

# Fiction and Fictionalism

R.M Sainsbury



New Problems of Philosophy

# FICTION AND FICTIONALISM

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*R. M. Sainsbury*



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# CHAPTER SUMMARIES

## 1 What is fiction?

### 1.1 *Fictive intentions*

Producers of fiction have distinctive intentions: getting an audience to make-believe what they write. Largely following Currie, I take this to be the characteristic feature of fiction.

### 1.2 *Pretending to assert*

Many writers have suggested that what is distinctive of authors of fiction is that they pretend to assert. This is neither necessary nor sufficient for the production of a work of fiction.

### 1.3 *Pretending, imagining, and making believe*

How are these attitudes related? They are distinct, though connected. Make-believe involves imagining, and may also involve pretending, but it can't be reduced to either.

### 1.4 *Make-believe and emotional response*

We seem to respond to fiction emotionally, with fear or grief or joy. How is this possible? Walton's view is that our responses depend upon our using pretense to imaginatively extend the fiction, so as to include ourselves and our reactions.

Rejecting this view on the grounds that our reactions are largely involuntary, whereas we can pretend what we like, I suggest instead that the vivid presentation of states of affairs can naturally arouse emotional responses.

### 1.5 *Varieties of fiction*

What feature, if any, do novels, plays, paintings have in common that makes them all count as species of fiction? Fictive intentions can be present in artistic activities other than writing novels. However, they are absent in the case of myth. In order to make room for myth, I suggest a disjunctive condition: a fiction is either the product of fictive intentions, or, though it starts life as serious narrative, it rightly comes to be treated as a work to which make-belief, not belief, is the appropriate response.

## 2 Realism about fictional objects

### 2.1 *Where do we start?*

Realism about fictional objects is the view that these objects, things like Sherlock Holmes and the planet Tralfamadore, belong to our reality. This view will be refined and discussed in this chapter and the four chapters that follow. Determining the right thing to think on this question involves explaining common-sense opinions and also the opinions of the experts – literary critics.

### 2.2 *Literalism: fidelity and truth*

Literalism is the view that a sentence like “Holmes lived on Baker Street” is literally true. Some theorists think that this is both correct and accepted by common sense. Literalism entails realism about fictional objects, for “Holmes is a detective” could only be literally true were there such an object as Holmes. I think literalism is incorrect, and is not believed by common sense. Contrary opinions can be explained away by our mistaking truth on a presupposition for absolute truth. Since literalists think the truths in question are made true by what is said in the stories, it’s plain they can’t be thinking of the sentences as *really* true. In any case, such a view would lead to contradictions: fictional truth is demonstrably not a species of truth.

### 2.3 *“Of course there are fictional characters”*

It just seems obvious that there are fictional characters. But realism requires that the fictional characters belong to our reality, not just to the world of the fiction. It’s indeed uncontentious that, in fiction, there are characters; but not

uncontentious that, in reality, there are such people as Sherlock Holmes. The contentious view I express by the phrase: there are *robust* fictional characters.

#### 2.4 *A theoretical reason for realism: the semantics of names*

Can a name be meaningful even if it does not have a bearer? If the answer is No, then we have a simple argument for robust fictional characters. But I say that the answer is Yes. The full justification for the answer is not given here, but there is a simple motivation: on the face of it, fictional names like “Sherlock Holmes” are meaningful but have no bearer.

#### *Appendix: reference without referents*

This sketches the framework (called RWR) that justifies the claim that there can be meaningful names without bearers. RWR undermines a motivation for realism about fictional names. The main idea is that a name purports to refer, but may not succeed in doing so. If it does not, a simple sentence containing it is false. This leaves many arguments for realism in place, for realists typically look for true sentences containing fictional names.

#### 2.5 *Evidence for realism*

This section lists a series of apparently true sentences, like “Anna Karenina is more intelligent than Emma Bovary”, whose truth seems to require robust fictional characters. These constitute the main case for realism.

## 3 **Fictional objects are nonexistent**

This is the first of three chapters in which specific versions of realism about fictional objects (the view that there are *robust* fictional characters) are set out and discussed. The three versions are that fictional objects are real but nonexistent (this chapter), that they are real but nonactual (chapter 4) and that they are real but nonconcrete (chapter 5).

### 3.1 *Formulating Meinongianism*

The view that there are nonexistent objects is usually attributed to Alexius Meinong, so, though not wishing to enter into exegesis, I call this view Meinongianism. In this section it is made more precise and applied to fictional entities.

