DISARMING VOICES IN ANN PANCAKE’S *STRANGE AS THIS WEATHER HAS BEEN*

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Portland, Oregon, where I have lived off and on since I was seventeen years old, is filled with social and political activists. Every weekend, you can find classes on subjects ranging from permaculture, to building worm boxes, nonviolent protesting, guerilla planting and independent publishing. If you are student out of work, you can feel comforted by the fact that, as a last resort, you can usually find a job as a canvasser for one of the hundreds of social justice campaigns going on during any particular season.

Every evening, Portland neighborhoods are well-mapped out and traversed by canvassers carrying khaki knapsacks and clipboards covered in plastic—to protect against the rain—knocking on doors and earnestly educating neighborhoods to raise funds for everything from stopping Liquid Natural Gas to clearcuts, saving dolphins, children, and salmon or eliminating invasive plants and insects.

One spring, I found a job working for the community activist branch of the AFL-CIO. Working America educates residents about issues affecting working people ranging from healthcare to corporate personhood, and the best part about Working America is the training you receive in getting your message “through the door.” At the start of each campaign, we learned a “rap” that had been carefully written and edited and was meant to be the starting point for each conversation we had with prospective supporters.

As canvassers, we were taught that the key factor in getting “doors” to listen to our rap was the inflection and tone of our voices. If we didn’t acquire a likeable, authoritative tone we were less likely to fill petitions we circulated to help influence legislators. We spent hours and hours in the office each week role playing our raps and offering feedback to help fellow canvassers deliver their message more effectively. Each afternoon, as we drove to our mapped-out turf, we practiced our rap yet again.
Canvassers were taught to use “down tones.” A lower voice increased our believability and authority while nervousness that creates higher voices could instantly turn the perspective donor off and make them slam the door. Other aspects of voice we practiced included speed, friendliness, use of language, and facial expressions. No matter what we were campaigning for, we were constantly told that it was our voice that would make a person busily preparing dinner for their family, tired after a long day, take a bit of time to listen, that it was our voice that would make them take the extra few minutes at the door to hear what we had to say.

Writing fiction about political and social justice issues requires the same attention to voice that we learned in our canvassing workshops, only in fiction it is the voice of the character and narrator that will seduce readers into setting aside their busy lives to stay with our story long enough to engage with its characters and hear what they have to say. Our contemporary life fragments a reader’s attention into the vortex of the bullet-speed Internet, news media, and thousands and thousands of subliminally seductive images in magazines, film and television. In social and political novels that deal with issues readers may find emotionally challenging, the writer’s attention to the voices of his or her characters is especially crucial. Just as it was difficult for me to get residents in neighborhoods to listen to the political issue I needed to educate them about, just as it was my voice and the personality it conveyed that would get me through the door, so it is the voice of a character, or a narrative voice that will keep readers reading novels conveying important political messages.

Ann Pancake, author of *Strange as this Weather has Been*, grew up in Appalachia and her political conscience is an integral part of her writing, but any political views she
shares with readers are hidden seamlessly in the dramatic story she tells of a family struggling to survive three weeks after a devastating flood more than likely caused by erosion created by coal mining.

Although *Strange as this Weather Has Been* is a deep exploration of the effects of mountaintop removal on a family living in Appalachia, readers care about mountaintop removal because they are lead to deeply care about the unique, tough-spirited, intelligent characters she creates to tell her story. And readers care about her characters because she creates distinctly different voices that are impossible to turn away from. Their voices are so unforgettable that they will undoubtedly become subjects of readers’ dreams.

It is by using the tools a novel offers, and telling her story through the voices of four main characters—Bant, Corey, Dane, and Lace See—that Pancake is able to convey the complex inner struggles created by coal mining and poverty.

From the opening chapter, Lace See’s voice disarms the reader with her tough wit, her feisty don’t-get-me attitude, and her lyrical language as she struggles to convey what home has come to mean for her during her absence.

The novel’s subject soon becomes how Lace See manages to keep her family functioning under the socioeconomic stress of poverty in addition to struggles of day to day existence after a devastating flood. The novel is also about the brutal mistreatment of the land and the people who live there by coal mining companies, and her daughter Bant’s political awakening. Bant’s search for hidden sediment retention ponds that put her community under constant risk of another more dangerous black flood becomes an important part of the novel because of what she sacrifices in her search for them.
Energy corporations who seek coal generally move into an area and seduce communities into accepting coal mining practices by promising high-paying jobs and economic stability with very little regard for the destruction of land and resources their coal mining practices will cause. It is through the voices of her four main characters that Pancake creates for us a vivid picture of the effects of mountain top removal that no political speech, set of talking points, canvass rap, or environmental impact statement could ever drive home.

Well-written novels allow us to feel as if we are living the story right along with a character, and by spending time with unforgettable characters during the time it takes us to read a novel, we are more likely to come away with a deeper understanding of their lives. Readers will never forget Bant's worry that she will get toxic pollutants into her bloodstream via a scraped arm when she falls down in pollutant-laden mud. Readers will never forget the image seen through Bant’s eyes of Lace See forging courageously through floodwaters to retrieve a weedeater and lawnmower, the tools her husband needs for the only work he has. (Pancake 18)

In Lace See’s opening chapter we learn she had hoped to leave Southern West Virginia and never come back, but winds up becoming very homesick her first year in college. On a trip back home, she falls in love with a beautiful fifteen-year-old boy. During Christmas vacation that same year, she winds up getting pregnant. It is through her eyes, and the eyes of her children, that Pancake tells her story.

After Lace See shares the story of her pregnancy with Bant and her marriage to Jimmy Make, the story jumps to three weeks after the community of Yellow-root suffered a terrible flood that wasn’t supposed to occur for decades. Global environmental
changes may be the cause of the early flood, but family members suspect it was caused by coal mining. Bant’s growing political awareness, nurtured by her mother, and to a lesser extent by her father, becomes an integral part of Bant’s voice. The story of the flood, Lace’s pregnancy with Bant, and her marriage to Jimmy are woven with back story and flashbacks throughout the novel to become the threads of plot that weave together the brilliant voices of her four main characters. Although Pancake also devotes two important chapters in the voices of two other members of the community, Avery and Mogey, my paper is focusing on Pancake’s four main characters.

Later in the novel, it is through Lace See’s voice that we are given a window into the struggles a mother faces trying to keep a marriage together with a man morally and psychologically defeated because the job he should be given is being performed by someone else. Work promised to community workers was often given to out-of-town scabs in the end. (Pancake 264) It's much easier for coal companies to convince out-of-town laborers to cut off the top of a mountain and throw toxic waste into a river residents swim in and wade through, much easier to convince out-of-town workers to destroy a community that they didn't grow up in, one they feel they don’t own.

