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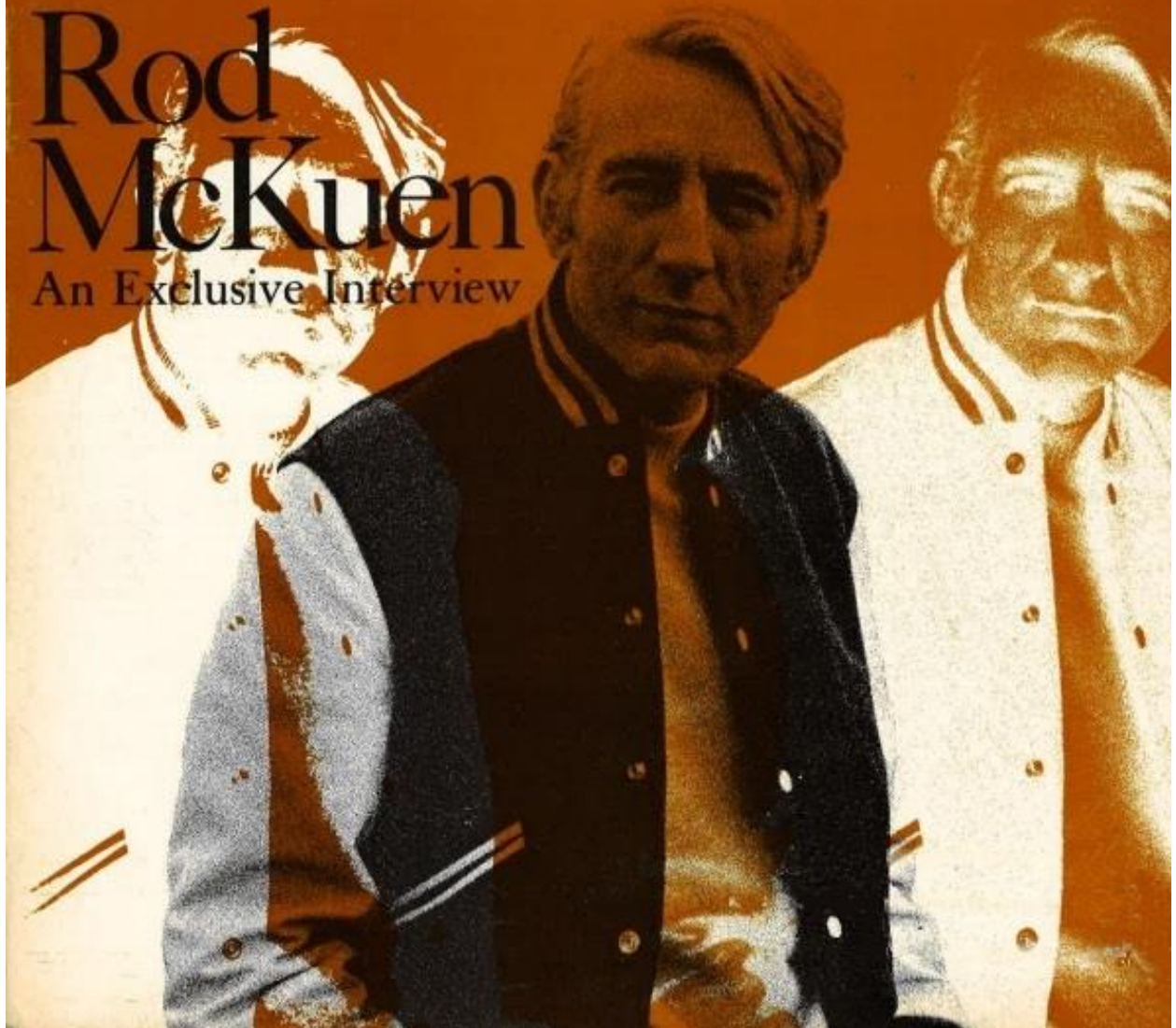
The Winners: WD Creative Writing Contest

