

Narrative Works



Introduction

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Article abstract

The editors of *Narrative Works* solicited the five papers of this special issue from major writers and thinkers in the field of narrative. The authors were asked to speak to the importance and role of narrative in their work and discipline, in the hope of somewhat clarifying what it is that narrative is and does, and perhaps providing a basis for seeing links between disciplines and approaches that might further narrative scholarship. In this introduction, I focus on how the five contributions have prompted me to think, or think again, about how I go about my own work in narrative. Approaching the literature in this way puts me in mind of Valéry's stance on reading the work of others: "But I am not much of a reader, since what I look for in a work is what will enable or impede an aspect of my own activity" (cited in Bayard, 2007, pp. 15–16). Yet for me, if not Valéry, this is not to devalue the work of others, but to recognize that such works provide vital nourishment for my own. In what follows, I hope to encourage others to explore how they, too, might find nourishment in these pages.

SPECIAL INVITED ISSUE: NARRATIVE ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Introduction

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The editors of *Narrative Works* solicited the five papers of this special issue from major writers and thinkers in the field of narrative. The authors were asked to speak to the importance and role of narrative in their work and discipline, in the hope of somewhat clarifying what it is that narrative is and does, and perhaps providing a basis for seeing links between disciplines and approaches that might further narrative scholarship. In this introduction, I focus on how the five contributions have prompted me to think, or think again, about how I go about my own work in narrative. Approaching the literature in this way puts me in mind of Valéry's stance on reading the work of others: "But I am not much of a reader, since what I look for in a work is what will enable or impede an aspect of my own activity" (cited in Bayard, 2007, pp. 15–16). Yet for me, if not Valéry, this is not to devalue the work of others, but to recognize that such works provide vital nourishment for my own. In what follows, I hope to encourage others to explore how they, too, might find nourishment in these pages.

It is now commonplace for authors discussing narrative to note the expansion of this form of analysis and understanding across disciplines. I am no exception. Indeed, narrative has found a place in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, in the professions as well as academia, and in the popular mind. There really does seem to be no area into which narrative has not reached. This expansion, however, has come at a price—an increasing lack of shared understanding as to what exactly is meant when the term "narrative" is invoked, and claims staked in the name of narrative when no such claim is justified, or at least not strongly. With regard to the first, one need only note the varying definitions of what constitutes a narrative: from Ricoeur's (1984) notion that narrative is the

retrospective configuration of events into a meaningful whole, bringing causal continuity to temporal sequencing to Kenyon and Randall's (1997) more open-ended definition of narrative as something that happened. I do not mean by presenting these two views on what constitutes narrative to imply that Kenyon and Randall's version is in any way inferior to Ricoeur's more philosophical rendering—I juxtapose them here simply to illustrate that some conceptions of narrative are precise, others more general. Making things more unclear are those authors who use the concept of narrative without any definition, or even defining characteristics, as if the term were simply common sense. Among such authors, we find claims to narrative that are, at least to my mind, tenuous. One can easily find examples of this by searching the various academic databases for narrative research. Among the results, one can find articles in which the term “narrative” appears in both title and keywords, yet with little to warrant this in the method, findings, or discussion. Narrative, it appears, has in some ways taken the place of grounded theory in being the term to invoke in order to imply credibility, or appear in fashion.

It is against this background that the editors of *Narrative Works* solicited the five papers of this issue, papers from major writers and thinkers in the field of narrative. Each was asked to speak to the importance and role of narrative in their work and discipline, in the hope of providing some clarity of what it is that narrative is and does, and perhaps as a basis for seeing links between disciplines and approaches that might further narrative scholarship. In the remainder of this introduction, I do not intend to discuss the relative merits of the positions and arguments of the respective authors, nor to evaluate the contribution of their work included here to establishing cross-disciplinary links. Both are beyond my purview, and very probably my ability. Instead, I intend to focus on how the five contributions herein have prompted me to think, or think again, about how I go about my own work in narrative. Approaching the literature in this way puts me in mind of Valéry's stance on reading the work of others: “But I am not much of a reader, since what I look for in a work is what will enable or impede an aspect of my own activity” (cited in Bayard, 2007, pp. 15–16). Yet, for me, if not Valéry, this is not to devalue the work of others, but to recognize that such works provide vital nourishment for my own. In what follows, I hope to encourage others to explore how they, too, might find nourishment from these pages.