It is also much easier for an out-of-town laborer to essentially rape a young girl from a community he is visiting just as he is raping her mountain. Through Bant’s voice we come to understand how a political activist is born, what a political awakening might look like, and the hope is, that by living with Bant through her story, readers, too, may wake up to the complicated effects of mountain top removal. (Pancake 324)

Yellow-root comes more clearly alive as we see the specific details important to the character whose voice we are listening to. Together, the four voices create a complex
understanding of the effects of poverty and coal mining on this one particular family. For readers, Bant becomes their most reliable narrator, because it is through her eyes that we understand how physically attached she and her people are to their land. We see the land’s beauty as well as the physical disgust she feels for the torture her land suffers at the hands of coal mining corporations.

You had your quiet places, Grandma places, your places where peace would settle in your chest—then you had these places, places with a sharpness, a hardness, so utterly opposite all the rumpled deep green, you’d have to slow down and refocus your eyes. Like the Big Drain, and the crumbling-down coke ovens at the far side of Yellow-root, and old driftmouths covered with rusty steel bars, and tilting-over tipples, and the mine cracks like earthquake scars in the ground, all my life I’d stumbled onto these used-up left behind places, and sometimes I saw ahead—only these places would be left (Pancake 157).

Bant’s voice is filled with made up words that she creates for herself to try and describe the unnaturalness of a landscape she grew up believing was normal until she began to wake up to the truth. She wakes up to what has happened to her beloved homeland at the same time she wakes up to her own body. Describing a mountain through the sensations in her body is the perfect metaphor for a teenage girl. And we feel the mountain’s humanity all the more forcefully because we witness its destruction through her eyes. Bant’s original use of language in her Appalachian dialect transfers to readers’ imaginations her intimate relationship with her homeland.
Appalachia was a rich farmland where families survived off the land until coal miners moved in, forcing families to become dependent on the dangerous work that would destroy their land and damage their bodies. Through the voice of Lace See, we see her father’s deteriorating health and his struggles breathing with black lung after spending many years spent in the coal mines:

And I remember Daddy’s breathing in the living room when both Mom and Sheila left and we were alone. The doctor’d finally put him on oxygen, tubes through his nose, and now every rasp breath came a shick shick shick. A spider in his web, I couldn’t help but hear him, trapping one breath. One breath. One breath more (Pancake, 88).

All of Pancake’s characters help us understand what they are seeing and feeling with images organic to the world surrounding them. This uniquely original comparison of labored breathing to a spider trying to capture insects in a web instantly shares with us how it must feel for Lace See to listen to her father struggle for breath. The sounds we hear through the character’s voices help us vividly imagine the experiences they share with us. The sounds add another important dimension to the imaginary world Pancake builds for us.

From Bant’s voice, when she takes off on her own to try and find out the hidden secrets of mountain top removal that are putting her community at risk, she describes the sounds she hears closer to the huge coal-mining machinery. She is listening closely to avoid being found by company guards:

I heard nothing but the machines destructing overhead. It sounded different up in here, you could hear it more clear, the noises separated
out—revving motors and backup beepers and crashes and bangs. Scrape of that humongous shovel against rock (Pancake 102).

Bant’s description brings her world vividly alive as readers suddenly become aware of what must be a constant hum of machinery farther down the mountain where she lives in Yellow-root. The sounds that aren’t “separated out” become a tacit part of Bant’s description of hiking closer to the machinery. The unique, specific details, told from each character’s point of view, in their own voice, allow readers to build the world Bant’s family lives in. In a novel trying to drive home the injustice of coal mining practices, making readers feel the effects of coal mining with all senses helps them stay present for the latent political messages woven into the story.

It is through the voices of Bant’s younger brothers Corey and Dane that we are able to see, from many angles, the effects of the flood damage in surprising, unexpected ways. The brothers hide their shoes in a refrigerator that has washed up on their lawn so they can continue walking through the toxic floodwaters like they want to—barefooted. (Pancake 25) An eccentric town drunk becomes one of Corey’s heroes because he is always building something unique and interesting with washed up parts. (Pancake 66)

The unnatural color of the water created by coal mining is described from every point of view until we viscerally feel as if we, too, have to wade through the toxic puddles. The colors and smells, tastes, and fear this toxic water creates are one of the threads tying all of the characters’ voices together. When Corey’s mother sends him through the floodwaters to find their staircase, we get one of the first descriptions of the floodwaters in his voice.
They slosh through pigshit-colored creek water that comes to right below Corey’s knees, right above Tommy’s. Used to be too deep to wade, but every year it gets more shallow, and the water with a bad odor to it, even though it was two years ago all the fish and crawdads died. A different thing to watch (Pancake26).

Each character has their own level of understanding about what they are seeing, depending on their age. In Corey’s voice, what we come to understand about the details he gives us are often above his ten-year-old head. Pancake never beats her readers over the head with the environmental effects of coal mining. When we hear, in Corey’s voice, about the dying fish and crawdads, the matter-of-fact tone he uses to describe what he sees makes us believe him, but we also feel a clench in our gut as we understand that toxins have been filling the water from a time long before this flood. These feelings are made more heart-breaking because Corey cannot always entirely understand the significance of what he shares with us.

But trying to describe the “voice” of a novel’s characters is like trying to describe the nails and bolts, electrical wiring, and framework of a house that has already been built. And this difficulty increases with the skillfulness of the writer’s hand. Readers enter the world of well-crafted novels and live within the framework of a character’s consciousness, viewing the reality of the story-world from windows, doors, and secret open spaces in the brickwork the author has painstakingly crafted. Once readers have willingly suspended their disbelief and entered the novel’s home, seeing the novel’s inner workings is a difficult thing to do. But for student writers, struggling to understand the ephemeral components writers use to create their characters’ or narrators’ voices, such
deconstruction of the novel’s framework is essential to learning their craft. Many aspects of writing the novel are much easier to grasp than “voice”. Characterization, setting, dialogue, creating a scene, are tangible aspects of writing and, like a step’s height and width, can be measured and imitated by other writers. But what exactly is “voice” and how does a novelist write this quality into their work?

