



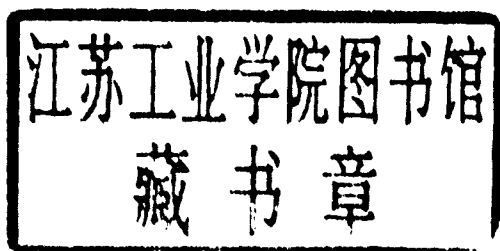
THE CAMBRIDGE INTRODUCTION TO

Narrative

H. Porter Abbott

The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative

H. PORTER ABBOTT



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002
Reprinted 2003(twice)

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Bembo 11/12.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 521 65033 X hardback
ISBN 0 521 65969 8 paperback

For Jason and Byram

Preface

The purpose of this book is to help readers understand what narrative is, how it is constructed, how it acts upon us, how we act upon it, how it is transmitted, how it changes when the medium or the cultural context changes, and how it is found not just in the arts but everywhere in the ordinary course of people's lives, many times a day. This last point is especially important. We are all narrators, though we may rarely be aware of it. A statement as simple as "I took the car to work" qualifies as narrative. As we seek to communicate more detail about events in time, we become involved in increasingly complex acts of narration. We are also the constant recipients of narrative: from newspapers and television, from books and films, and from friends and relatives telling us, among other things, that they took the car to work. Therefore, though much of this book is devoted to narrative in literature, film, and drama, it grounds its treatment of narrative by introducing it as a human phenomenon that is not restricted to literature, film, and theater, but is found in all activities that involve the representation of events in time. In its early chapters, the book moves back and forth between the arts and the everyday. At the same time, the book honors the fact that out of this common capability have come rich and meaningful narratives that we come back to and reflect on repeatedly in our lives.

This book is descriptive rather than prescriptive; it seeks to describe what happens when we encounter narrative, rather than to prescribe what should happen. All along the way questions arise that are very much alive in current work on narrative. These are often tough issues, and, with a few important exceptions (as for example the definition of narrative that I employ), I try to keep these issues open. In organization, the book introduces the subject of narrative by moving outward from simplicity to complexity, from the component parts of narrative in Chapters Two and Three to its numerous effects, including its extraordinary rhetorical power and the importance of the concept of "closure," in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Six deals with narration and the key role of the narrator.

Chapters Seven and Eight, in taking up issues connected with the interpretation of narrative, shift the focus from the power of narrative to the power of readers and audiences. In this sense, narrative is always a two-way

street. Without our collaboration, there is no narrative to begin with. And if it is true that we allow ourselves to be manipulated by narrative, it is also true that we do manipulating of our own. These chapters take up this interplay of audiences and narratives in the process of interpretation and culminate in Chapter Eight's treatment of three fundamentally different ways of reading that we all engage in: intentional, symptomatic, and adaptive. The differences between them are important and bring in their wake different understandings of what we mean by meaning in narrative.

Chapter Nine turns to the differences that different media make in narrative and to what happens when you move a story from one medium to narrate it in another. Chapter Ten opens out the subject of character, both as a function of narrative and as intimately connected with what we loosely call "the self" in autobiography. In the final two chapters, we return to the broad subject of narrative's role in culture and society. Much of politics and the law is a contest of narratives. Chapter Eleven looks at the ways in which these conflicts of narrative play out, particularly in the law. And in Chapter Twelve, I look at the ways in which narrative can also be an instrument by which storytellers and readers seek to negotiate the claims of competing and often intractable conflicts. Stories, for example, that are told over and over again (cultural masterplots) are often efforts to settle conflicts which are deeply embedded in a culture.

In this book, I have endeavored to avoid writing another anatomy of narrative, of which there are fine examples available in print (Genette, 1980; Prince, 1987). Instead, I have sought at all times to restrict focus to the most useful concepts and terminology. The field of narratology has produced a great arsenal of distinctions and terms. I have kept my selection of these to a minimum, using only those that are indispensable. These key terms will be found throughout the book and are featured in boldface in the Glossary. As such, this is a foundational book. The tools and distinctions it supplies can be employed across the whole range of nameable interpretive approaches.