Andrew Estefan, Vera Caine, and Jean Clandinin highlight the importance of thinking *with* stories, rather than simply thinking *about*

stories. In their contribution, these authors first recount a story that holds some significance for them, and then draw on that story in their thinking about their current roles and projects. For example, Vera Caine recounts a story of nitpicking and draws from it in her reflections on the boundaries between the personal and the professional. Storying for these authors is thoroughly relational. The notion of thinking with stories is an interesting and a challenging one. Stories are not like logic—they rarely travel in a straight line, and then can surprise you in ways that an emerging argument cannot. There is, as Tony de Mello writes, “no guarantee that an occasional story will not slip through your defences and explode when you least expect it to” (p. xxi). If one listens to a story carefully, one will never be the same again.

This contribution prompted me to think about the various ways in which we might think *with*, rather than *about*, stories. I first came across the idea of thinking with stories when I read Art Frank’s (1995) *The Wounded Storyteller*, in which he claimed that thinking with stories is to take the story as already complete and experience the story having an effect in one’s own life. For me, this resonates with Illich’s (1993) distinction between scholastic and monastic reading, the former being a way of reading that focuses on “what the author is saying” (and often arguing about that—witness the plethora of arguments about what Marx really meant), the latter reading a text for the nourishment it gives to one’s own life. Tony de Mello (1989, 1992), a Jesuit spiritual director, was an expert in the promulgation of thinking with stories in this way, his books consisting primarily of stories presented as doors to awareness in one’s own life. This is, however, as I have come to realize, only one such way of thinking with stories. We also think with stories when we use stories, and the process of storytelling, to make decisions. Elsewhere (Baldwin, 2009), I have argued that narrative plays into the decision-making process by constituting the ethical and characterological framework of those decisions. In this way, decisions depend on the stories we tell and want to tell, and as such, stories are integral to our thinking. Such thinking is seen in the research of Elliott, Gessert, and Peden-McAlpine (2009), in which family members of people living with dementia were seen to use the life stories of their elders to frame decisions for care.

A third way of thinking with stories is offered by Frank (2010) in *Letting Stories Breathe*, in which he discusses the companionship of stories. In this view, the stories which accompany us, help shape who and

how we are in the world, can prompt us to nobility or destruction. As Frank puts it:

When Haraway says, “There’s no place to be in the world outside of stories,” at least part of what she means is there is no existing as a human outside a companionship with stories that are semiotic in their being and material in the effects they bring about. The capacity of stories is to allow us humans to be. (p. 44)

The stories that are our companions, those we carry around with us in our “inner library,” (Bayard, 2007; Frank, 2010) are often drawn upon to understand the world around us. More often, they are used to reinforce our own worldview or value system—we see the world through the stories we hold onto as most important. Fortunately, however, the right story at the right time can slip by our defences: the shortest distance between a human being and the truth is, according to Tony de Mello (1992), a story. Such “narrative ambush,” as Frank (p. 59) puts it, can challenge our traditional ways of thinking. Further, we can develop our own narrative literacy, our ability to recognize, understand, and work with stories, by extending our stock of stories, our narrative capital, so that when we are faced with new situations we have far more stories with which to think.

In his piece, Matti Hyvärinen provides us with an overview of how narrative came to claim a place within sociology, and describes three forms of narrative sociology: the sociological analysis of collected narrative texts, the analysis of narrative realities, and the narrative genres. In the course of this tour of narrative sociology, he points to Plummer’s (1995) work on the sociology of stories. To my mind, Plummer’s contribution to narrative research has been under-recognized, and I take this opportunity to bring his approach to the attention of readers.

In *Telling Sexual Stories*, Plummer (1995) puts forward a five-fold framework for developing a sociology of stories. Each of the five facets addresses a particular aspect of stories and storytelling. First, the nature of stories: the kind of stories that seek to empower, degrade, control, or dominate another:

Some stories may work to pathologise voices, or turn them into victims with little control over their lives; other stories may sense human agency and survival, giving the voice a power to transform and empower. Stories may be told in different ways by different

groups—giving some kinds of stories much more credibility than others? Talk from “below” may be marginalised and excluded, whilst “expert” talk from above may be given priority and more credibility” (p. 29).

Second, the making of stories: how spaces are created for a story’s telling and how some voices are silenced. “Does a coxer, for example, facilitate stories (enabling new stories to be heard) or entrap stories, into a wider story of his or her own?” (p. 29).