The term “voice” is a loaded word that can mean many things to different writers. Some writers, when speaking about voice, are referring to the author’s voice, a recognizable quality that seems to be the thread tying together all of a specific writer’s works, and may include certain habits of sentence length, phrasing, and even types of obsessions. For the purposes of my paper I will not be referring to an author’s voice, however, because what I am more interested in discussing is the voice of a character which may or may not be entirely separate from the writer’s voice. Uncovering the framework of how these voices were built is made easier by searching for vocabulary, manner of speaking, preoccupations, obsessions and particular repetitive responses of each character. Other components of voice include sentence structures, use of dialect, and the objects in a characters’ surroundings that they find meaning in and may come to symbolize deeper emotions.

In an interview for Other Voices, Dorothy Allison describes how important it was for her to find the right voice for her acclaimed novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

It took me a long time to teach myself how to write a novel. I was writing stories, in part, to find the voice. And at one point I think the count was thirty-nine drafts. It took a long time to get the voice right, and some of
the stories I published along the way were attempts to get the voice right some of them worked, some of them didn’t (Allison 62).

One of Pancake’s particular strengths is that she is able to convey, in a myriad of ways, the landscape of her characters’ interiority in their own voices. She shares with us the deep thoughts, feelings, and unconscious longings of her characters. She reveals her characters’ interior world with imagery, objective correlative, flashbacks, and idioms specific to the character whose head we are in.

In Writing the Breakout Novel Workbook, Donald Maas describes why including a characters’ interior world is so essential to creating a character’s voice:

I find that most manuscripts, whether written in the first or the third person do not bring us as deeply as they might inside characters’ heads. Point of View is more than just a set of eyes looking upon the world. Those eyes come with a mouth and a brain. Those must come into play, too, or your novel will have the chillness of a movie camera. (Maass 185)

Maass goes on to add that it is only when we are including the interior voices of our characters that we are fully using the many dimensions of character the form of the novel allows us to create.

In a personal interview with Pancake, she explains why she decided to tell her story with the interior voices of several characters instead of just one:

As I got farther into the process, I realized that I needed to tell this story from multiple perspectives to give the reader a spectrum of views on mountaintop removal, a range of reactions and feelings and experiences. Of course, no narrator in the novel truly “supports” mountaintop
removal—Corey is fascinated by it, but you can’t say he’s a 
“supporter”—but I wanted to show what it was like to live with this 
terrible force in your life if you were a brave little kid who loves 
machines; or if you were a teenager trying to come of age in a place you 
love that is being destroyed; if you were a mother trying to save the place 
and culture for her children’s sake; or if you were outright scared to death 
all the time. I know now, after many people have finished reading the 
book and have gotten in touch with me about it, that the multiple narrators 
are especially effective because I’ve been able to touch emotionally a 
broader range of people than I would have with a single narrator.

And along with reaching as many varied readers as possible, telling the story of a 
community’s destruction at the hands of greedy corporations through many voices helps 
readers to understand how much is at stake in the fight to end mountaintop removal. 
While listening to Corey’s voice, readers are moved by the vulnerability of children 
having to play in toxic floodwaters. As readers get to know Bant, they come to 
understand the deep beauty of Appalachia and how political activists are born. As Lace 
See tells her story, we understand the fierce protective spirit of a mother struggling to 
raise her children in poverty, after a devastating flood, while refusing to leave her home.

Like Bant, Lace See often shares her interior emotions by connecting her feelings 
to the landscape around her. Because Bant and Lace See’s voices are so intimately woven 
into descriptions of their environment, readers soon associate environmental damage as 
an assault on characters’ physical bodies, too:
He picked me up in his truck the next morning between rains. The sky a fresh-washed watery blue and the clouds on the move, and as I stood out there under it, waiting for him, my insides felt like that sky. Thin clouds blowing through me. (Pancake 91)

In the next scene, Mogey, a family friend, uses nature to help Lace See overcome shame about her unwanted pregnancy by taking her up on the mountain to dig for ramps. He seems to know that by reconnecting Lace See with the earth, he can re-empower her, while also showing her a way to make money for her and her baby. Lace See describes what going out into the country felt like:

I hadn’t been out in three months, and I tell you, it was like light in your eyes after a long darkness, only it was not just my eyes, but my self felt that way. A squint with my whole body, and I pulled my jacket closer. (Pancake 91)

And then we understand what a relief the feel of loam in her hands is to Lace See as we see her digging fast and furiously as if she’s found gold. We see Lace See’s pent up emotions released into digging through the earth.

I got down on the dead damp leaves. Then my knees were pushing into the black loam under that, and I could smell the ramps from where Mogey was already pulling them up. I shoved my trowel in the ground and started working around the bulbs, easing them out, careful not to nick or chop. Then I was digging, and after a while, I realized I’d dropped the trowel altogether and was working them out with my hands, my fingers mud-crusted, the black pushing up under my nails. I worked steady with my
hands only, not thinking, dropping them into the buckets by their hair, first
the clump sounds as they hit the plastic bottom, and then no sound at all as
the bucket filled up. (Pancake 92)

This important memory Lace See shares with us, of regaining her confidence by
reconnecting to the soil and plants, shows readers, in a specific way, how the pollution
caused by coal mining threatens her community and their livelihood. By taking time to
describe the significant details of digging through loam for ramps—“working around the
bulbs, easing them out, careful not to nick or chop” “black pushing up under my nails”
“first the clump sounds” “then no sound at all”—readers gain more insight into how
important the mountain is to Lace See and her family. Readers feel as if they are digging
with her through the loam.

Earlier in the novel, Lace See tells a story that is remarkable, not only in
displaying our heroine’s bravery, but also for the nuanced understanding she has of
herself. We hear the voice of a typical eleven-year-old who wants to do something her
mother doesn’t want her to do: go to an away basketball game seventy-five miles away
with her friends. When Lace See’s mother says “no” she fearlessly plots her next move,
which is to avoid talking about the game at all after that so no one will suspect she is
going to go anyway. When game night comes, she climbs out a window and hitchhikes
seventy-five miles.

The story is told in Lace See’s voice which means that prepositions are left off,
for example in this sentence, “Soon as I finished the supper dishes, I slipped on back into
me and Sheila’s room…” “I slipped on back” is a speaking voice and because Ann
Pancake grew up in West Virginia she has the voice of her characters clearly in her head
while she writes. “Sheila and Dad busy watching TV, Buck and Roy and Grandpa Jones, even at eleven I wouldn’t be caught dead watching Hee Haw—” (Pancake 1). We learn, in just a few sentences, that Lace See lives in a home small enough that she must share a room with her sister and she has an independent spirit that more than likely no one will ever tame. Her stubborn courage might be a trial for any mother, which means we love Lace right off the bat. The story she tells us is rich with tension that Lace See knows how to draw out. Lace, the first character we meet in Strange As this Weather Has Been, has the clear voice of a story-teller, someone we would want to sit in a coffee shop with all day to listen to stories about her life. Lace See disarms readers into listening to a story that will ultimately be about coal mining practices because we want to hear her stories.