### 3.2 *Motivating Meinongianism*

I offer four possible motivations for Meinongianism. (1) As a form of realism about fictional objects, it can help us understand how some problematic fiction-related sentences can be true. (2) Some hold it's a commonsensical view: of course there are things that don't exist, dragons, witches, etc. (3) Meinongianism solves the "puzzle of existence", explaining how we can truly say of, e.g. dragons or Vulcan, that they do not exist. (4) Meinongianism gives the best account of thinking about things (intentionality): it seems we can think about things that don't exist, so there are nonexistent things we think about. I suggest that none of these motivations is very compelling, save possibly the first, which at this point is *sub judice*.

### 3.3 *Contradictions within Meinongianism?*

If Meinongians are committed to round squares, or impossible objects in fiction, are they not committed to contradictions? And so can we not simply reject the view? I present some ways in which Meinongians have rebutted this charge. They may distinguish nuclear from extranuclear properties. Alternatively, nonliteralist Meinongians may say that the only properties nonexistent objects possess are representational ones, and something that in itself is perfectly consistent may represent something inconsistent.

### 3.4 *Creativity and nonexistent objects*

Meinongians cannot regard creating fictional characters as bringing them into existence, for on their view they don't exist. This makes pressing what I call the selection problem: how does an author pick out, from among the cloud of nonexistents, the right one to be the fictional character he wants to create? This question simply does not arise for irrealists (those who don't accept any form of realism about fictional characters). For them, making up a character is just making up a story.

### 3.5 *Other problems for nonexistents*

A variety of problems for nonexistents are canvassed. Here are two: Meinongians cannot assign any different metaphysical status to fictional characters like Hamlet, and to characters who are only fictionally fictional (like Gonzago). Both come out simply as nonexistent, yet intuitively there is a significant difference. The other problem I'll mention here is that if an author says there are several sisters, but is never more specific, it seems that a Meinongian must hold that there are several nonexistent sisters but deny that there is any nonexistent sister; this is hard to understand.

### 3.6 *Retrospect on Meinongian views*

We cannot reject Meinongianism out of hand. But a properly developed Meinongianism has to steer through some very treacherous metaphysical waters.

## 4 **Worlds and truth: fictional worlds, possible worlds, impossible worlds**

The aim of the chapter is to consider whether we can take seriously the idea that fictional characters are nonactual inhabitants of nonactual worlds. I call this view nonactualism about fictional characters.

### 4.1 *Possible worlds in modal logic*

This section gives a brief introduction to the use logicians have made of possible worlds. Those who have encountered this before should skip this section.

### 4.2 *Realism about possible worlds (and their occupants)*

Lewis's modal realism (realism about possible worlds) is, I argue, required for a view of fictional characters according to which they are real but nonactual objects. Superficial objections are rejected.

### 4.3 *Fiction operators as quantifiers over worlds*

In a famous paper ("Truth in Fiction", 1978) David Lewis argues that we can understand operators like "According to such-and-such fiction ..." in terms of quantification over possible worlds. This position is not required by the view that fictional characters are nonactual objects, but it may seem to entail that view. In any case, I argue (for familiar reasons) that Lewis's account does not work.

### 4.4 *Which possible object is Sherlock Holmes?*

The problem is that in the nonactualist's picture, there will be many different candidates for being the one and only Holmes, hence no one of them is Holmes (this argument goes back to Kripke). I endorse this argument, pointing out that even if a certain supervaluational semantic theory assigns truth to "There is just one Holmes", the associated metaphysical picture does not accord with that assignment.

### 4.5 *Strange worlds and objects: incomplete and impossible*

Can we do better for nonactualists by adding to our worlds ones which classical logicians do not countenance, worlds that are impossible or



incomplete? I argue for a negative answer. The incompleteness of fictional characters requires all of them, even those who are lucky enough to inhabit perfectly consistent stories, to belong to impossible worlds.

## 5 Fictional entities are abstract artifacts

The form of realism about fictional entities with the largest current following is that they are abstract things. A specific (and less popular) version of this view, but in my opinion the best version, is that they are abstract artifacts: abstract things produced by human agency.

### 5.1 *Abstract artifact theory*

Abstract artifacts are things like marriages and contracts: man-made (so artifacts) but lacking spatial extent (so abstract, or as I prefer to say nonconcrete). The abstract artifact theory of fictional objects, following Thomasson's view, assigns them to this category: they are man-made but nonconcrete. This involves something like the distinction between exemplifying and encoding properties. If Sherlock Holmes is nonspatial, he does not smoke a pipe. The abstract artifact theorist (in the version I develop) says that Holmes *encodes* this property but does not *exemplify* it.

