Writing Literary Fiction: Point of View

Point of view (POV) is an important author decision in writing fiction. The most common POV in short stories and novels is third person. First person is also popular for short stories due to the immediacy of “someone” telling the story. Many works, especially longer fiction, employ multiple points of view depending on the chapter or section of the story. POV can also be used in experimental ways, like “Choose your own adventure” stories or an inanimate object speaking. Whatever POV you choose will determine how you must tell your story. Think about what you want the reader to know, and when. Will your story work if the main character knows their roommate ate the last piece of birthday cake? Or will you need to “withhold” this information from the main character and the reader? Either of these choices might lead you to a different POV. If you are not sure which POV your story needs, try writing a major scene from a few different types – Which one do you feel strongest about?

Point of View & Examples:
3rd Person: The author tells the story, but decides if the events will be objectively given, or if she can go into the mind of every character; to what degree she can interpret that character; to what degree she can know the past and the future; and how many authorial judgments will be allowed.

3rd Person Limited (or multiple): The author tells the story, but only goes into the mind of one (or a few) character(s). Many short stories use this perspective.
Example: She opened the door, greeting the boy with a hug. His hair felt like straw against her cheek and she worried whether his trip had gone well.

3rd Person Omniscient: The author tells the story, but we know everything going on within a character’s mind as well as interpretation of why the character is acting that way. The characters’ thoughts are always filtered through the Subjective Omniscient narrator.
Example: She opened the door, greeting the boy with a hug. Eva felt his hair against her cheek and worried whether his trip had gone well. He smiled back at her, having already decided to leave out the time he was pickpocketed.
Note: This is different from “3rd Person Multiple”

3rd Person Objective: Also known as “the fly on the wall” POV. The author tells the story, but only shows details that could be outwardly observed—no internal thoughts from characters.
Example: She opened the door, greeting the boy with a hug. They embraced briefly, then returned inside.

3rd Person Subjective: The author tells the story, but with a strong voice, and can comment on the events of the story or the internal thoughts of characters.
Example: She opened the door, greeting the boy with a hug. She worried whether his trip had gone well, but she did not ask then. Inside, the trash overflowed, the dog’s water bowl sat empty. Eva tended to leave chores unnoticed when she worried about others.

2nd Person: Least commonly used in fiction. Example: You open the door, hoping he’ll be there.

1st Person: A character narrates the story. Example: I watched her open the door.