Nonetheless, by selecting the terms I do and by treating them the way I do, I have written a study that is bound to be controversial. The simple reason for this is that all studies of narrative are controversial. Despite a burst of energetic and highly intelligent research over the last thirty years and the genuine progress that has been made, there is not yet a consensus on any of the key issues in the study of narrative. If, like language, narrative is an inevitable human capability that we deploy every day without conscious effort, it is also, like language, a complex and fascinating field that often seems to defy our best analytical efforts at exactitude. Therefore, and above all else, I have aimed at clarity in this introduction to narrative. I have also been highly selective in recommending, at the ends of Chapters Two through Twelve, secondary texts that seem at this date to have

stood the test of time (though for some areas, like hypertext narrative, the works have only barely been tested). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge here the assistance I have received from the work on narrative by many brilliant scholars, among them: M. M. Bakhtin, Mieke Bal, Ann Banfield, Roland Barthes, Emile Benveniste, Wayne Booth, David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Claude Bremond, Peter Brooks, Ross Chambers, Seymour Chatman, Dorrit Cohn, Jonathan Culler, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Monika Fludernik, Gérard Genette, A. J. Greimas, David Herman, Paul Hernadi, Wolfgang Iser, Roman Jakobson, Fredric Jameson, Robert Kellogg, Frank Kermode, George P. Landow, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Wallace Martin, Scott McCloud, J. Hillis Miller, Bill Nichols, Roy Pascal, Gerald Prince, Vladimir Propp, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Eric Rabkin, David Richter, Paul Ricoeur, Brian Richardson, Robert Scholes, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Marie-Laure Ryan, Saint Augustine, Victor Shklovsky, Franz Stanzel, Tzvetan Todorov, Boris Tomashevsky, Hayden White, and Trevor Whittock.

I want to give special thanks for hands-on assistance to Josie Dixon who caught on to the idea of this book right away and never failed in her encouragement. Her successor at Cambridge University Press, Ray Ryan, together with Rachel De Wachter, gave helpful guidance during the later stages. Derek Attridge read at least two versions of the manuscript for Cambridge and made some sharp suggestions which I incorporated. Fiona Goodchild, Jon Robert Pearce, Paul Hernadi, and Anita Abbott all read it through (the latter more than once!). I am thankful to them for their many shrewd and helpful comments. To my teaching assistants and many students over the years in a course called “The Art of Narrative,” I send my thanks for their ability and (more important) their willingness to pose wonderful questions I never would have thought to ask. Finally, thanks are long overdue to my former colleague Hugh Kenner, whose ability to make revelatory connections, and to do so with an efficiency that always surprises, is to my mind unsurpassed.

Acknowledgments

The author and publisher are grateful for permission to quote from the following texts.

“A Common Confusion,” by Franz Kafka, from Willa and Edwin Muir (trans.), *The Great Wall of China*, copyright © 1936, 1937 by Heinr. Mercy Sohn, Prague. Copyright © 1946 and renewed 1974 by Schocken Books, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Schocken Books, distributed by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

“Bedtime Story,” by Jeffrey Whitmore reprinted with permission from *The World’s Shortest Stories* edited by Steve Moss, copyright © 1998, 1995 by Steve Moss, published by Running Press, Philadelphia and London.

“Taboo,” by Enrique Anderson Ibert, from Isabel Reade (trans.), *The Other Side of the Mirror*, copyright © 1966 by Southern Illinois University Press.

