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'You *will* be drawn in': the literary effectiveness of the second person in Eddie Campbell's *Alec: how to be an artist*

Abstract:

Alec: how to be an artist is a graphic novel intertwining autobiography/memoir with the history of the graphic novel itself from the 1980s to the early 2000s. It was written, illustrated and published by the Queensland-based Scot, Eddie Campbell, best known as the illustrator of *From hell* (written by Alan Moore). This paper seeks to demonstrate that, through a variety of techniques (most notably sustained second-person narration), the work subverts what structuralist Gérard Genette calls the most fundamental rule of novel writing: that the author must decide to narrate from inside the story via one of the characters (a homodiegetic narration), or from outside (heterodiegetically). Eddie Campbell in an array of forms (author, implied author, commentator and character) is inside and outside this story. He is at times narrator, protagonist and narratee, and at others appears to be a removed (and somewhat bemused) observer, or a powerless agent of fate. At many points the reader too is co-opted as protagonist or narratee, thanks to the shape-shifting and unsettling nature of the second-person mode. It will be argued that the use of this unusual narrative mode (with the linked choice of future tense) is not merely a gimmick but a highly effective and appropriate way of telling Campbell's story.

Biographical note:

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Narration on the edge

Campbell's work was originally published in serial form between 1997 and 2000 (in *Dee Vee* and *The Staros report 1997*), then brought together in expanded and partly revised form as the single volume considered here (*Alec: how to be an artist*, March 2001). In words and drawings, the book braids two narratives: the artistic development of Campbell's obvious stand-in, Alec MacGarry, and the fate of the graphic novel. There are interludes on the history of art and humour, and allusions to the way chaos theory permeates everyday life in matters big and small. The work is described on the back cover as a 'graphic novel', a term most often used for comics aimed at adults, and often implying a literary approach. The term goes back at least as far as the 1978 comic collection entitled *A contract with God and other tenement stories – a graphic novel* (by Will Eisner) and, arguably, reached the mainstream when Art Spiegelman's holocaust story *Maus* became the first 'graphic novel' to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1992.

Campbell's narrative begins with MacGarry working in a sheet-metal factory while producing short runs of his own photocopied comics as part of the 'small press movement'. It finishes with MacGarry as one of an exclusive coterie of internationally renowned graphic novelists, accepting invitations to speak at overseas conventions. Between those two points, though, is poverty, uncertainty and much artistic angst[1]. Reviews were generally positive, with Andrew D Arnold (2001) writing at Time.com: '…it bounces from essay, to history, to criticism, to autobiography in a way I haven't seen comix try before…' Rob Vollmar at Comic Book Galaxy (2001) praised the book and called Campbell 'one of the most literate and sophisticated comics creators alive today'.

Alec: how to be an artist frankly portrays the trials, tribulations, failings and vanities of MacGarry. It adeptly mixes incidents large and trivial to create a sense of realism and enhance the impression of authorial honesty, notwithstanding the assertion by Chatman (1978, 147) that 'pure mimesis is an illusion'. From the point of view of this research, however, the main interest is the literary effectiveness of Campbell's second-person narration, much of it in future and future perfect tense.

The second person

Sustained second person is rare in literature, and considered no more than a curiosity by some. In 552 pages of Wayne C Booth's landmark *The rhetoric of fiction* (updated edition), it receives only a dismissive footnote (1983, 150). Brian Richardson (2006, 35), however, has argued that second person is perhaps the most important development in literature since the stream of consciousness. Bruce Morrissette, who identified second person as a literary genre as early as 1965, wrote (1965, 2) the narrative 'you':

> … appears as a mode of curiously varied psychological resonances, capable, in the proper hands, of producing effects in the fictional field that are unobtainable by other modes or persons. Narrative 'you' generates a complex series of perspectives whose multiple angles deserve to be explored.

A small body of academic work has since built up, proving more than anything, how hard it is to tie down exactly what constitutes second person, and to assess its literary worth. Though the likes of Richardson have praised its power, others have called it merely a sly way of writing first person (Beach 1932, 281 among others) or have said it is often displaced third person (McHale 1987, 224, Ryan 2001, 138 among others).