### 5.2 *Applying abstract artifact theory*

Although it might seem that abstract artifact theory has an easy time with authorial creation, some versions of the theory make very implausible claims about what creation involves. There are other versions which are much more plausible.

### 5.3 *Motivating abstract artifact theory*

The main motivation comes from doing justice to sentences that apparently need a realistic interpretation. This motivation has been explored at length by Peter van Inwagen, whose views are examined in detail in this section.

### 5.4 *Problems for abstract artifact theory*

One difficulty is doing justice to existential sentences. If Holmes is an existent abstract artifact, then "Holmes exists" ought to be true. Some ways of fixing this are discussed. A more general problem is identified. Encoding is really just representing. Everyone agrees that there are real representations. But fictional characters were supposed to be something more than representations.

## 6 Irrealism: fiction and intentionality

### 6.1 *Options for irrealists*

This is the hardest chapter in the book. It's also one I care about a lot, as it's where I fix the outstanding problems for RWR. An irrealist about fictional objects says that there are no robust fictional objects. There wouldn't be much point struggling to develop a coherent irrealist theory of fiction unless one could also supply an irrealist theory of intentionality. Irrealists need to explain how the mind can think about things that don't exist without there being such things. In this section, various strategies are spelled out, many of them involving paraphrase, or related notions.

### 6.2 *A first irrealist look at a problematic case*

Interfictional comparisons (e.g. "Anna Karenina was more intelligent than Emma Bovary") are often used to ground realist views. This section shows that we can adopt an extension of a familiar irrealist response: to the extent that such sentences are true, they are governed by a fiction operator. (It's a bit tricky to see what the operator might be in this case: that's the point of the section.) However, I voice a preference for a different approach: such sentences are not true absolutely, but only under a presupposition, perhaps the presupposition that there really are such people as Anna and Emma.

### 6.3 *Marks of intensionality*

We have to broaden our enquiry to consider intensionality in general, and not merely fiction. This section aims to identify the phenomenon. I argue that realism has little or nothing to contribute to the more general project.

### 6.4 *Operator and predicate intensionality: reduction*

Operator intensionality is induced by sentence operators (expressions that take a sentence to make a sentence), for example "John believes that *p*" or "According to the fiction, *p*." Predicate intensionality is induced by an intensional verb, like "seeks": Ponce de León seeks the fountain of youth. This section considers attempts to reduce the latter kind of intensionality to the former. The point of the reduction in this context is that operator intensionality is entirely conformable with, and explainable by, RWR. Although I argue that there is no general reduction, I highlight reductions for two important cases: "John thought about Pegasus" and "Holmes is famous."

### 6.5 *Operator and predicate intensionality: entailment*

Even if there's no reduction of the kind envisaged in the previous section, it's plausible that there's entailment: every sentence dominated by an intensional predicate is entailed by some sentences that either lack intensionality or are dominated by intensional operators. If that's right, the ontology of the sentences dominated by intensional predicates cannot exceed that of the sentences dominated by intensional operators. By RWR, we know that an irrealist ontology will work for operator-dominated sentences. Hence irrealism will work across the board. This is a crucial section.

### 6.6 *Presupposition and relative truth*

It remains to explain intuitive evaluations of some sentences that motivate realists. I argue that in many cases our treatment of a sentence as true is really treating it as true upon a presupposition. I think it's very interesting how easily one can slip in and out of presuppositions, and how they can be embedded and iterated. I give some examples drawn from fiction itself.

### 6.7 *A final review*

This section lists the responses I think irrealists should make to various examples used to support realism.

## 7 **Some fictionalists**

This chapter introduces the work of various authors who have been or might be called fictionalist. The main aim of the chapter is to distinguish fictionalism from other metaphysical views.

### 7.1 *Early history*

The earliest clearly fictionalist author I have discovered is the sixteenth-century figure Osiander, who presented his words as if they were those of Copernicus. Other candidates for being fictionalists (Berkeley, Hume, Bentham, Russell) turn out on closer inspection not to qualify.

### 7.2 *Van Fraassen's constructive empiricism*

1980 was a major year for modern fictionalism, with the publication of Bas van Fraassen's *The Scientific Image* and Hartry Field's *Science without Numbers*; towering works, and indisputably fictionalist. This section gives a brief survey of van Fraassen's position and of some of the problems it has to address.