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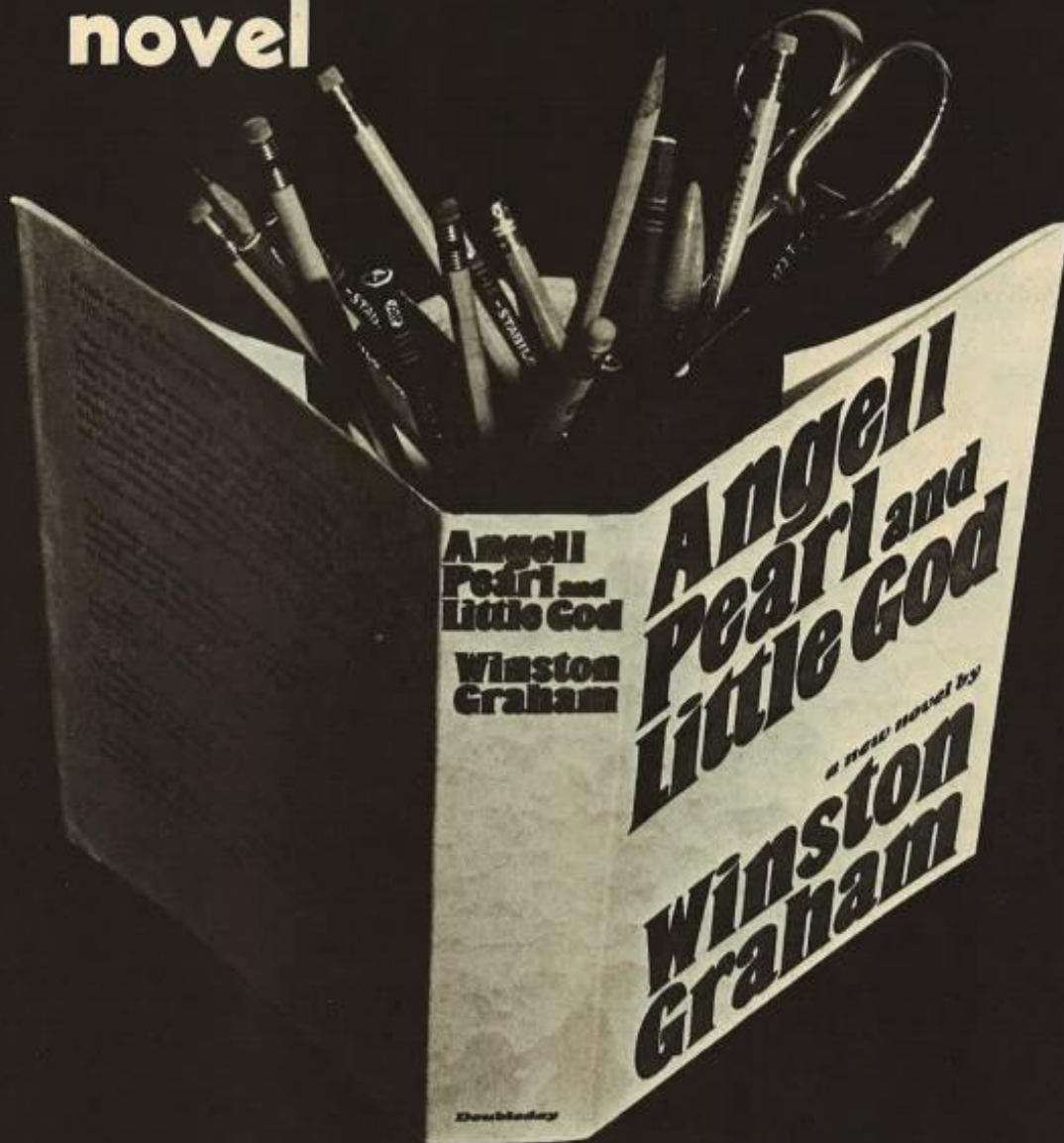
TV Guide: What It Buys

Rod
McKuen
An Exclusive Interview



This Doubleday author wrote his last novel four times—the first three from the viewpoint of each principal character, and finally settling on the third-person, omnipotent-author version. Here's how he analyzes

viewpoint in the novel



by Winston Graham

The author has had over a dozen novels published in England and America and has also collaborated on movie and radio scripts of his works. He lives with his wife in Sussex.