There has been considerable conjecture too about when it is being employed. Some writers and critics have argued that apostrophe, or the practice of addressing a homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narratee, constitutes second person; others have claimed that some texts accepted by most as second person are not really that at all because they don't exhibit dual time (Hopkins & Perkins 1981) or multiple subjectivity (Hantzis 1988). Matt DelConte (2003) says any comparison with first- and third-person narration doesn't make sense because second-person narration isn't defined by who is speaking but by who is listening.

Nonetheless, writing long-form fiction in the second person is adventurous and ambitious. It is immediately arresting and can provide 'both distance and intimacy' (Fisher 2008, 10). The form can also be confronting and claustrophobic. It can repel the reader. Kimberly Nance (1994) compares it to 'reading someone else's mail'. Herman (2002, 345) talks about the 'oftentimes disorienting, sometimes uncanny experience of reading second-person fictions' which try to put the reader in the text and abolish the boundary between the textual and extra textual, the fictive and the real, the virtual and the actual.

It is not the aim of this paper to comprehensively define second person and all its variations, nor indeed to examine the equally fascinating graphic side of this graphic novel. Suffice to say, Campbell's work falls within most definitions though, as in many second-person books, the narrative voice moves around, often phasing in and out of the boundaries.

Marie-Laure Ryan (2001, 138) is one of many to suggest the impact of a second-person address is often short lived. This is perhaps demonstrated by the fact most writers use it only in small doses. Prose novels that are second person throughout are remarkably rare. The first is possibly Rex Stout's *How like a god* from 1929, the most famous almost certainly Jay McInerney's *Bright lights, big city* from 1984.

An unusual point-of-view: The Man at the Crossroads speaks in one frame; half to Alec, half to the audience (14):

Genette (1980, 244) writes that 'The novelist's choice, unlike the narrator's, is not between two grammatical forms, but between two narrative postures (whose grammatical forms are simply an automatic consequence): to have the story told by one of its "characters" … or to have it told by a narrator outside the story.' Richardson (2006, 5) says it is precisely this choice that is rejected by so many contemporary authors, and second-person prose provides a prime tool: 'the "you" invoked will at different points seem to be one of the characters; at others a narrator outside the story; it may furthermore seem to refer to a narratee or the actual reader who holds the book.'

Richardson (2006, 14) calls the 'you' and the 'we' forms 'unnerving' and 'protean'. Campbell himself (to Vollmar 2001) has attempted to explain where readers fit into his story, saying he came up with the notion of presenting the whole book in two registers: in high terms as a prophecy and, in low terms, as a 'how to' manual 'addressed to the second person, "you", nominally Alec MacGarry, but also by inference the person reading the book, who is asked to be Alec for the duration.'

The reality though is that the identity of the 'you' in *Alec: how to be an artist* (to be referred to hereon as *HTBAA*) is in constant flux. Campbell's narrative voice is more complex than he gives credit – and in that lies much of its effectiveness. The narration goes beyond an address from one vantage point, as one might expect from a quasi-autobiography. It displays aspects and exploits advantages of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrative, parts of the story being told by a narrator who is one of the characters, part of it being told from outside, and parts of it more ambiguous again, as if (perhaps) fate is directly addressing both Alec and the reader. This ambiguity is one way the work directly engages with 'tyranny of intimacies', 'entry points into spaces' and other themes of the 2012 AAWP conference.

Second person can enable the writer, protagonist and reader to engage in an ontological shuffle that approximates Walt Whitman's line[2] about being 'both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it'. Jill Walker (2000) aptly explains part of the power:

> The word 'you' is ready to be filled by anyone. It is empty: it doesn't refer outside of the situation in which it is uttered. There's a word for this emptiness: deixis. Deictic words … have no meaning except in relation to other words and to a context. Their power lies in this emptiness. Filling the empty space of a 'you' can be 'wonderfully stirring' (Quintilian 1953, 38–39; bk. 9, ch. 22) for a reader, as writers and rhetoricians have known since ancient times.

Campbell doesn't restrict himself to one style of narration. Scenes can be delivered solely in dialogue and pictures, giving the impression the reader is overhearing, while others are highly mediated; the reader or 'second-person protagonist' can be told directly something prescriptive, such as (2001, 97) an idea might be a 'bunch of sour grapes' or, on page 103, 'To be given enough time to create a significant work … To create the stories that are the dialogue the world has with itself … To cultivate a separate life from the one happening in front of you. There's a thing to pursue.' Equally, a named person can be summed up with an editorial comment in words or pictures or both, rather than by using the far less audible technique – typical in prose – of introducing a character slowly through their actions and dialogue. Campbell is not only using second person at its most fluid, he is applying equal flexibility to the structure.