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
Chapter 1 Narrative and life	1
The universality of narrative	1
Narrative and time	3
Narrative perception	6
Chapter 2 Defining narrative	12
The bare minimum	12
Story and narrative discourse	14
The mediation (construction) of story	17
Constituent and supplementary events	20
Narrativity	22
Chapter 3 The borders of narrative	25
Framing narratives	25
Paratexts	26
The outer limits of narrative	27
Is it narrative or is it life itself?	31
Chapter 4 The rhetoric of narrative	36
The rhetoric of narrative	36
Causation	37
Normalization	40
Masterplots	42
Narrative rhetoric at work	46

Chapter 5 Closure	51
Conflict: the agon	51
Closure and endings	52
Closure, suspense, and surprise	53
Closure at the level of expectations	54
Closure at the level of questions	56
The absence of closure	57
Chapter 6 Narration	62
A few words on interpretation	62
The narrator	63
Voice	64
Focalization	66
Distance	67
Reliability	69
Free indirect style	70
Narration on stage and screen	72
Chapter 7 Interpreting narrative	76
The implied author	77
Underreading	79
Overreading	82
Gaps	83
Cruxes	85
Repetition: themes and motifs	88
Chapter 8 Three ways to interpret narrative	93
The question of wholeness in narrative	93
Intentional readings	95
Symptomatic readings	97
Adaptive readings	100
Chapter 9 Adaptation across media	105
Adaptation as creative destruction	105
Duration and pace	107
Character	109
Figurative language	111

Gaps	114
Focalization	115
Constraints of the marketplace	118
Chapter 10 Character and self in narrative	123
Character vs. action	123
Flat and round characters	126
Can characters be real?	127
Types	129
Autobiography	131
Life writing as performative	134
Chapter 11 Narrative contestation	138
A contest of narratives	138
A narrative lattice-work	142
Shadow stories	144
Motivation and personality	146
Masterplots and types	148
Revising cultural masterplots	150
Battling narratives are everywhere	152
Chapter 12 Narrative negotiation	156
Narrative negotiation	157
Critical reading as narrative negotiation	162
Closure, one more time	168
The end of closure?	171
<i>Notes</i>	176
<i>Bibliography</i>	183
<i>Glossary and topical index</i>	187
<i>Index of authors and narratives</i>	198

Illustrations

The author and publisher are grateful to be able to include the following illustrations.

- Figure 1 Photograph of a shipwreck, photographer unknown, in *Disaster Log of Ships* by Jim Gibbs, Seattle: Superior Publishing, 1971. Copyright holder unknown. page 6
- Figure 2 Black and white photograph of *Belshazzar's Feast* by Rembrandt, copyright © National Gallery, London. Used by permission. 7
- Figure 3 *La douce résistance* by Michel Garnier, 1793. Private collection. Every effort was made to contact the owner, but without success. 8
- Figure 4 Black and white photograph of *Dr. Syn* by Andrew Wyeth, 1981 tempera on panel. Collection of Andrew and Betsy Wyeth, copyright © Andrew Wyeth. 9
- Figure 5 Black and white photograph of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* by Francis Bacon, 1944. Copyright © Marlborough Fine Art, London. Tate Gallery, London 2000 and Art Resources, New York. 10
- Figure 6 Black and white photographic still from *Wuthering Heights* (United Artists, 1939). Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 110
- Figure 7 Black and white photographic still from *Cleopatra* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963). Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 113
- Figure 8 *Understanding Comics* (page 66) by Scott McCloud, reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. 116

Narrative and life

The universality of narrative

When we think of narrative, we usually think of it as art, however modest. We think of it as novels or sagas or folk tales or, at the least, as anecdotes. We speak of a gift for telling stories. But as true as it is that narrative can be an art and that art thrives on narrative, narrative is also something we all engage in, artists and non-artists alike. We make narratives many times a day, every day of our lives. And we start doing so almost from the moment we begin putting words together. As soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is a good chance we are engaged in narrative discourse. “I fell down,” the child cries, and in the process tells her mother a little narrative, just as I have told in this still unfinished sentence a different, somewhat longer narrative that includes the action of the child’s telling (“‘I fell down,’ the child cries”).