It is likely that the problems which made my last novel *Angell, Pearl and Little God* so difficult to write would not have affected a young writer at all. At least, they would not have affected me as a young writer because when I was young the overmastering need to tell my story would have ridden me roughshod over the manner of its telling. But with the years and with experience one becomes more selective, more self-conscious, and one has more desire for perfection of technique.

(At this stage it will be clear to all who despise "a story" in a novel that they may safely pass on to the next article, for there is nothing here for them. For although I have always had more to say in a novel than the telling of a story, the story itself has always been the sturdy framework on which the rest has depended for its form and shape. I have never been clever enough—or egotistical enough, according to one's point of view to spend 300 pages dipping experimental buckets into the sludge of my own subconscious. I have always been more interested in other people than myself—though there has to be something of myself in every character created, or he will not come alive. I have always been more interested in people than in events; but it is only through events that I have ever been able to illuminate people.)

So to *Angell, Pearl and Little God* and its point of view. It is a commonplace of the suspense novelist to use the first person singular in presenting his story. It brings an immediacy to events, to danger, to crisis, to the smallest detail of the central character's life. It concentrates the narrative wonderfully by preventing the writer from wandering off down byways of irrelevance. By limiting the point of view it helps mystification (on any level—from D. H. Lawrence or Henry James to Raymond Chandler or the latest paperback writer) and the very limitations are a challenge and a stimulus to both author and reader.

But the personally told story has a number of drawbacks, and one which is frequently overlooked is that the narrative character usually remains something of a negative personality—a sort of multiple mirror reflecting other people's images but never his own. Things happen to him, events occur, he feels heat and cold and pleasure and pain, he may have endless narrow escapes and struggle among the enveloping sheets of a dozen lecherous beds; or he may spend the book's lifetime trying to unravel the mystery surrounding two haunted children. In either or any case, it is the villains who beset him, the women who seduce him or, even, the ghosts who haunt him, who come to have personality and remain in the reader's mind. Not "I". Not the mirror person.

This is overstating the case, but by and large it is true. How does one retain the first person and overcome the obstacle? Or can one?

Various authors have tried to do so in the past. My novel, *Marnie* was my first attempt. It seemed to succeed. But whether it succeeded or not, the process fascinated me and made the novel doubly worth writing.

The fault with the average narrator is that he is too normal. His very normality is the plain mirror reflecting the oddities of others. But let the narrator be a psychological case, like *Marnie*, a compulsive thief and sexually frigid.

Her mirror is not plain, it is flawed and slightly distorts what it reflects. All the other characters therefore are at first slightly out of true because of it—that is until the reader adjusts himself. Then you have the intriguing situation of narrator betraying her character, her slightly twisted reasoning, *unselfconsciously*, so that the reader gradually perceives what she is, while she does not know she is so revealing herself. The author is inside the narrator but he does not tell the reader about the narrator, he allows him to find out. He has taken a deliberate step away from his character while not appearing to do so. If this device succeeds, then it altogether raises the stature of the novel.

The first character to present himself to me in *Angell, Pearl and Little God* was the first one named: a stout, greedy, middle-aged lawyer. For years I had had the idea of such a man marrying a pretty shop girl or factory girl less than half his age and then my allowing the events to move forward, the tragi-comedy to work its way out, from there. Not an unusual situation in life. Not an unusual situation in a novel. But here again I wanted to see it through the eyes of this rather mean and unattractive man. The narrating mirror was not going to be quite clear. One would not see Pearl exactly as she was but as Angell saw her. One would also see the rival—as yet a shadowy figure but weekly growing in substance—through Angell's eyes. The tragi-comedy of Angell's betrayal would take on another dimension precisely because he was telling it himself. One would see only a third of the picture, and the light cast upon that third would be brighter for the shadow covering the rest.