Third, the consuming of stories. Narratives are told for consumption. They are aimed at some real or imaginary audience. For example, Jackson (1988) illustrates this in relation to the courtroom, where even the judge must take account of

his desire for and prospects of success in telling this story within his own institutional framework. That must take account not only of his perception of his own status, but also of his perception of his capacity to persuade both his immediate superiors (the House of Lords) and the profession in general of the rightness of his cause, and of the acceptability or otherwise of failure to do so (p.171).

Even those private narratives found in personal journals operate on an implied audience of one (see Proff, 1980, on writing a personal journal). Consequently, the question becomes: who has access to particular narratives? Are such stories widely available, or are they restricted to narrow groups? How is access to stories extended or curtailed?

Fourth, the strategies of story-telling. Narratives, by their very nature, imply that alternative stories could be told (Burr, 1995). Some narrators, according to Plummer,

may “stumble” more, be told with less assuredness and boldness, be more qualified and hesitant, and hence (initially) sound less convincing. Women may generally find it harder to consider their stories as possessing “authority,” harder to express themselves in public, harder to believe that others will respect their story (p. 30).

In the pursuit of acceptance of their story, narrators may employ certain devices which help to open up their own story and close down the competition. For example, O'Barr (1982) has shown that narrative testimony is deemed more persuasive in the courtroom than fragmented testimony, and that cross-examination is the opportunity for advocates to fragment the telling of a narrative (see also Jackson, 1988).

Finally, stories in the wider world. Storytelling occurs within frameworks of power in which some voices are not only heard more readily but also frame the questions and set the agendas:

Some voices—who claim to dominate, who top the hierarchy, who claim the centre, who possess resources—are not only heard much more readily than others, but are also capable of framing the questions, setting the agendas, establishing the rhetorics much more readily than the others. These social acts become habitual networks of domination ... [and] ... certain stories hence are silenced from a saying" (Plummer, 1995, p. 30).

Plummer's framework provides, I think, not only a useful tool with which to analyze narrative data, but also a reflexive tool to bring to bear on the production of those data. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) rightly brought to the fore the importance of attending to the production of research texts (rather than seeing data as simply being "there"), and for me, the application of Plummer's framework to the process of my own work, as well as to the stories of others, is a useful reminder of the co-construction of all that we do.

A second important area to which Matti Hyvärinen directs our attention is that of genre, and in particular how genres encapsulate particular narrative realities which, in turn, form part of the narrative environment in which we live. While this area alone would provide a basis on which to conduct fruitful research, here I want to open out the discussion to include genre as social action (see Miller, 1984), though I suspect in the last analysis what I have to say here would fall under Hyvärinen's understanding of what constitutes the narrative environment. Rhetorical genre analysis covers a range of ways of approaching and analyzing genres. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) suggest that genre can be understood as a means of social, situated cognition which enables users both to communicate effectively (resonances here of Fisher's [1984] notion of narrative as a paradigm for human communication) and to participate in, and reproduce, a community's "norms, epistemology,

ideology, and social ontology” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, p. 501). Genres, however, do not function in isolation, but are part of a system within which more or less powerful genres interact. This leads us to think of genres as belonging to sets and systems. As Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) point out: “By studying genre systems and genre sets, researchers can gain insight into social roles and relationships, power dynamics, the distribution of cognition and activities, and the social construction of space-time (what Bakhtin calls “chronotope”) within different contexts” (p. 87).

Kate de Medeiros, in her turn, reminds me that engaging with narrative involves more than theoretical ruminations—about the relationship between narrative and reality, narrative and social relations, narrative and identity—but has the power to change the world for the better. Within gerontology, de Medeiros points to how master narratives of aging (decline, withdrawal, loneliness, and so on) can negatively impact older adults, and insists upon attending to the actual experience of older adults, counter-stories of progress, wisdom, and generativity.

The notion of counter-stories is an important one, and one that can be applied across many different fields. Nelson (2001) explores a number of “master narratives” which negatively impact those they depict (nurses, gypsies, gay men, and women), and how counter-stories can serve to repair the identities damaged by the master narratives. In my own work, on the experience of being transabled (living with the desire to become disabled), I am keenly aware of the master narrative able-bodiedness, which serves to deny validity to the experience of transabled people, save through the master narrative of mental illness. Lacking cultural narratives within which their narratives might find a home, transabled people are vulnerable to master narratives that damage their identities and do not permit of narrative repair. This lack of explanatory cultural narratives is, I think, an example of Fricker’s (2007) “hermeneutic injustice,” an injustice that can only be remedied by the construction and dissemination of counter-stories. Thinking back to the emergence of narrative as an academic pursuit, much was made of narrative’s potential for giving voice to those marginalized in society, and one need only perform a cursory Google search to find that this emphasis on, and hope for, narrative as a liberatory process is still going strong. In her focus on older adults’ stories, de Medeiros brings that approach to gerontology.