### 7.3 *Field's mathematical fictionalism*

A brief survey of Field's position and an indication of some difficulties.

### 7.4 *Some features of fictionalism*

This section harvests the fruit of the labors of the previous sections in the chapter. Fictionalism is distinguished from reduction and eliminativism; its relation to the attribution of error is set out; and I indicate some typical motivations.

## 8 Fictionalism about possible worlds

Whereas the previous chapter was primarily motivated by an attempt to describe the essential features of fictionalist approaches, this chapter and the next look in close detail at specific fictionalisms.

### 8.1 *A partial taxonomy of fictionalisms*

The main fictionalist idea is that, in some region, thoughts don't have to be true to be good. There are then various options, relating to whether the normal thinkers of these thoughts appreciate this fact about them, or whether the thoughts as they stand need to be modified. What norms are being invoked by the "don't have to be"? Don't have to be true, given what aims or purposes?

### 8.2 *Fictionalist values*

What does the "good" amount to in "doesn't have to be true to be good"? This may vary from case to case, but one important answer is that fictionalist sentences can serve as inference bridges. A mickey mouse example of how this might work is offered.

### 8.3 *Fictionalism about possible worlds*

This fictionalist claims that talk of possible worlds cannot be taken fully seriously, for there are no worlds other than our world. A fictionalist hopes to preserve talk of other worlds as a useful fiction. In particular, Lewis's theory of possible worlds, abbreviated PW, is taken as the canonical "fiction".

### 8.4 *Comparisons with other forms of irrealism*

By contrast, an eliminativist would say we should just junk all talk of nonactual worlds, and a reductionist would say we should reduce worlds

to ontologically respectable things, for example, maximal sets of consistent sentences.

### *8.5 Problems for fictionalism about possible worlds*

There's a quick alleged refutation of fictionalism about possible worlds. However, as is now well recognized, the refutation doesn't work, through failure to pay close attention to the details of Lewis's possible worlds story. But there is a useful lesson: much depends on very fine details of translating modal idioms into PW.

### *8.6 Motivations for fictionalism about possible worlds*

It's unclear what the benefits are of retaining possible worlds talk, if one thinks there are no such things as worlds. PW makes very definite pronouncements about disputed features of modal logic; why should we think it is right?

### *8.7 Whence modal knowledge?*

This leads to a general problem for the fictionalist about possible worlds. There are various possible "fictions", variants of PW. How can a fictionalist ground a choice between them? If it's all done by a prior conviction about modal facts, expressed just by modal operators, it becomes quite unclear what role PW is playing. But it hardly seems right to let PW call the tune (as Lewis does). After all, it's meant to be just a story.

## **9 Moral fictionalism**

Moral fictionalism can be motivated by the view that there's no room for moral properties in the natural order. That's not the version I mostly discuss. Rather, I look at a quite intricate argument by Mark Kalderon, designed to establish, on very different grounds, that fictionalism is the only tenable view to take about morality.

### *9.1 Noncognitivism*

The first stage in Kalderon's argument for fictionalism is to argue for noncognitivism. This is the view that moral commitments are not best explained as beliefs, attitudes to truth evaluable propositions. Kalderon uses an original argument to the conclusion that morality is noncognitivist, based on the view that, in a moral dispute, we can properly be "intransigent": we don't have even a lax obligation to reconsider in the light of the disagreement. I

argue that Kalderon is mistaken: our obligations to reconsider don't differ as between moral and nonmoral cases.

### 9.2 *Fictionalism and semantics*

Kalderon claims to be able to offer a plausible semantics for moral discourse. The semantics involves referring to properties, like being evil, but is not committed to these being instantiated. It seems to me that moral fictionalism would be better off not requiring there to be distinctively moral properties; many semantic theories, including RWR, impose no such requirement. Indeed, RWR allows that singular terms, as "courage" and "evil" seem to be, can have an acceptable semantics without commitment to any distinctively moral entities.

### 9.3 *The value of morality from a fictionalist point of view*

How can a mere fiction guide our lives? Reading ordinary fiction may, of course, be morally uplifting, making us see the destructive consequences of idleness or cowardice, making us feel the excellence of noble conduct, and so on. But how can a fiction according to which some course of action is right get us to perform that action? Kalderon pays little attention to this problem, but it is the focus of an article by Richard Joyce, who suggests that fiction can help stiffen resolve towards prudent actions when prudential considerations on their own risk being overwhelmed. I argue that this falls well short of doing justice to the role that morality plays in our lives.