There is plenty of inherent tension in a scene where an eleven-year-old girl goes hitchhiking alone after dark. But this is what Lace says happened during her adventure. Tough, independent Lace disarms us with her sweet comment:

But then three miracles happened, two for me and one for mom. First, I made it to Route 9 and had my thumb out before a single neighbor saw me. Second, a man in a Lanz truck picked me right up and drove me all seventy-five miles to the Civic Center without a word about my age, my parents or why I was hitching. And third, and least surprising, given the time and place, the Lanz truck man didn’t do me no harm. (Pancake 2)

It took me until the third reading before I noticed the words “and least surprising” which is a very important subtlety that conveys a part of Lace that will travel with her throughout her story—when she tells us stories about her life, she is careful to include the fact, that although her family struggles with incomprehensible difficulties, her homeland
is not only beloved, but has also nurtured she and her family very well. Her community is a strong, loving, community. Her family’s lives have been made precarious by environmental and economic impact of coal mining practices hidden away behind gates at the top of the mountain, not from a lack of love. Lace See’s insistence to explain her people in an honest, compassionate, and loving way is another quality that makes us willing to listen to her political views about coal mining.

Another important quality in Lace’s voice that disarms readers into reading a story that includes a strong political message is her believability. Because so many readers will have never experienced a flood caused by mountaintop removal and because the politics of coal mining will be so new to many readers, developing trust in the characters who are going to educate us about what coal mining does to a community and, more specifically, to the individuals in that community, is essential. In this first chapter, we learn from Lace See’s understanding of the many layers of meaning in her own life story, told in her own voice, that we can later trust her impressions and opinions about the politics affecting her community.

In this first chapter, we learn about Lace See’s complex understanding of how the outside world’s opinion of her community, and the people in it, affected her view of herself and her life goals while growing up.

Here was fine for Mom, Dad and Sheila—You could take one look at them and see how they fit—but only outside of here would I, Lace See, live real life. Ages one to eighteen were just a waiting for that. Nothing on TV, nothing in Books, nothing in magazines looked much like our place
or much like us, and it’s interesting, how you can believe what’s on TV is realer than what you feel under your feet. (Pancake 3)

Hidden in the eleven-year old voice is the older adult narrator’s understanding of the youthful fallacy of her own view made more poignant when we realize that she does not “escape” but comes back to marry and have children in the very community she wants to get away from. The older narrator is explaining to us how it is not so much the fault of her community, but instead, the view of the outside world on her community, that made her feel she needed to get away.

In a 2007 interview with Ann Pancake for Willow Springs conducted by Niccolas Arnold and Michael Baccam, Pancake directly explains what she was trying to convey, through the voices of her characters, about the community she had grown up in:

No, it was love of the land and the people’s passion. Love of the land and my outrage over the way the people in my region are being treated. In Strange As This Weather Has Been, I needed to convey a sense of legacy to show what is being lost and why it’s worth saving and what future generations are going to have when the land is destroyed. I guess what also drove me was my own grief over the loss of culture in Appalachia, the loss of the language, and the loss of civility and things like that. There are things West Virginians still have that have been lost to an extent in the rest of American culture—warmth and generosity and community spirit and respect and work ethic—and in Appalachia, these qualities are being preserved. I’m sure they’re being preserved in other parts of the country, too, but in general, I believe they’re in decline. So I think it’s an
expression of grief over the loss of some of these things. (Willow Springs 2)

Pancake reveals the warmth and generosity of her characters—characteristics that make them, at times, more vulnerable to the greed of corporations—through their voices and their actions. Part of Lace See’s shame in her unwanted pregnancy comes from her worry that she will burden her struggling family with another mouth to feed. And later, when Lace See eagerly begins to pull too many ramps from the soil, her gentle friend Mogey reminds her of the ethics of foraging. “‘That’s enough there, Lace.’ I looked up. ‘No reason to dig em all. Other folks’ll be up here, too’” (Pancake 92). The contrast of the huge coal mining company’s machinery removing entire mountaintops, with no regard for the environmental damage they are causing, is in stark contrast to Mogey’s ethics about carefully only digging for ramps you currently need. Lace See’s voice, as she describes her spiritual renewal under Mogey’s guidance, makes us feel the importance of the landscape. Through her voice we feel soil under our own fingernails as we hear her tell the story.

In early chapters, Pancake acquaints us with the dialect that helps create her characters’ voices. Although each voice is unique and different, words specific to Appalachian dialect run through the text letting us truly hear the characters’ voices with words like “realer” and “livening.” “I let come in the hurt,” Bant says, when explaining how she feels when seeing the moonscape that is her mountain (Pancake 165). Corey describes the huge machine that performs the mountaintop removal, “lit all over like a carnival ride, and roller-coaster shaped, but a real roller coaster, not a game one, the livening violence to it” (Pancake 162). Near the end of the novel, Bant uses the word
“babified” to describe the sniffing, out-of-town worker she bargains away her virginity with so he will take her up on the mountain to find the sediment ponds (Pancake 330).

Also from the 2007 interview for Willow Springs Pancake describes how she came to invent the language she uses to create her characters’ voices:

I think the language in Appalachia is more elastic than Standard English. Maybe partly because people there aren’t as formally educated as people tend to be outside, the grammar isn’t as strict and there’s more flexibility—to both make up words but also to change and play with syntax. There’s a great freedom in joining words together, compounding words, so when I make up words in my novel like ‘speak-taste’ and ‘leaf-wait,’ it’s not that I’ve heard those exact words used by somebody back home, but I grew up hearing people make up their own words, along with more commonly used compounds like “gray-headed lady,” or “pitiful-looking,” or “big-bellied,” words like that. Also nouns and adjectives are sometimes used as verbs, like “I’m doctoring with that Indian man over in Winchester,” or “They mounded up the dirt real high,” and in my work that pattern shows up in sentences like “They rumored that dam to bust every spring” (Willow Springs 5).