In our own small way, too, here at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative (CIRN), we seek to explore the potential benefits of narrative for older adults. We are currently in the midst of two projects

in this area. The first project, based on data from 45 interviews with older adults, focusing on coping and adaptation, involves exploring the relationship between the ability to tell strong stories (rich, complex, structured, well-populated, nuanced, and so on) and resilience among older adults. In the second, we conducted three day-long workshops aimed at enhancing the narrative capacity of older adults, with a view to identifying improvements in scores on scales measuring resilience, mastery, psychological well-being, and narrative foreclosure. Through these projects we hope to contribute to the excellent work already being done in narrative gerontology by authors such as Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, and Emmerik-de Jong (2008), Korte, Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, and Pot (2011), and de Medeiros, Mosby, Hartley, Suarez Pedraza, and Brandt (2011). A brief, interim account of the project can be found in the pages of the *Journal of Aging Studies* (Randall, Baldwin, McKenzie-Mohr, McKim, & Furlong, 2015).

Hanna Meretoja's contribution points to the aspiration of narrative studies towards interdisciplinarity, an aspiration that has been largely unrealized. In her discussion of narrative hermeneutics, she brings together a number of issues that others in this volume have raised within their own disciplines. For example, Meretoja, like Munslow, discusses the referential versus constructed nature of narrative history; with Hyvärinen, Meretoja brings our attention to the situated-nature of stories, though she prefers the metaphor of a web to that of an environment; as with Estefan, Caine, and Clandinin, she indicates how stories are implicated in the understanding of our lives; and with de Medeiros she is concerned with the relationship between narrative and identity. In this way, she not only overtly discusses matters of interdisciplinarity, but subtly invites us to appreciate that interdisciplinarity in her work. (It is important to note here that Meretoja's resonances across disciplines is not a function of having read the contributions of others to this special edition but is an inherent feature of her own work).

Given the spread of narrative across disciplines, it is interesting to note the relative lack of interdisciplinary narrative work. Some time ago, I asked my research assistant to tabulate citations among leading narrative scholars to identify the degree to which those working in narrative actually drew on works by others in other disciplines. With a few notable exceptions, there was little in the way of cross-citation. It seemed that the excellent work being conducted within disciplines was not being nourished by consideration of work across those disciplines. Of course,

this was a fairly crude experiment, but it served its purpose at the time to focus attention on my own interdisciplinary practice.

As indicated above, we at CIRN are working on two related projects exploring the relationship between narrativity and resilience. The research team consists of faculty from gerontology, literature, education, social work, and nursing. At various times this core team has been joined by other faculty and students from psychology, organization studies, nursing, healthcare, gerontology, and interdisciplinary studies. This rather fluid arrangement has helped both to build relationships and to extend the range of available skills, so as to enrich our analysis of the data. Each of us brings our own narrative perspective to the process (as a group, we have not defined a single narrative approach to which we have agreed to adhere), suggesting new issues, new priorities, and new directions. This is a time-consuming process, though one which is all the richer for it.

Both Meretoja and Hyvärinen indicate the need for narratological work that specifically addresses the concerns of the social sciences. Hyvärinen briefly mentions Herman's (1999) "Towards a Socionarratology" and Frank's (2010) socio-narratology laid out in *Letting Stories Breathe* as potential starting points in the creation of a specifically social scientific narratology. Meretoja, on the other hand, argues for extending the reach of literary narratology by encouraging engagement with "the 'big questions' that concern the function and significance of narrative for life, identity, agency, and cultural self-understanding." My interest in Meretoja's approach lies in its potential for understanding identity. While there is much written on narrative and identity, I am drawn particularly towards the work of Marie-Laure Ryan (2015) on immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media. With the developments in narratological thinking provoked by electronic media, a new way of approaching the relationship between narrative and identity has been opened up. In my work, I have been exploring the usefulness of the notion of the rhizomatic self (Baldwin & Hill, 2012), identity as line of flight (Baldwin, 2013), and experimental ways of representing narrative research on identity (Baldwin, in press).