The introduction (7):
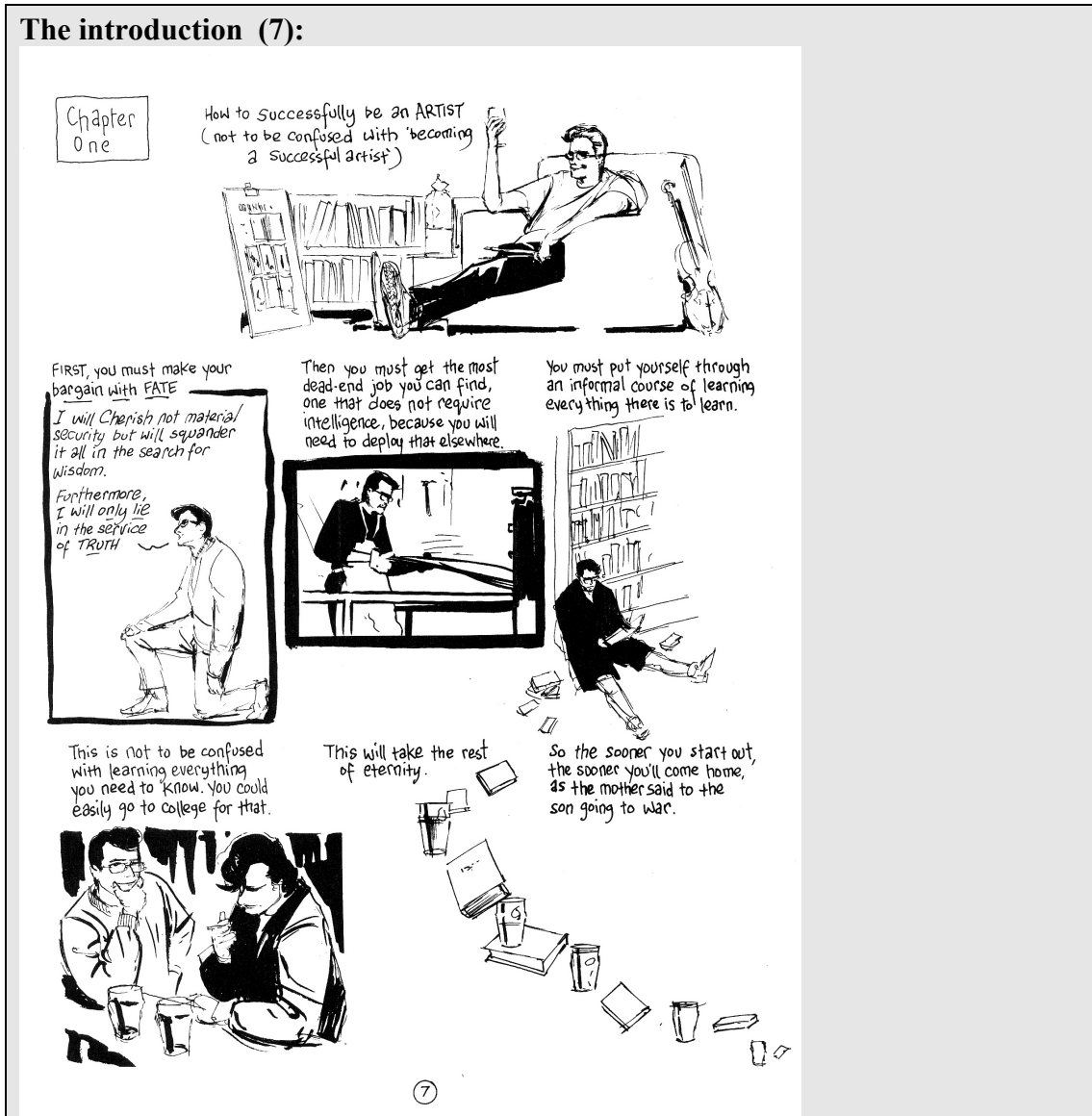
The striking tone is established from *HTBAA*'s very first words (2001, 7), which could be addressing the implied reader (the person who wants to be an artist), the actual reader, or the artist (MacGarry/Campbell) himself:

> How to successfully be an ARTIST (not to be confused with 'becoming a successful artist').