By using the dialect her characters think with to create their interior world, we understand what a close relationship Pancake’s characters have to their mountain. Many of the made up words are used to describe what the coal mining equipment is doing to their land. The made up language also describes the beauty of the Appalachian landscape that is usually so hard to put into words. The made up language gives words to feelings
that are often too hard to express and allows readers to understand those emotions in a
deeper way. By sharing her characters’ interior lives, and telling their story in the voice
they use when thinking, readers share characters’ vulnerabilities in ways they could not
witness through a more authorial narrative.

Pancake’s ability to create unique, interesting, likeable characters with strong
individual voices is what makes readers care about coal mining. In a 2010 personal
interview with Whitney Otto, author of How to Make An American Quilt, Otto explains
her views about why creating a well-rounded character with a believable voice is so
important to novels incorporating politics and themes of social justice issues:

In real life, if a stranger sits next to you on a bus and begins telling you her
worldview you immediately try to figure out a way to move to another
seat. After all, you don't know this person so you have no context for she
is telling you. The fact that you may even agree with what she is saying
becomes unimportant without knowing her (without a context). However,
if an old friend sits down next to you on a bus and begins telling you her
worldview (which could be identical to the stranger's worldview) you will
listen, and listen closely. You care what she has to say. Your friendship,
that is, years of familiarity, is the context. You know how to weigh out
and judge what you're being told; you may agree, you may disagree but--
and this is important--you won't be desperate to change seats on the bus.”.

Otto implies that we need to get to know a character, like we would a new friend,
before the character begins describing beliefs about political issues. Accordingly,
Pancake takes us into scenes of mountaintop removal in the second chapter, our first
introduction to Bant’s voice. A less skillful writer might have gone off into a lesson about
the politics of mountaintop removal, feeling she needs to explain the problem to us so
that we will understand what her characters are going through before she dives into her
scene. But Pancake completely trusts her characters to transmit the political information
we need through their thoughts, actions and their memories of living through the flood.

In Bant’s first chapter she describes a day when her father takes her up to show
her what mountain top removal looks like. Bant’s mother wants her daughter to see what
might have caused the flood they just experienced.

The scene starts off right away in Bant’s voice as if Bant were already a few
minutes into her story. “So he took a blowtorch to it. He hacksawed it and he
blowtorched it, and I made sure to stay clear of that flame. But every once in awhile he
would motion at me take the hammer to the lock, try to spring it that way” (Pancake 14).
The very first story we are hearing from Bant is about the day her Dad takes her up on a
coal mining road into their beautiful Appalachians and breaks the lock to their gate to
show her the bare mistreated mountainside and the practices that more than likely caused
the flood. Even though we don’t know Bant well yet, when she sits down beside us, we
want to listen, we don’t want to move away.

In the first paragraph, the padlock is an “it” which is exactly what a speaking
voice uses to describe an object that is so very important to a story, an object too packed
with meaning at times to name. We don’t know how old Bant is, but she seems to be
around fourteen or fifteen years old. And we don’t know, in the beginning of this chapter,
what lock she is taking off, or where it is, but we know the lock is important and that
Bant is scared to break it. “But every once in a while he’d step back and motion at me
take the hammer to the lock try to spring it that way. I did what he wanted, but I did it leery, listening for a guard every other knock… Until Jimmy Make cocked his head, lifted half his lip, and kind of growled at me. ‘C’mon now, girl. Hit her harder.’”

Here we are introduced to the politics of mountaintop removal in a brilliant way, through the feel of the lock a young girl is being taught how to break into, the very lock that is trying to hide what is being done to their homeland. Through Bant’s voice we understand viscerally as we break this lock with her. By not telling us why she is breaking the lock or what she and her father are doing on the mountain yet, we stay glued to her story, so by the time the very short explanation tells us what is going on, the reader is well-hooked and willing to listen. Even though writing rules may dictate that political issues should best not be raised until far into a novel, Pancake creates a character for whom a political awakening is such an integral part of her voice that containing this awakening within Bant’s opening story is exactly the right thing to do.

Although Lace is the first person we meet in the novel, and it is her story that binds the other characters together, Bant is the character who helps readers truly understand her family and community. After Bant’s exposure to the rape of mountain land hidden behind the gates, she is determined to find out if there are sediment ponds waiting to cause another flood, but in order to do this, she must find the path to the top of the mountain where they are hidden. Her search for these sediment ponds is one of the preoccupations that always lets us know that we are in Bant’s voice. Bant is our reliable observer who interprets the behavior of those around her and lets us travel the path of political awakening right along with her.
Bant becomes a house-painter after her Dad Jimmy gets her a job, but for readers, she helps take down walls between them and the Appalachian language, lifestyle, and culture. It is through Bant’s voice that we deeply understand her world. We learn about union politics, for example, and Bant’s growing political awareness, when union workers on strike paint “Scab Resort” in big black letters on her boss’s wall. Bant wants to paint lightly over the letters, so the black graffiti shows through, but knows her boss won’t let her get away with this. Pancake uses Bant’s response to this scene to draw us into the day to day turmoil created by Bant’s desire to support unions, while badly needing the money scab work provides. Bant wasn’t a scab, but she was working for someone who would hire scabs.

Pancake repeatedly uses concrete situations to reveal the contradictions her characters feel between their need for money and their need to do what is right for their land. The struggle between survival and protecting their land shows up again and again in the novel, for example, in scenes where Jimmy Make and Lace See argue over Lace See’s political activism to stop mountaintop removal. Jimmy Make feels her political activity could prevent him from finding work or even get him killed (Pancake 153).

Bant’s chapters are told in first-person POV. Pancake lets Bant tell the story of the graffitied wall with markers from Bant’s voice blended into necessary authorial language.

Twice in two nights in early July, somebody spraypainted a wall I’d finished that day. First they graffitied “Scab Resort” in black, and the night after I repainted that, they did “Local Jobs for Local Miners” in red. Each morning after it happened, Hobart waddled out the second Jimmy
Make dropped me off and ordered me to take care of it right then. Before too many people saw, I knew, but I didn’t want to paint over what they wrote. I thought about sloppying up my repainting so at least people passing by could see something had been there, but Hobart would never let me get away with that, so the most I dared was not blend the fresh blue with the old very well. (Pancake 119)

In Bant’s story, Pancake starts sentences with more formal transitions like “Twice in two nights” “First” “Each morning.” But readers never question whose head they’re in because Pancake weaves into Bant’s story phrases like “spraypainted a wall,” “they did ‘Local jobs. . .’ ” [Here the word “did” replaces “painted” or a synonym.], “Hobart waddled” “sloppying up my paint.” And earlier in the chapter, Bant told us of all of the private sounds she’s been hearing when she’s been painting walls as well as describing “Sharon home chewing ice cubes and writing Donnie’s name on her arm” (Pancake 119). We know immediately, even without the chapter title, whose voice we’re hearing, because of the details chosen to describe Bant’s angle of vision. It is these markers of voice—dialect, made-up words, and exactly the details a girl Bant’s age might add to a description of her day—that make us care about Pancake’s characters and the stories they tell us. Because of their strong voices, Pancake’s characters come alive in our imaginations as if they were in the room with us, and because we care about her characters, we begin to care about the effects coal mining has on their lives.

