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## We the Characters

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**W**riters have set some perversely difficult tasks for themselves: composing a novel entirely devoid of the letter "E," for example, or a novel in which the chapters can be read in a number of different orders. One of the trickiest feats is to narrate a story in the first-person plural. It's so hard, in fact, that among the dispiritingly vast array of titles shelved in my local bookstore's How to Write Fiction section, few even mention the first-person plural as an option. John Gardner's classic, "The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers," refers to it in passing as "the 'town' point of view, in which the voice in the story is some unnamed spokesman for all the community," and notes that William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily" is the best-known example. But even in the sentence or two he devotes to the subject, Gardner assumes too much. Is the "we" who narrates Faulkner's Gothic tale about a reclusive spinster really "some unnamed spokesman" or is it the town itself?

Modern readers find collective first-person narrators unsettling; the contemporary mind keeps searching for the familiarity of an individual point of view, since it seems impossible that a group could think and feel, let alone act, as one. The ancient Greeks believed otherwise. Their drama, which is the root of our novel, emerged from the dithyramb, a hymn to the god Dionysus, originally recited in unison by 50 men, a collective voice that survived in the form of the Greek chorus. You could say that the history of Western literature so far has been a journey from the first-person plural to the first-person singular, the signature voice of our time. The solitary first-person narrator -- confessional, idiosyncratic, often unreliable -- is the choice of novelists ranging from Vladimir Nabokov to Philip Roth in some of their most celebrated works. Truth, these writers suggest, is slippery and protean, and authenticity can be found only in individual experience. Broader claims to authority are suspect. To presume to speak, as novelists once blithely did, for a nation, a city or, especially, a generation is to invite protest and ridicule.

All this makes the first-person-plural narrator both a risky proposition and a striking effect, if a writer can pull it off. In clumsy hands, it may seem merely a stunt or, in the case of Ayn Rand's "Anthem," a novella about a collectivist dystopia, drearily tendentious. As Gardner points out, Faulkner, in having the town describe Emily Grierson's courtship and its strange aftermath, thrusts his story's theme -- community values versus personal values, in Gardner's formulation -- to the fore. Too much message too heavily delivered can break the spell, but "A Rose for Emily" is a horror story, not a parable, and by keeping the reader at arm's length from the doings in the Grierson house, Faulkner forces us to imagine the grisly scenes inside. "A Rose for Emily" is as much about privacy versus curiosity or voyeurism as it is about a conflict in values; its power comes from the secrets its narrators can guess at but never get to see. What unites the townsfolk is their shared status of being shut out.

This points to a provocative contrast between the ways writers have used the first-person plural: for male writers, the collective narrator is most often on the outside trying to peep in -- usually at a woman

or women -- but female writers speak from the center of the mystery. Jeffrey Eugenides's novel "The Virgin Suicides" tells of the deaths of the five teenage Lisbon sisters from the perspective of a group of neighborhood boys who adore them from afar. The sisters are kept sequestered by their parents; the isolation might be what drives them to kill themselves. The reason for the suicides remains elusive, however, and this uncertainty compels the boys to pore over the "evidence" the Lisbon sisters left behind, searching for clues. The "we" who narrates Joan Chase's "During the Reign of the Queen of Persia," on the other hand, is, like the Lisbon sisters, an amalgamation of young girls -- two pairs of sisters, the daughters of two sisters -- who describe their coming-of-age in their grandmother's farmhouse in Ohio.

The communal inclinations of women, though often praised, are riddled with ambivalence, and that makes the first-person plural a particularly fraught choice for women writers. Chase's collective narrator is like a puddle of mercury: any drops that temporarily separate from the whole are soon sucked back in. But the idyllic union of their girlhood threatens to become the suffocating, fretful attachment of their mothers' generation, women who can't escape their sisterly bonds to form significant relationships with men. A husband of one of these older women likens the sisters to a close stand of trees, "their slender branches intertwined, thrashing in any wind at all, making much ado about nothing. The sawn-off waterlogged stumps he compared to the few men who ever dared to approach."

THE latest literary venture in first-person plural is Kate Walbert's exquisite "Our Kind," also about a group of women, this time related not by blood but by class and historical moment. They are a handful of upper-middle-class ladies living in a Northeastern suburb, the last generation of such women raised to believe that life offered them no decent alternative to marriage, motherhood and homemaking. They have survived divorce, widowhood, disease, children who self-destruct, children who never call, and now they see themselves as uninteresting, the leftovers of a jettisoned plan. When one member has the group read Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway," whose heroine is a prime specimen of "our kind," they're bored; someone suggests Jane Austen for next time. Theirs is an alliance of convenience, "all of us together, not for companionship, exactly, or high regard, but because we're in the same boat." Yet of all these first-person narrators, this gang is the most inviting. They are good company: funny, tough, loyal, tolerant, jaunty even in their cups. Convinced that life has passed them by, they fail to notice the gift it slipped them on the sly, an ability to be part of their "kind" even as each remains utterly herself. And that may be the trickiest task of all.