> FIRST, you must make your bargain with FATE [the following within frame, presented as the character talking] *I will Cherish not material security but will squander it all in the search for wisdom. Furthermore I will only lie in the service of TRUTH.*

> Then you must get the most dead-end job you can find, one that does not require intelligence, because you will need to deploy that elsewhere.

> You must put yourself through an informal course of learning everything there is to learn.

Immediately we see how the comic-book format can comfortably mix narrative modes; we have the 'bargain with FATE' being delivered in first person and in the present tense (dialogue and illustrations are always 'of the moment', even when the context suggests they were spoken in the past or future), but within a future tense textual framework.

The idea of fate merges with black humour (12):

> You will at this stage find it necessary to defraud the government. You might pretend for instance that you're lodging with your old pal Danny Grey so you can continue to pick up the dole money.

The second person has been called restrictive, excluding and claustrophobic. It may repel, as Fisher, Schofield and others have pointed out, by making the reader seem complicit in things he or she finds antithetical. Jack Hodgins (1983, 183-84) argues that the second person fails 'if it seems that the reader is intended to be the protagonist but refuses to cooperate.'[3] Clearly, readers are not always happy to be told what to do, or indeed what they are doing. However, Campbell largely overcomes these hurdles by using the future tense, by introducing many voices, and by supporting them with what is at times a separate visual narrative. This means *HTBAA* is not as tightly locked into a potentially claustrophobic second-person world. If Campbell had instead chosen the conventional first person, past tense to tell this story, the opening may have read like this:

> How I successfully became an ARTIST (not to be confused with 'became a successful artist').

> FIRST, I made a bargain with FATE. *I will Cherish not material security but will squander it all in the search for wisdom. Furthermore I will only lie in the service of TRUTH.*

> Then I got the most dead-end job I could find, one that did not require intelligence, because I needed to deploy that elsewhere.

> I put myself through an informal course of learning everything there is to learn.

The difference is dramatic. The original carries an ominous and portentous tone (albeit a gently ironic one) and, with it, an element of presupposition. Such presupposition, Chatman (1978, 210) points out, is an effective device for a narrator staying covert. In first person, the narrator is fully exposed and the suprahortative

mood – that sense of avid urging and encouraging the reader – is lost. The first-person version reads as flat, conceited, very much rooted in the past, and applying solely to one person. In contrast, Campbell's somewhat grandiose second-person voice immediately suggests both a ludic approach, and a universality of the tale.


The future perfect explaining the past from some time hence (18):

The future perfect tense used for much of the book (for example, page 12: 'One night you'll propose setting up house with Annie.') is a curious one, suggesting a point in the future where the action indicated has already been completed. As such it encompasses both future and past and, in a sense, eliminates the now. Derrida noted (1981, 309) that it contorts time: 'Such a future perfect, always making one text circulate inside another, excludes any and all eschatology merely by dint of being the future perfect of an innumerable imperfect, an indefinite past that will never have been present.' Its advantage in Campbell's hands, according to Caroline Small (2011), is its 'blurring of passive and active… The result is a doubling of the vantage point and of the time of the narrative: the future perfect tense conveys the author's narrative awareness of history while leaving intact the position of the character who has not yet experienced that history.'

A thought bubble attributed to Alan Moore, a rising star in the field (19).
The next panel (frame 6) morphs into a very traditional comic book frame; these characters clearly live and breathe the form, and see the world through it.
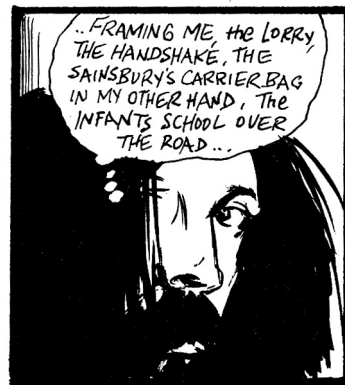
At times the *HTBAA* narrator is consoling or cajoling the Alec character (for example, page 8: 'Do not be deterred.'). The narrator may be taking the role of Fate, or as Vollmar (2001) suggests: 'In many ways, *How to be an artist* seems to [be] a temporal telegram from Campbell the Elder to Alec the younger to keep his head about him and have faith in the choices that he's making.'