Given the presence of narrative in almost all human discourse, there is little wonder that there are theorists who place it next to language itself as *the* distinctive human trait. Fredric Jameson, for example, writes about the “all-informing process of *narrative*,” which he describes as “the central function or instance of the human mind.”¹ Jean-François Lyotard calls narration “the quintessential form of customary knowledge.”² Whether or not such assertions stand up under scrutiny, it is still the case that we engage in narrative so often and with such unconscious ease that the gift for it would seem to be everyone’s birthright. Perhaps the fullest statement regarding the universality of narrative among humans is the opening to Roland Barthes’s landmark essay on narrative (1966). It is worth quoting at length:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms,

narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.³

Barthes is right. There are, of course, narrative *genres* (literary kinds) – the novel, the epic poem, the short story, the saga, the tragedy, the comedy, the farce, the ballad, the western, and so on – in which narrative provides the overall structure. We call them narratives and expect them to tell a story. But if you look at any of the so-called non-narrative genres, like, say, the lyric poem, which is frequently featured as pre-eminently a static form – that is, dominated not by a story line but by a single feeling – you will still find narrative. “Drink to me, onely, with thine eyes,” wrote Ben Jonson in the first line of his “Song: To Celia,” and already we have a micro-narrative brewing – “look at me” – overlaid by another micro-narrative which acts as a metaphor – “drink to me.”

Drink to me, onely, with thine eyes,
 And I will pledge with mine;
 Or leave a kisse but in the cup,
 And Ile not looke for wine.
 The thirst, that from the soule doth rise,
 Doth aske a drinke divine:
 But might I of JOVE’S *Nectar* sup,
 I would not change for thine.
 I sent thee, late, a rosie wreath,
 Not so much honoring thee,
 As giving it a hope, that there
 It could not withered bee.
 But thou thereon didst onely breath,
 And sent’st it backe to mee:
 Since when it growes, and smells, I sweare,
 Not of itself, but thee.

Here you have a poem dedicated to the expression of a powerful feeling, erotic love (threaded with irony and good humor), but the poem as a whole is structured by two narrative situations. The first is a series of micro-narratives, in the conditional mode, involving looking, kissing, and drinking. The second, beginning midway through, tells a more elaborate story of flowers that were sent, breathed on, returned, and now flourish, smelling of his beloved.

Narrative capability shows up in infants some time in their third or fourth year, when they start putting verbs together with nouns.⁴ Its appearance coincides, roughly, with the first memories that are retained by adults of

their infancy, a conjunction that has led some to propose that memory itself is dependent on the capacity for narrative. In other words, we do not have any mental record of who we are until narrative is present as a kind of armature, giving shape to that record. If this is so, then “[o]ur very definition as human beings,” as Peter Brooks has written, “is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live. We cannot, in our dreams, our daydreams, our ambitious fantasies, avoid the imaginative imposition of form on life.”⁵ The gift of narrative is so pervasive and universal that there are those who strongly suggest that narrative is a “deep structure,” a human capacity genetically hard-wired into our minds in the same way as our capacity for grammar (according to some linguists) is something we are born with.⁶ The novelist Paul Auster once wrote that “A child’s need for stories is as fundamental as his need for food.”⁷ For anyone who has read to a child or taken a child to the movies and watched her rapt attention, it is hard to believe that the appetite for narrative is something we learn rather than something that is built into us through our genes.

Narrative and time

Whatever the final word may be regarding the source of this gift for narrative – whether from nature or from nurture or from some complex combination of the two – the question remains: what does narrative do for us? And the first answer is that it does many things for us, some of which we will go into in later chapters. But if we had to choose one answer above all others, the likeliest is that *narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time*. This would seem to be the fundamental gift of narrative with the greatest range of benefits. And it certainly makes evolutionary sense. As we are the only species on earth with both language and a conscious awareness of the passage of time, it stands to reason that we would have a mechanism for expressing this awareness.