Pancake’s brilliance lies partly in her ability to keep the entire narrative in each point of view almost completely in her characters’ voices. When she allows the narrator to break away to a setting description or complex insight into the community’s politics,
she moves so smoothly that it’s hard to catch and feels exactly right for describing a character’s inner world. For example, in Lace See’s first chapter, when we hear about her coming home from college and meeting Jimmy Make for the first time, the atmosphere at the football game they attend is lyrically described, invoking the voice of a young woman who has been terribly homesick. The familiar takes on a beautiful bitter-sweetness:

Us drifting towards the part of the field they used as overflow parking, star-pricked sky with a crackle to it, so dry and cold, new cold, and us drifting through those other October night dramas. Mothers beating cowbells in the stands, and little boys playing their own games of tackle in the shadows. The twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls huddled outside the bathrooms. (Pancake 7)

This description contrasts sharply with a very moving chapter later in the novel when Bant exchanges her virginity for access to trails where she can finally find the impoundment where sediment ponds were waiting to flood their land again with toxins:

The bald ground prickled sharp all over with artificial lights, and far beyond those, a few dulled stars. He banged the truck behind and away from where they were working, away from the brightest lights, him dodging dirt knobs like many mountaintops and weird little plateaus, and even though we hadn’t been close to the sky-high dragline to begin with and were now heading away from it, I still couldn’t see to the top of it out the truck window. (Pancake 326-327)
By invoking the setting Bant and Lace See find themselves in through lyrical poetry and descriptions that invoke every sense, readers are more able to experience the story as if they were living the story vicariously. We know we are in Bant’s consciousness because of words like “weird”, the phrase “to begin with,” and “I still couldn’t see to the top of it.” The addition of the sensation of riding in a truck “bangin” over the mountain road and Bant not being able to see to the top of the mountain out the truck window keeps us, not only in her head, but also in her body, as we clearly feel we are riding along with her in that truck.

Allowing readers to identify closely with Bant’s physical sensations early in the scene makes her first sexual experience later in the chapter all the more painful and heartbreaking. And because the violence in Bant’s first sexual experience becomes a metaphor for what has happened to the mountain top, because readers are waking up to the effects of mountaintop removal as it becomes clear to Bant, readers experience the rape of the mountain more powerfully, too.

One criticism often raised about novels written in multiple points of view is that it’s hard to differentiate between the characters’ voices. If the characters sound too much alike, they all begin to sound like the writer. However, in Strange as this Weather Has Been, Pancake carefully develops her characters with many different traits, responses, uses of language, and perceptions to make them easily identifiable to the reader. Bant and Lace, for instance are rendered in first person, both are women in the same family, and one is mother and one is daughter. And when we first enter Lace’s story, she is not much older than the daughter we will meet in the next chapter.
Pancake creates differences between Bant’s and Lace’s voice through careful character development. Lace is an impulsive, passionate character who sees the world through an emotional lens. It’s not that readers can’t trust her, it’s just that she is more vulnerable to her feelings than Bant. And even though Bant is still young, like many mother-daughter relationships, in some ways the roles have been reversed, and Bant is the more careful, thoughtful observer. She is constantly forced to negotiate her parents’ explosive emotions. For example in the Dairy Queen where Lace See works, Bant is looking at pictures of the mountaintop removal being shown to her and her mother by Loretta, a political activist, when her father Jimmy Make becomes livid. He’s afraid Lace See’s activism could prevent him from getting a decent job or even get him killed. He gets in his truck to leave and Bant is the one to resolve what’s about to become a divisive situation between her parents. “Then I wanted the whole thing not to have happened, and the first way to start erasing it was to calm Jimmy Make down. So I said, ‘Thank you for the ice cream cone’ ” (Pancake 59). We often hear Bant’s thoughts as she is trying to calm the stormy emotional waters of her brother, her father, and her mom. As well as developing into a political activist, Bant is also developing caretaking skills, and we see this progression in her internal voice.

Lace is more aggressive than her daughter. When she tells stories about herself, they are full of the voice of a strong-willed, protective mother who is in a tumultuous relationship with her husband because of the stresses of living in a company town with a man who can’t find much work.

I was rushing around getting ready for work and arguing with Jimmy Make at the same time—“Me working a full shift, and you can’t take
twenty minutes to pick up this place?” “I’m working too! Just because I’m not out there cutting grass don’t mean I’m not working. I’m working just as hard drumming up business, it’s an investment what I’m doing now”—when something caught my eye out a window I was passing. Tommy standing in the creek in nothing but a pair of shorts, mud smeared over his belly, and studying something he held in each hand. I stopped and squinted. It was a full-size dead fish he held. (Pancake 265)

Pancake uses Lace’s voice to share the constant daily struggles of trying to survive in a community that has been made nearly uninhabitable by a flood caused by coal mining. While listening to Lace See’s voice, we understand the harm done to family relationships by greedy corporations whose only concern is profit. We understand the struggles of a mother who must raise children that are playing in a river where fish have died because of the toxic pollution dumped into the river by coal mining companies.

Bant is a good story-teller too, but rather than focusing on herself, her stories are about the other people in her life and her awakening political awareness. She is an unselfconscious heroine in the making. It is through her eyes and feelings that readers can learn to face environmental changes, and instead of going into denial and pretending these environmental changes don’t exist, keep their hearts open. “What I saw punched my chest. Knocked me back on my heels. At first I saw it only as shades of gray, but I pushed my eyes harder, I let come in the hurt, and then it focused into a cratered-out plain. Whole top of yellowroot amputated by the blast”(Pancake 165). The unfinished sentences, the noun turned into adjective, the strong-minded, outward-focused lens, all of these characteristics tell readers whose voice they’re listening to.
Readers need to see the effects of coal mining from both the mother and daughter’s perspective in order to fully understand the struggles coal mining communities face. Lace See is the fierce lioness who will not abandon her community no matter how difficult life becomes for her there. While living through Bant’s voice, readers develop the awareness they need to try to understand why they should fight coal mining practices too.