Aiding mimesis when using the 'disorienting' and 'unnerving' second person is Campbell's strong connection with the subject matter. A writer who has the reader's trust will take them further into the subordination process than a writer who does not. Dealing, apparently frankly, with matters regarding his own life (matters he can be presumed to know better than anyone else) helps build this trust. Because of the paratext in the *HTBAA* volume, because *HTBAA* follows previous autobiographically derived books from Campbell, and because many readers will know of the author's parallel real-life career (yes, there are things outside the text!), the author can claim unmatched authority in explaining exactly what it is like to be Alec/Eddie, ergo to put *you* in the shoes of the author.

In a related vein, among other successful second person novels, Peter Kocan (in *The treatment*, 1980) conveys great authority when writing of mental-hospital experiences that are clearly his. Georges Perec (in *A man asleep*, 1967) has his character creeping into solipsism and almost complete inactivity; it is easy to imagine that a writer as eccentric as Perec is explaining his own fate. *No end to the way* (1965) – written by GM Glaskin (under the pen-name Neville Jackson) and set in the Perth homosexual community in the 1960s – reads almost as memoir. There is the feeling with each book that someone with hard-won inside knowledge is personally escorting you, the second-person reader/protagonist, through a secretive world.

An innovative segue from an almost textbook like history section (62). It raises the question of who 'some guy' is and, in doing so, illustrates how much we as readers are buying in on the conceit of having no fixed narrator, and bending to accommodate it. If the work is engaging enough, we can suspend not only disbelief but ontological consistency.

How to be an artist, concluded

There is no easy way to be an artist, nor to explain the creative impulse and process. Yet Campbell's chosen method is original and for the most part highly effective. The constant unsettling of the reader, using a variety of techniques but most notably second-person narration, adds greatly to the immersive nature of the narration, enables the tale to be told on several levels (and from several points of view), and allows us to know the author and his struggle as much as one can through a fictional mirror. As we run through the difficulties, disappointments and occasional triumphs of Alec/Eddie, Campbell plays with all the weapons in his literary armoury to win the trust and empathy of the reader and let that reader walk in the artist's shoes.

It is hoped this paper goes some way towards showing that sustained second person can be an effective authorial tool, providing the distance and intimacy spoken of by Fisher and others, and evading the limitations of a fixed first- or third-person position. On the evidence weighed up by this researcher, which includes a dozen novels and many more short stories, second-person fiction works best in texts with an autobiographic element, particularly where a text is known to have close parallels with the writer's own story.

Richardson (2006, 139) rejects models that insist on, among other things, binary oppositions, fixed hierarchies or impermeable categories: 'This is most importantly the case concerning what are still claimed to be the foundational oppositions, those between homo- and heterodiegesis, first- and third-person narration, and carefully separated figures of actual author, implied author, and narrator in Chatman's model of the narrative transaction… numerous important narratives elude, problematize, or collapse these oppositions.' If one were looking for a prime example of a narrative that eluded, 'problematized' and collapsed such foundational oppositions, *Alec: how to be an artist* would provide an excellent starting place. Aside from that, it stands up as a finely written, humorous and at times moving narrative.

Endnotes

1. The pretence of a 'how to' manual is quickly broken down through the text, so much so that a young boy on the final page vents his disappointment by saying 'Bugger all that hocus pocus! Just tell me what brush to use.'

2. I thank Kimberly Nance for identifying this quote in a 1994 paper and relating it to the second person technique. It is line 79 from Whitman's *Song of myself* (1855).

3. Many other aspects of second person are being considered by this researcher as part of ongoing PhD work. These include the insights of Monica Fludernik, Dennis Schofield, Brian McHale, Mieke Bal, Matt DelConte, James Phelan and others who have written on the subject from narratological, focalisation, reader reception, postmodernist and other angles. Some writers – including Marie-Laure Ryan, Ruth Nestvold, Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin – have more recently looked at electronic gaming and its similarities to second-person literature in transforming the reader into the protagonist. Again there is much food for thought, indeed too much for here.

An example of Campbell's rich and expressive writing (66):

Everybody will be full of unfulfillable promise in the cheery winesodden Friday afternoon of your life when you feel an unbearable nostalgia for events less than a day after they happen. You just see if I'm not wrong, Alec MacGarry. Just see if the Monday morning of your life don't arrive like a broken elevator.

(66)

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