Of course, there are other ways to organize time and to express it. In our own age, the commonest of these is the mechanical timepiece: the clock or watch. But mechanical clocks have been around only since the Middle Ages. Before that, the measurement of time was more proximate than exact. Still, there were then (as there are now and always will be) dependable non-narrative ways of organizing time: the passage of the sun, the phases of the moon, the succession of seasons, and the season cycles that we call years. Like the clock, these modes of organizing time are abstract in the sense that they provide a grid of regular intervals within which we can locate events. Narrative, by contrast, turns this process inside out, *allowing events themselves*

to create the order of time. “I fell down,” cries the child and in so doing gives shape to what in clock time would be roughly a second. In effect, the child carves out a piece of time, spanning her collapse and fall to the ground. This is the way time, to quote Paul Ricoeur, becomes “human time”: “Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence.”⁸

If we extend our example just a bit, we can show how much we rely on the free exercise of narrative to shape time according to human priorities:

The child fell down. After a while she got up and ran, until at last, seeing her mother, she burst into tears: “I fell down,” she cried.
 “There, there,” said her mother. “That must have hurt.”

Here time is comprised of a succession of events that appear as links in a chain: the fall, the getting up, the running, the seeing of her mother, the bursting into tears, what she said, and what her mother said. If one tries to imagine this sequence underscored by integers of clock time (--), one might come up with something like this:

The Child fell down.

After a while she got up and ran,

until at last, seeing her

mother, she burst into tears: “I fell down,” she cried. “There,

there,” said her mother. “That must have hurt.”

The juxtaposition of the two kinds of time makes the difference clear. Clock time, like other forms of abstract or regular time, always relates to itself, so that one speaks in terms of numbers of seconds or their multiples (minutes,

hours) and fractions (nanoseconds). Narrative time, in contrast, relates to events or incidents. And while clock time is necessarily marked off by regular intervals of a certain length, narrative time is not necessarily any length at all. In the short narrative above, for example, we could slow this whole sequence down simply by adding details, and in the process, we would have expanded time.

The child fell down. She sat where she had fallen, her eyes frightened, her lower lip trembling. She rubbed her knee. Was it bleeding? No, but the skin was scraped. Where was her mother? Carefully, she got to her feet and started running . . .

We have not added clock time to what happened. But we have added narrative time. We have added time in the sense that we have added greater complexity of narrative shape to its passage. This complexity is a matter of the accumulation of incident. It is as if we went inside the phrase “After a while she got up and ran” and lingered there to observe a fabric of micro-events. Conversely, we can make narrative time go like the wind:

“There, there,” said her mother, “that must have hurt.” In the following months, the child fell often. But slowly she acquired confidence and eventually stopped falling altogether. Indeed, as a young woman, the assurance of her gait would command attention whenever she entered a roomful of people – people who would have found it hard to imagine that this was once a little girl who fell down all the time.

Here a new narrative structure comes into place, stretching over years. Time becomes a sequential reduction of falls and the acquirement of balanced poise, while all the numerous incidents that must have marked the daily life of this child/woman are screened from view. With a few broad strokes time is now structured as the history of an acquired capability.

This gives some idea of how fluid narrative time is. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that this way of expressing time, though in a way the opposite of the many modes of regular, or abstract, time, is rarely kept in strict isolation from regular time. Notice, in the example above, that I used the phrase “In the following months,” invoking the thirty-day interval with which we are all familiar. In narrative, then, though it is the incidents that give shape and that dominate our sense of time, the regularity of abstract time, which is also an integral part of all our lives, unavoidably adds its own counterpoint to the time structured by incidents.

Both of these kinds of time have been with us as far back as history can trace. We have always been aware of the recurring cycles of the sun, moon, and seasons, and at the same time we have always been shaping and reshaping time as a succession of events, that is, as narrative.