s house, books are everywhere, filling floors and cupboards and windows—leaving barely enough room for anything else. The next point of noticing focuses on Alia’s dream of peace and of a new library. Finally, narrator-focalized takes over the narrative and concludes by restating the initial ideological position about a strong women who loves for books (Figure. 6), also known as ‘the librarian of Basra.’
Alia’s Mission Saving the Books of Iraq by Mark Alan Stamaty

Formatted in graphic novel panels, Alia’s mission contains a sequence of juxtaposed images and texts offering a more animated and, somewhat, long stretched and fast moving narratives encompassing the present and the past. The story is framed within the context of an ordinary person (woman) whose courage acts exemplifies superhero. The woman who has determination and courage to take actions: the dominant discourse the author wants to highlight. Prior to the main story, focalized narrator, represented by a talking book, orients readers with the story, or as Stephens (1992) describes it as “what is narrated” (p. 19), consisting of events (wars and library book rescue), and existents (Alia and the library of Basra).

Narrator-Focalized
The narrator-focalized component of the narration is clearly evident in the first few pages when the author introduces the main character, Alia, whom Stamaty the author fondly describes as a dedicated and book-loving librarian. In addition, Stamaty also depicts the Basra library, the setting where the narrative takes place (Figure. 7). The narrator-focalized then traces back to young Alia who grew up enjoying books. Entering into young Alia’s mind, the narrator-focalized tells facts—old civilizations and Mongol soldiers conquest—that do not have immediate relevance to the present narrative of Alia the librarian (Figure. 8). This suggests that the narrator offers a perceptual point of view to readers by way of describing the story character and setting (story existents). Simultaneously, the narrator also equips them with a conceptual point of view since the narrative is loaded with an attitude (attitudinal description) fondly describing Alia as a passionate librarian who loves books.

Alia’s focalization: A determined and fearless Alia
Story characters begin taking over focalization when young Alia expresses her concern about the past history of the burning library in Iraq “Why would anyone want to destroy a library?” Her concern later becomes a clue and justification of her heroic action rescuing library books. Alia’s focalization takes readers into her life as a librarian as well a citizen who’s concerned with an increasing tension of war in Iraq. Alia’s focalization is dominant; she looks as if she is talking to herself. Without the visualization readers wouldn’t know that Alia is sharing her concern with her husband. It is interesting to highlight that Alia’s concern is driven largely by her (childhood) fear of the history of the burning library, “with one bomb or one fire, all those books could be destroyed just like the great library of Baghdad!” the fear that repeats many times in Alia’s focalization and it serves to motivate her brave action. The page ends with Alia’s determination to contact the government about her concern, “I know! I’ll go to the government!”

The discourse of a determined Alia recurs in the next few pages. Alia’s focalizations shows determination after her request to a government officer is denied, “there’s got to be a way!” Alia’s determination increases as she observes a growing threat of war endangering the library and books, “I’ve got to do something!” In the next couple of pages, focalization comes from Alia’s mind that engrossed with a plan to rescue the library collection. Alia silently makes a number of round trips sneaking out books from library to her house. This almost silent focalization is only to highlight not only Alia’s determination but also her courage of taking great risks.
Multiple focalizations: Narrator and characters

As the war threat draws nearer, focalizations begin to multiply and switch between narrator and characters. It begins with Alia's focalization that narrates the rampage of looting emptying all that were in the library, except for the books. The focalization then switches between Alia dan Anis, her restaurant owner friend, coordinating the books rescue plan, “yes, Alia...I'll help you. Those books are the history of Basra!” The fear of the repeating history of the burning library emerges again in Alia’s focalization, “looters have already attacked our library. In all this chaos it could easily be destroyed just like the great library of Baghdad...” Some pictures are clearly showing Alia’s leading role during the books rescue process. One picture shows Alia urging people to help. In another picture Alia is shown to gesture a man to pick up a stack of books. These together enhance visualization of Alia and her courage.

Turning page, the narrator-focalized takes over the narrative to describe the scale of book rescue process that involves community members from different walks of life. Then focalizations are multiplied as unidentifiable characters of various ages and different genders simultaneously narrate the important and the hard work needed to save the library.

In the next several pages, focalizations of Alia and Anis serve as the center of the narrative of minutes-by-minutes the culmination of the story events. Center in the focalizations is the discourse that only to emphasize Alia’s great affection of books that drives her courage to do anything possible to rescue them (Figures. 9 & 10). Alia disregarded Anis’s concern about her health by saying, “but there’s so much to do” and “I wish I had the strength to work all night again tonight and every night till all the books are safe.” When the library is finally caught by fire (Figure. 11), Alia's focalization enhances the brave woman discourse that has earlier has been established, “the library’s on fire! I’ve got to get there right away!

Anis’s focalization is not distinctive for it largely serves to support Alia’s focalization. When the library is completely engulfed with fire, Anis’s focalization is to highlight that Alia’s effort has rescued a significant number of books, “we did a lot. You don’t realize how many books we did save...all the books...add up to more than 30,000 books!” (Figure.12)

Narrator gradually takes over the focalization as Alia and the community begins to reorganize to restore the library. The talking book or the narrator focalized appeared earlier in the beginning of the story reemerges. It narrates the central role of Alia in the process of rebuilding the library involving many people and professionals (Figure. 13).
Conclusion

The intention in this paper is to investigate the way in which narration’s points of view in John Stephens’s sense manifest themselves in two books about an extraordinary heroine, Alia, the librarian of Basra. The assumption behind this investigation is that recognizing of the perceptual and conceptual point of view in children’s literature and how such a point of view is constructed is tremendously important for developing reading strategies for children.

The main thrust of Stephens’s notion of point of view is that of focalization, which can loosely be described as the one who sees and narrates the narrative. Focalization is inextricably linked with the perceptual point of view. Focalization in both The librarian of Basra and Alia’s mission is dominated by Alia as the main character. Much of the narratives are generated through her point of view.

This tendency, the paper has argues, is intentional on the part of both authors for reasons that they want to emphasize the ‘determined and brave’ and “heroic” Alia who takes a great risk to rescue library books. This is also the moral story Shaila K. Dewan wishes the readers to take away from her story in the New York Times. From Stephens’ perspective, this tendency can be categorized as conceptual point of view, which includes, among other things, the ideological stance of the narrator. But seen from a larger perspective, this tendency is also in line with the main purpose of writing for children in general, which according to Stephens is “to foster in the child reader a positive appreciation of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audience” (p.3).

References