Alun Munslow recounts his epiphany in coming to understand that history is not the "discovery and objective reporting of the most likely narrative of the past," a view to which the "vast majority" of practicing historians hold, but a narrative or literary artefact, constructed through multiple narrative-making decisions, which then substitutes for the absent past. This view of the practice of history is one with which I am in general agreement—though it does raise troublesome and unresolved

questions, which prompt me to be less confident than Munslow in holding to this view. The first question concerns the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, boundaries that have been historically different from those which predominate now. Some authors, such as Frus (1994), argue that the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are largely (if not wholly) arbitrary:

Arguing over which parts a writer “got right” in terms of accuracy is a hopeless exercise because we have no primary or original text to compare later versions to, and these narratives are paramount in determining the history we have of events in the past; in fact, they are all we have, for we cannot retrieve the past except from texts, including our memory as a text. (quoted in Lehman, p. 5)

Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Baldwin, 2005), persuasive narratives are not those that are based on pre-existing facts, but facts become facts by virtue of being held in a persuasive narrative.

At the same time, however, it is clear that there is some difference between fictional and non-fictional texts, not only in their claims regarding factuality, but in their relationship to the world outside the text. Works of fiction, or rather works that are clearly fictional, have relatively well-defined borders; works of non-fiction spill over into the world outside of the text, concerning as they do events and characters that exist independently of the text. For example, no one can contest the events in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, but those involved in, say, Tony Blair’s government in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq might well contest any account of those events. However, even the distinction between storyworlds and real worlds becomes problematic. First, the further back in time one’s non-fictional story refers to, the fewer opportunities there are for the real world to take a stance against the narrative being presented. Thus, while it is possible for Tony Blair to contest his portrayal as a war criminal, it is not possible for Christ’s Apostles to dispute the representation of their actions and beliefs. The troublesome issue here is that the further back in time we go, the smaller the real world and the larger the storyworld. Second, the distinction between storyworld and real world is not as clear-cut as we might like it to be. As Arthur Frank (2010) has pointed out, stories are not just representations (artistic or mimetic) but are also actors in the world. In other words, stories (fictional and non-fictional) have a real effect in the world. For Frank, stories can be good or bad companions, affecting how we act in the world. Thus, stories are part

of the real world, and as such become players in our stories about that world.

In my work, primarily on life stories and identity, I am uncertain as to where the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction lie, and, further, how to detect any movement of those boundaries. Many take the storyworld of the participant to be an authentic representation of the experience of those involved and as such is the basis for analysis; others might argue that such authenticity is the outcome of the analysis rather than the basis for it—authenticity (or at least its representation) being subject to the vicissitudes of authorial decision-making (in my case, the decisions of participants regarding what they will tell me, and my decisions as to what I think is significant). The resulting artefact is thus effectively a *mélange* of fiction and non-fiction.

The second question that arises for me in reading Munslow's contribution concerns the relationship between form and content, and in particular how the chosen form of reporting on research impacts the content. In my area of interest, much narrative research relies on what can be called the "narrative coherence" presentation of life stories. In this approach, much is made of linearity, realism, mimesis, internal coherence, self-consistency, and emplotment. Subsumed under this approach are narrative features of a particular and recognizable point of view, characterization of people in recognizably humanist form, narrative arcs, and beginnings, middles, and ends. All of this seeks to corral the unruly messiness of life into something that resembles a (Western, Aristotelian) narrative, courting the danger that in so doing we force a "counterfeit coherence and order on otherwise fragmented and multi-layered experiences of desire" (Boje, 2001, p. 2), imposing narrative as "a tyranny of truth, a preference for structure over lived content" (Boje, 2008, p. 3). If life is multi-layered, if the Self is multiple, then how can the form in which we represent our narrative work reflect, or even promote such multiplicity? Currently, I am experimenting with transmedia storytelling as a vehicle for disseminating the findings of a study on transableism, the desire for a physical impairment. In the transmedia story I envisage, readers will come to know the protagonist(s) through engagement in a range of social media (Facebook, blogs, SMS, Twitter, email, YouTube, and so on), and the story that emerges will, at least to some extent, be dependent upon how readers engage with each narrative element. In other words, there are multiple pathways through the story, and the pathway chosen will construct a particular story. The exploration of multiple pathways will generate multiple stories. In this

way, I hope to provide a means by which readers are implicated in the narrative and demonstrate how such implication generates multiple understandings of the complex, messy, and multilayered experience of being transabled. In conclusion, it has been a privilege to have been offered early sight of the papers in this special issue and to have had the chance to engage with the riches they offer. Each in its own way has sparked off the desire to explore either new areas, or familiar areas with new tools and renewed energy. If my ruminations above have any merit, it lies in illustrating the richness of the papers that follow.

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