

Molly Andrews. *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life*

William L. Randall

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BOOK REVIEW

Molly Andrews. *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014. 148 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-981239-4.

William L. Randall
St. Thomas University

Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life, by Molly Andrews, Professor of Political Psychology and Co-Director of the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London, is an eminently readable book that explores the intricate link between our ability to tell stories and our capacity to envision future and past, the not-real and the not-yet-real, and the worlds of other people. Interestingly, however, Andrews admits early on to not having set out to write such a book in the first place. Rather, she says, her topic—narrative imagination—is one that found *her*, an admission that reflects the experience of many of us narrativists perhaps, for whom ideas about “story” tend to grow on us in a gradual, organic manner to the point where they are inseparable from how we experience the world.

Besides drawing on a broad array of sources in the course of her explorations, Andrews also—and this is a major plus about her writing—draws liberally from her own experience. In effect, she delves into narrative ideas with the aid of narrative thought, something that narrative thinkers are, sooner or later, invited to do. It’s as if “story” requires us to reflect on it not from some detached, academic space that’s basically outside of us, but from within our own unique storyworlds.

In this highly personal work, one in Oxford’s Explorations in Narrative Psychology series, edited by psychologist Mark Freeman, Andrews shows how the theme of narrative and imagination has “seep[ed] into all corners of our existence, from the most mundane to the most abstract” (p. 14). Serving as the central structure of her book are her analyses of how it seeps into four areas in particular: research, aging, education, and politics.

Chapter 2, devoted to the interplay between knowledge, beliefs, and disbelief in the realm of qualitative research, moves from Andrews' reflections on the role that magic has played in her own life to the challenge that researchers face "to immerse myself in a world very different from my own." To do so, "I, as a researcher," she says, "must be willing to suspend my disbelief, and to follow the paths of the narratives which are told and performed before me in the course of my investigations" (p. 32).

In Chapter 3, Andrews considers the role of narrative imagination in our conceptions and experience of aging, and, towards the end, that of creativity in later life, especially what's referred to as the "late life style." In this respect, her reflections contribute nicely to the interest that's been growing in my own field, gerontology, in what's being called "creative aging." Among the many helpful lines of thinking Andrews puts forward are those describing her use of autobiographical assignments to assist students in a course entitled "Life Stories" to appreciate the narrative complexity (and malleability) of their own stories, too, insofar as key events in their lives can always be given multiple interpretations. In short, the stories of our lives are not cast in stone. A point I find particularly compelling concerns the "time traveling," as she refers to it earlier in the book, that's involved in narrative reflection on our past, which she argues plays a pivotal role in "the development of self understanding" (p. 52). An expression of such traveling, she implies, is what might be dubbed narrative *pro*flection, which is to say, reflection on our future. "The ultimate leap of imagination," she says, is "to see, in my mind's eye, a world in which I am no longer there" (p. 51).

In Chapter 4, Andrews looks at education in general as a matter much less of imparting information than it is (ideally, at least) of "igniting the imagination" (p. 59). To achieve this, she suggests, involves encouraging learners "to think meaningfully about their experiences, to gain a deeper understanding not only of their individual lives but of their wider social contexts, and further, to move beyond that known world" (p. 61). In effect, we know ourselves only through narrating ourselves—which once more underscores autobiographical reflection as a pivotal vehicle of learning.

Helpful to the reader in appreciating the role of narrative imagination in education is Andrews' vision of the educational enterprise as a whole. Borrowing from the work of narrative scholar Jean Clandinin, which explores "the importance of personal stories to teachers, students, administrators, and families as they all try to make sense of one another,"

she proposes that educational institutions— schools, colleges, universities—need ultimately to be seen as a “network of interwoven stories” (p. 72). Especially helpful here are her reflections on the necessity of narrative imagination for what could be called compassionate citizenship. By this she means, borrowing from philosopher Martha Nussbaum, “the ability to think about what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed may have” (p. 78).

Such reflections act as a segue into Chapter 5 and the fourth main focus of the book, which is narrative imagination in the political realm. Here I find Andrews’ writing at its clearest and most passionate, above all her reflections on Barack Obama’s “exceptional appreciation of the importance of story to people’s ideas of who they are, as individuals and as part of a larger whole” (p. 84). Against the backdrop of her argument that “stories are pivotal to the way in which politics operates” (p. 85)—and that politics in general is “the stage for competing stories to be told about the same phenomena” (p. 86)—narrativists will be especially taken with her analysis of Obama’s “strategic use of storytelling” (p. 95) to connect his individual story with that of the nation as a whole: past, present, and future. In this regard, one passage that stands out for me concerns how Obama’s stories “represent so much more than his own individual life” (p. 91). By means of them, Andrews writes, “he manages to establish an important relationship between himself and others, his story and theirs, linking his narrative not only to others in the present day, but also to an enduring narrative which stretches across time, and is the lifeblood of the nation” (p. 92).

Though in many ways the book seems more about imagination” than narrative, *Narrative Imagination in Everyday Life* makes a compelling case for how on many levels—from learning to aging to civic engagement—human reality “is always narratively constructed” (p. 108). Employing multiple examples and stories to illustrate how we navigate our way each day from past through present to future, from real to not-real, and from self to other, Andrews rightly celebrates the potential all of us possess, by virtue of our narrative imagination, for continually “extending the boundaries of our world” (p. 109).

William L. Randall, EdD, is Professor of Gerontology at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, and co-editor of *Narrative Works*. His research interests include narrative care with older adults, narrative foreclosure in later life, and the narrative complexity of autobiographical memory. His books include *The Stories We Are: An Essay on Self-Creation* (University of Toronto Press, 1995; 2nd ed., 2014); *Restorying Our Lives: Personal Growth through Autobiographical Reflection* (with Gary M. Kenyon; Praeger, 1997); *Ordinary Wisdom: Biographical Aging and the Journey of Life* (with Gary M. Kenyon, 2001); *Reading Our Lives: The Poetics of Growing Old* (with A. Elizabeth McKim; Oxford, 2008), *Storying Later Life: Issues, Investigations, and Interventions in Narrative Gerontology* (co-edited with Gary M. Kenyon and Ernst Bohlmeijer; Oxford, 2011); *The Tales that Bind: A Narrative Model for Living and Helping in Rural Communities* (with Rosemary Clews and Dolores Furlong; University of Toronto Press, 2015); and *The Narrative Complexity of Ordinary Life: Tales from the Coffee Shop* (Oxford, 2015).