The two other POV characters in the novel are Corey and Dane, Bant’s younger brothers. Dane is older but again the roles are reversed. Dane is more fragile and sensitive while Corey plows straight ahead and loves everything with a motor in it. At one point we see Corey under a porch torturing his youngest brother Tommy until his mother comes out and tells him to go and find their staircase that floated away in the flood. Corey braves the town eccentric, even though he’s a little scary, because Corey wants to learn some of the man’s skills. While other people might see sadness and loss in belongings washed up along the banks by the novel’s central dramatic event, the devastating flood, Corey sees a goldmine.

Pancake conveys Corey’s boyish, aggressive, inventive personality in the language she uses to describe what Corey sees. “Seth and Them are inside people,” Pancake writes. “They stay in their house with the air conditioning on. Most people along Yellowroot don’t lock up. Seth and them do” (Pancake 123). And later, he sneakily peers into Seth’s window to make sure it’s clear before he goes to the shed where the rig is. “Three times he has looked at it up close. A thousand more he has dreamed it. A 2000 Suzuki Quadralliner 250 4X4, four stroke engine, advanced drivetrain design” (Pancake 129).
Corey is a ten-year-old boy with a one-track mind. He loves motorized vehicles and although the flood scared him more than he’d ever been scared in his life, right now his driving passion is to gather up all the parts left along the banks by the flood in order to build the most incredible motorized vehicle you could ever imagine.

Like all of the characters we meet in *Strange as this Weather Has Been*, the first story told about Corey is essential to believing in him from the start, essential to having him pop vividly into our imaginations so that he is a living, breathing well-rounded character within moments.

If I had a four-wheeler. If I did, now. Seth has a four-wheeler, and Seth’s only nine. And Seth hardly ever rides his four-wheeler, just goes to waste in the shed, why should Seth have a four-wheeler. If I had me a four wheeler…

But Corey has to make do with his bike. (Pancake 23)

This is the voice of a ten-year old whose family lives on barely enough to eat and who feels jealous of his neighbor’s possessions. Corey has a knife hidden up under the house in plumbing tape and he is experimenting with his brothers to find out how tough their feet are by systematically poking holes into their feet. “Corey drills the dull point of the old steak knife, slow, into the calluses on their feet, and he counts until the person being stabbed yelps cries or winces. Tommy, who is six, tends to yelp or cry, Corey, ten, tends to wince or cuss. You can wince or cuss and keep counting” (Pancake 24).

Finding out how much pain you can bear is an important metaphor for living after a devastating flood caused by mountaintop removal, but, at this point, readers are more than likely not thinking about symbolism, they are right there with their feet in their
hands, wincing, along with Corey and thinking “What are you doing to your little brother?” But because Pancake’s skillful writing moves have introduced us to Corey in a way that we believe him, now we will move forward with him into the story, very eagerly thinking, “what else is this crazy kid going to do?”

And Corey’s delightful creativity and passion for motor vehicles gets better and better as the chapter and novel progresses. The love Corey has for motor vehicles is ever present, always bringing us back from the heartbreaking reality of the flood that could drown us in sadness just as it could drown the community who has experienced it, Corey’s inventiveness, his dream to build a motor vehicle, and the ironic humor we find in his actions, disarm us and keep us afloat while we read about the tragedy.

We learn early on how much Corey admires his father. In this passage we can so clearly hear the voice of a ten-year-old boy who will do anything to be like his beloved hero—his father—and imitates his mannerisms and language instinctively every chance he gets:

Can that man handle a truck, you better just get in and hang on. Dad could power that truck over any terrain, using nothing but two-wheel ninety percent of the time. Dad could drive it over anywhere, shit, dad could drive it over nowhere, that’s how good Dad could drive, and the time little Scotty bet he couldn’t take the rise to the above-the-hollow road in two-wheel, and Dad did, spin-clutching, all four kids in the bed, then hauled ass to the dairy Queen with the bet money, them hollering all the way like in a parade. (Pancake 61)
Voice markers for Corey include long sentences, strong verbs, sounds of movement and motors and nature—he is very aware of sounds—and plenty of cusswords while he tries to think like his dad.

But what Corey does understand is that their family is in financial trouble and he can see it in the slow decline of his father’s truck, what Jimmy Make calls “his pride n joy” (Pancake 60). Because Corey’s voice is so filled with motor parts, motor sounds, the movement and feel of riding motor vehicles, his partly unconscious understanding of the trouble his family is in through the state of his Dad’s truck is very moving. First it’s rust around the wheel wells. “But nowadays. Well, anymore…the truck concerns Corey. Just a little, Corey has noticed. It is starting to rust around the wheel wells, just a little” (Pancake 60). The “just a little” is so clearly the voice of a little kid trying to be more adult than he may be ready for.

Another remarkable aspect of Corey’s love of motor vehicles is that Pancake is able to describe through Corey’s voice the hopeful promise the use of energy and coal mining was for the United States in its early days. Corey feels unbridled joy when he watches a brand-spanking new train come through town, filled with the abundant coal. Juxtaposing Corey’s innocent passion for the coal train against the reality of what coal mining has wrought, the very destruction Corey so movingly described in his rendition of the flood, is a powerful contrast. Seeing the train through his eyes, in his voice, makes us see another side to coal mining and not become the didactic single-minded political activists we so need our writers not to become. His enthusiasm for this train also makes the tragic images of the mountains rape, throughout the novel so poignantly conveyed, more believable. His love of the coal train is a needed contrast. If Pancake would have
only chosen to tell the novel through Bant’s voice, or even, only through Bant and Lace See’s voice, we wouldn’t have been able to see the many other complex sides to coal mining.

While the brothers are experimenting with pain tolerance, Corey’s mother, Lace, gets a phone call from a neighbor who lets Lace know that her staircase might have washed up along the river bank. Lace tells Corey to take his little brother along and make sure it’s their staircase before she sends his father with the truck. I would imagine that most readers have never had their mother tell them to go make sure a staircase washed up on the banks belongs to them or not. And the tone Lace uses at this point is as matter of fact as it would be if she were asking Corey to go to the neighbor’s house to borrow a cup of sugar. It is this tone that gives this scene the dark humor so prevalent in Corey’s one-track perspective. The dark humor balances the chapters filled with Bant’s sincere, earnest political awakening.