But at this stage, not only was I becoming more interested in Pearl, but Godfrey Brown—or Little God—was emerging from the mists and was threatening to monopolize my attention absolutely. At first, just a tough little rowdy on the make, ready to turn any sort of a mildly dishonest penny, he shortly changed in my mind to a mechanic respraying stolen cars and handy with his fists, earning a few pounds here and there sparring in the London East-end gyms; and from there he gradually developed into a chauffeur and suddenly into a man with a career in boxing and the ability and the ambition to get to the top.

At this juncture I knew virtually nothing about boxing, but my constant visits to the East end of London quickened my interest; and then a chance meeting with one of the big fight promoters opened every door. By this time fascination with the subject itself had taken over from any mere matter of duty-research, and it seemed abundantly clear that I could write a book entirely about the boxing career of Little God. The world of prize-fighting had become much more interesting to me than the world of law offices or even of a pretty girl on the perfume counter of a big store.

Yet, since I generally find it a mistake to be diverted from original intentions, I began to write the novel in the first person of Wilfred Angell, middle-aged Bachelor of Law.

At first it went well. To begin, it is all Angell's adventures: his consultation with the doctor, his visit to Switzerland, his meeting with and courtship of Pearl. It is fascinating and right to see all this through the slightly distorting eyes of a stout, selfish, greedy man. But very soon I began to appreciate how *much* I should lose. The drawback as well as the stimulus of the first person singular narrative is of course that the adventures of only one person and the workings of only one mind can

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Viewpoints In The Novel

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be revealed. In this book, one would have had to see Pearl's adventures with Godfrey only insofar as she told Angell of them. One would have had to see only the boxing matches that Angell went to or again such as he might have had related to him by Pearl or Lady Vosper or Vincent Birman, two other characters in the story. After about 25,000 words I stopped for reassessment.

Now something like this had happened to me once before—in the writing of *Marnie*. That time I was half way through the book; it was the first time I had written in the person of a woman; and I found myself gagging at the love scenes in which the narrator was made love to by a man. So I stopped and began again at page one, writing it entirely afresh in the third person and from an omniscient point of view. And, although one can begin cheerfully enough writing "she came down the steps" instead of "I came down the steps", it doesn't go on like that. Whole areas of the book take on an entirely different complexion. So I persevered in this revision, and having rewritten (in long hand, as I do everything) about 45,000 words of *Marnie*, I stopped and left it alone for a month, and then went back to read it through. And quite clearly the new version was losing enormously in the change. Not merely was the distorting mirror removed but the language lacked the colloquial immediacy of the original. The whole book seemed curiously prosaic where before it had been dynamic.

So back I went to the original version, reading it, rewriting it here and there until I came again to the troublesome love scenes. But this time I had somehow sunk deeper into the character of the girl and they went through without let or hindrance. When the book was finished I was utterly convinced—and still am—that the first person narrative was a tremendous gain upon any other possible way of presenting that novel.

Omniscient Third Person

My reluctance, therefore, to change from this method of narrative in *Angell, Pearl and Little God* is understandable, and it was only after an agony of indecision that I eventually sat down and laboriously rewrote the first 25,000 words in the omniscient third person.

Again a month's wait, again a careful reading, again a tremendous sense of loss. Angell's predicament cried out to be told in the biased first person. Also, even though so differently told from my other novel *Marnie*, a loss of colloquial immediacy in the telling.

Changing Viewpoint

So one came to an impasse. Neither way would work. Either way meant giving up so much. After about a further month's horrible indecision, I decided to leave the first chapters, as told by Angell, in *his* skin; and then began to tell the next part in *Pearl's* skin. This way one still got the urgency of first person narrative, and still it could be told through the mirror of another personality: it was only that the personality changed part way.