## 10 Retrospect

This chapter looks back at the various connections between the metaphysics of fictional discourse and the metaphysical approach embodied by fictionalism.

# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The origin of this book relates to the semantics of names. Historically, two views have been dominant: one traces back to Frege and Russell and says that proper names have descriptive meaning; the other traces back to Mill and says that the meaning of a proper name is simply its bearer. There are familiar problems with both views. For example, Millian theories have to say that a name without a bearer is a name without a meaning, from which it should follow that it cannot be part of a meaningful sentence, a consequence that seems plainly at variance with the facts. Fregean views were sharply attacked by Kripke (1972), who pointed out (among other things) that people belonging to a single practice of using a name, and so people for whom the name should have the same meaning, nonetheless may not have in common any descriptive information to associate with the name.

Some time ago, it seemed to me that the arguments against both these theories were successful, but that there were other theoretical positions to choose from. I outlined one of these in an earlier book, *Reference without Referents* (Sainsbury 2005), calling it RWR. That book acknowledged a problem that it did not fully resolve. RWR allows that proper names can be intelligible even if they have no bearer, but does not allow for simple sentences containing such a name to be true: it counts “Pegasus was a flying horse”, “Holmes was created by Conan Doyle” and “The Greeks worshipped Zeus” as false. That unqualified ruling is unsatisfactory.

The first inspiration for the present book was that I now know (I think!) how to fix this problem. The essence of RWR survives intact, but there are various additions to deal with problem cases. In thinking about these issues, fictional names tend to be salient. At one point I thought that it was clear that they could be used as examples of names without bearers, and so as counterexamples to Mill: they have no bearer, so on Mill's theory they have no meaning; but they are plainly meaningful, so Mill's theory must be abandoned.

This argument now seems naïve. Many theorists hold that fictional proper names do have bearers, in which case these names can happily fall within the scope of Mill's theory. Some theorists hold that fictional names are not really meaningful (we merely pretend that they are), and so again pose no threat to Mill's theory. These proposals raise a number of semantic and metaphysical questions, and these form the subject of the early chapters of this book.

If fictional names like "Sherlock Holmes" have bearers, these entities cannot be ordinary objects: ones that actually exist and fill space. If they were that kind of object, we would have found them long ago. Taking fictional entities seriously requires one to explore unfamiliar realms – realms of nonexistent things, or nonactual things, or nonconcrete things. This leads one to many taxing metaphysical questions. And once metaphysics becomes a dominant theme, it's natural to consider a form of metaphysical project that is nowadays gaining increasing momentum: fictionalism. Fictionalists about some region of thought say that these thoughts are, or should be regarded as, like the thoughts we have when we engage in fiction. They may have value, but their value does not require them to be true. It follows that the value of these thoughts can be detached from the commitment they appear to have to the entities that would need to exist for them to be true. For example, suppose one is a fictionalist about the theories of elementary physics. The theories claim that there is a whole panoply of unobservable particles, hadrons, quarks, fermions, and these are used to explain observable phenomena. A fictionalist will say that the theory does not need to be true to be good. All we need *believe* is the predictions concerning observable phenomena. We can treat the unobservable entities just like fictional entities: they have their uses in calculating the predictions, but are not to be taken metaphysically seriously. To accept the theory is to believe its observational consequences, but does not require believing the fantasies about subatomic particles.

There's clearly an interaction between the metaphysics of fiction and the metaphysical picture proposed by fictionalists. Suppose that it turns



out that, perhaps because fictional names do have bearers, there really are fictional characters, and these are nonexistent entities. This places limits on the lightness of metaphysical being the fictionalist can aspire to. For example, perhaps treating talk of subatomic particles as fiction frees us from belief in existent subatomic particles, but only at the cost of requiring us to believe in nonexistent subatomic particles. Or perhaps fictionalism about mathematics, according to which math is just a useful myth, to which we can help ourselves without believing in numbers, nonetheless requires us to believe in nonexistent entities as the referents of numerals. This upshot could obviously derail certain kinds of motivation for fictionalism about mathematics.

In keeping with the aims of this series, I've written the book in such a way that most of the chapters are self-standing. If you want to read less than the whole, I suggest looking at the chapter summaries above. This should enable you to devise a path that suits your interests.

Each chapter is followed by some suggested reading. Here's an entirely general suggestion: nowadays there is a huge amount of material on the web, accessible with the usual search engines. (Try the search string "mathematical fictionalism".) The best single site is the superb Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy ([plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu)): very high quality and up-to-date contributions with good bibliographies.

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