The flood suffered by their community three weeks before the novel opens is told through backstory from the perspective of each of her characters in their voices. When Corey tells us his version we can hear the voice of a ten-year old boy trying to imitate his father’s voice but using his own imagery, “It was like driving a boat, it was, there toward the end...The Day of the May flood, Dad had gone to Madison, and before he left, he took the lawnmower and the weed eater out of the truck and set it in the yard” (Pancake 66). In italics “it was” marks Appalachian dialect again and mention of the weed eater and lawnmower bring us back to the powerful memory we have from Bant’s version of the flood where she watched her courageous mom brave flood waters to retrieve them. And even though this is the start of the story of a terrifying ordeal, we are once again
given a dose of humor before the ordeal starts. “So Corey snuck the lawnmower and the
weed eater behind the house, and him and Tommy started working on them. Or he started
working on them, and Tommy fetched Corey’s tools—the steak knife, coat hanger wires,
tomato stakes, bottle opener. Dad wasn’t dumb enough to leave his tools behind, too.”
(Pancake 67). Dad’s livelihood might have gone through a conversion before the flood,
too.

Pancake tells Corey’s story in third person, but we know we are inside Corey’s
head because the language is in Corey’s voice. Words like “fetch” and “him” instead of
“he” stays with Corey’s recognizable use of language. Corey also corrects himself in
mid-story: “And him and Corey started working on them. Or he started working on
them…” If we were in the hands of an authorial third-person narrator, he or she would
tell the story correctly the first time. These subtle details allow us to feel, that, even
though Corey is speaking about himself in third person, he is telling his own story about
the flood.

Another aspect of hearing the flood story, told from Corey’s voice, is that we
learn more about his fearless love of adventure and inability to sense danger that
foreshadows Corey’s later death. But here it’s funny. “By the time the lightening started,
they were inside watching TV, and Mom made them shut it off so it wouldn’t get hit and
blow up. Which Corey wouldn’t mind seeing” (Pancake 67).

While Bant helps us learn about what is hidden behind the gates on top of the
Mountain, Corey helps us see the devastating flood through his voice. It is while Corey
is searching for the staircase that we learn what the flood means to him. For most adults
many months of cleaning up toxic waste and trying to recover possessions is stressful, for Corey, it is a gold mine of motor vehicle parts:

Well, if you can unfocus your eyes right—and Corey can—wading the creek is like walking the aisle of a Wal-Mart made for Corey, with all the price tags saying free.

Water heaters and kerosene stoves and tires of all dimensions, lawnmowers and roofing, bike frames and car axles. Barrels and plastic toys, washing machine parts, and oven racks, and on top of all that good stuff is the great stuff, the mysterious could-be-anything stuff dumped off the mine—rusted metal contraptions and cogs and wheels and iron bars and yellow steel sheets. (Pancake 25)

The straightforward analysis of levels of pain he and his brother’s feet can bear is the same tone this ten-year old uses to describe flood damage. Corey’s tone makes his voice recognizable, but as adult readers, we understand the deeper meaning of his descriptions. Although they are tinged with black humor, they are also more heartbreaking.

On the other hand, while Corey is torturing the youngest brother and tearing apart motors, Dane, Corey’s older brother, works as a caregiver. Dane is absorbed in a tortured world where he feels the heat of God and encounters premonitions about the flood and his brother’s later death. Dane and Bant are in some ways parallel characters swept away in the serious politics of the novel. Dane’s voice captures the world of those closer to spiritual conversions, those who are often labeled as “special”. It is through his eyes that we deeply feel the dangers this world is in, even though he does not always understand
what he is sharing with us. Dane’s voice comes to symbolize the collective voice of our subconscious warning us about global warming and our suffering earth.

For Dane, messages appear as visions he doesn’t always understand. For example, in this scene, Corey sees a dead monkey in the hallway right before Corey’s death. “The monkey” is what Corey calls a dead animal that has been slowly decaying in the floodwaters he and his brothers wade through to gather washed up motor parts. Corey has been taunting his younger brother with the monkey throughout the novel—the boys are fascinated by its grotesque appearance and references are made to it many times in chapters told in Corey’s voice, but here, in Dane’s final chapter, a vision of the monkey comes to foreshadow Corey’s death. This is the beginning of the chapter where we will see Corey’s death through Dane’s eyes, a very concrete reason for choosing to tell a novel’s story in several voices:

Even though it was too dark to see that far, even though there was no way his eyes could have adjusted that fast, Dane could see. The monkey wasn’t sitting up looking at him, no. It wasn’t alive. The pull had come off him dead. It lay crumpled in its usual death pose, Dane recognized the way it lay even though he had never actually seen the monkey, still Dane recognized that pose. He knew. Limp on the carpet, twisted funny unlike any live thing would lie, and its dirty fur swished a little, Dane saw it move, the way it swishes when water passes over it. (Pancake 337)

Dane’s vision is preparing him for Corey’s death just as it is preparing the readers’ unconscious for the death of a character they have come to deeply love.
In conclusion, in *Strange as this Weather has Been*, readers are disarmed by Pancake’s strong, energetic personalities, characters readers sense to be fighters from the very first stories each character tells. The characters disarm readers by sharing insightful interior thoughts, their senses of humor, their deep love of the Appalachia landscape, and their brave unwillingness to stop fighting for it. Readers are also drawn into the story Pancake tells by her lyrical language—language that may not always be part of the speaking language a character might use—but describes, in the characters’ voice, a deeper emotion that only such poetic language can convey.

If a story about the effects of mountaintop removal were told in a newspaper, it might be read on a bus ride, left behind on a seat, and never thought about again by its reader, but because of the way Pancake leads us into the effects of coal mining on one particular family with four uniquely different and compelling family members, readers will more than likely never think about coal mining in the same way again.

Most readers will never have lived through the poverty Pancake's characters face, and do not understand, in an intimate way, how poverty truly affects one's day-to-day living conditions. By experiencing through each character’s obsessions, speech patterns, sensory perceptions, and the language they use to describe their eerie, flood-battered moonscape, readers have no choice but to feel the character’s story in their own bodies too, to live that story for a time, as if it were their own. That is what a powerful novel can do.

Learning to create distinctly different character voices is essential for writers wanting to write about political themes. The skills needed to create different voices can only be learned through the study of other writers who carefully develop their characters
using many different tools. Although every character or narrative voice is much greater than the sum of its parts, at least attempting to untangle and study the components of what makes up a voice can help a writer get closer to learning this skill. And for this writer, steeped in the political consciousness of Portland, Oregon, who writes because she hopes to use her fiction writing skills to help make the world a better place, studying Pancake’s beautiful novel may help her write her own novel about politics and social justice one day.
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