About The Novel Discussed in This Article

"*Angell, Pearl and Little God*" is a long suspenseful, intense novel about 4 London types from 4 different levels of London society—a bachelor solicitor named Wilfrid Angell; a woman race driver, Lady Flora Vosper, who is a real daredevil; a perfume counter salesgirl named Pearl Friedel; and a tough, small-time, very ambitious, very fiery and very good featherweight fighter, nicknamed Little God. He is chaffeur to Lady Vosper who has lost her driver's license for drunken driving. Angell, the lawyer, is making for the first time in his life, a suspicious deal, in which he will come out with a killing. He becomes interested in Pearl and asks her to marry him.

Meanwhile, the prizefighter has cut in on Pearl at a dance one night and becomes fascinated by her. Most girls are a push-over for him but Pearl isn't and he wants her very much. The solicitor Angell, the girl Pearl, the prizefighter Little God, and Lady Vosper form a quartet, each wanting something from the other, building up to marriage between the lawyer and the girl for security, a fiery explosive affair between the prizefighter and the girl, an arranged mis-match fight in which Angell gets even with Little God for seducing his wife. Little God realizes he has been mis-matched and beats up Angell as revenge. Angell finally kills Little God when he discovers him in bed with his wife in his own house.

This is covered up so that it appears to the police that Little God had come with a revolver to threaten Angell for mis-matching Little God in a fight. Pearl substantiates this testimony and Angell narrowly squeaks through as innocent of the murder although, of course, he committed it. He and Pearl live together in a sort of armed truce until after the trial when obviously they will separate. Gradually they drop into a sort of comfortable way of life, go for a holiday in Tenerife, Africa where in the sun is a man who smiles at her and she realizes finally having been sexually aroused by Little God, that this will be the next real man in her life.

It's a tight, very suspenseful novel, filled with insights into the solicitor's life, the shop girl's, the pugilist and the county daredevil aristocrat.

After this it was quite a simple matter several chapters later to switch the personal narrative a third time to Little God. In this way the novel even seemed to gain something, because each time one saw the other characters through a different flawed mirror, thus helping to create them in all three physical dimensions, with the fourth dimension of the self-revealing narrator added.

Thus I reached about the halfway mark of the book. After *Little God's* piece it was natural to turn to a new long piece by Angell. After Angell, Pearl. This way one could gradually work right through to the climax of the novel and so finish it. It was almost a new idea!

Again a gap of a month, and I read through what I had written. A new idea? Surely not. It had been used by other novelists before, and never as far as I could remember, with complete success. What begins as a brilliant device ends as a gimmick. To change the narrator once or twice is perhaps permissible. After that the wheels begin to creak. The author labors to bring it off, and both he and the reader are conscious of the effort. It *looks* like a device, and once a device becomes obvious it ceases to have any place in a work of art.

After this rejection—and it was ultimate and absolute on my part—I was left once again with the alternatives of either choosing one of the three principal characters and restricting the knowledge and the illumination of character to what he could perceive, thus gaining a little but losing a great deal. Or accepting the fact that as this novel had developed, the challenge of the first person singular could not be taken up and returning to the omniscient third person, with its loss of idiosyncrasy and immediacy but its enormous scope, its complete lack of blinkered vision.

So I now scrapped what I had written—all but the 25,000 words in which I had experimented in this style six months before—and from then on wrote the book as it later appeared.

Although I am the last person to be able to judge this objectively, the success of the book and particularly the success of the characters, does give me the impression that possibly this preliminary experimentation, this lighting up of the characters, so to speak, from different angles, helped to give them extra solidity and shape.

It was an interesting experiment, but I commend it only to those with ample time and endurance. □

The above article from *Writer's Digest*, Volume 52, issue 10, cover date October 1972 was reprised by WG in *Memoirs*, 1.10, although *not* exactly as seen here. True to form, he took the opportunity of republication to cut a little, add a little, revise and buff a little whilst leaving the thrust of his arguments unchanged.

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