



A COMPANION TO
*N*ARRATIVE
*T*HEORY

EDITED BY JAMES PHELAN
AND PETER J. RABINOWITZ

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THEORY

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Introduction: Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Narrative Theory

James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz

Writing an introduction to a wide-ranging collection of essays is always a matter of navigating between Scylla and Charybdis – but in this book, the metaphor has more specificity than usual. Scylla, you'll recall, was a monster who inhabited a cave in a cliff on a spit of land jutting off from the coast; her many arms plucked sailors from the boats that came too near. Charybdis was a whirlpool that threatened any boats that tried to evade the cliff. Elements of those images impinge on this introduction – and on narrative theory itself – in several ways.

How, for instance, should the introduction be structured? On the one hand, we can aim for clarity, simply summarizing the contents. Such a *Cliffs Notes* approach may provide a certain stony intelligibility, but it runs the risk of plucking the spirit from both the essays and our readers. On the other hand, we're faced with the ever-expanding whirlpool of self-reflexivity. An introduction, after all, can itself easily become a narrative – and a narrative about the current study of narrative (which in turn includes a history of the study of narrative) risks spinning into an endless loop, especially when written by authors who are, by disciplinary training, acutely self-conscious.

The task is made more difficult still because Scylla and Charybdis are not simply potential dangers to be evaded. Like the Sirens (and it's appropriate that the volume includes three essays on music and one that deals tangentially with musical issues), they offer seductions as well. Indeed, one can argue that the discipline of narrative theory itself divides into two attractive and productive ways of doing things, ways parallel to the distinction between the cliff and the whirlpool. On the one hand, we have the search for a stable landing, a theoretical bedrock of the fundamental and unchanging principles on which narratives are built. This approach is often associated with what is called structuralist (or classical) narratology, and especially after the rise of post-structuralism, it is often viewed as old-fashioned, even quaint – and it is often

believed to yank the life out of the works it considers. But as we hope this collection will make clear, it's still an enormously vital area of study, and it's still producing illuminating work, though nowadays its claims tend to be more modest – about “most narratives” or “narratives of a certain historical period” rather than about “all narratives.”

On the other hand, we have a discipline experiencing a voracious spin. That whirlpool is generated in part by the self-conscious and self-critical nature of much narrative theory. What the two of us have in the past labeled “theorypractice,” for instance, uses the interpretive consequences of particular theoretical hypotheses as a way of testing and re-examining those very hypotheses. But the vortex of narrative theory comes as well from what's often called the “narrative turn,” the tendency of the term “narrative” to cover a wider and wider territory, taking in (some would say “sucking in”) an ever-broadening range of subjects for inquiry. Narrative theory, over the years, has become increasingly concerned with historical, political, and ethical questions. At the same time, it has moved from its initial home in literary studies to take in examination of other media (including film, music, and painting) and other nonliterary fields (for instance, law and medicine).

It should therefore be no surprise that our volume represents both Scylla and Charybdis, both the search for enduring fundamentals of narrative theory and the engagement with the many turnings of contemporary theory. True, the introduction steers, on the whole, closer to the cliff, largely because so many of the essays themselves offer sufficient spin to satisfy anyone in search of the pleasures of the whirlpool. Nonetheless, we are sufficiently self-conscious to warn you that, if writing this introduction involved navigating a familiar but tricky path, so too does reading it. For reasons that will become increasingly clear, we urge you to recognize that our navigational choices were not inevitable. You very well might have charted a different route – though of course you can't choose that route until you've read much more than this introduction.

The book opens with a prologue that sets out narrative theory's modern history. In the first essay, “Histories of Narrative Theory (I): A Genealogy of Early Developments,” David Herman surveys the origins of the field. But since Herman is strongly influenced by the notion of “genealogy” promoted by Nietzsche and Foucault, his essay refuses to move in a simple linear fashion. He is particularly concerned with the way early structuralist narratology – an attempt to study narrative by treating “particular stories as individual narrative messages supported by a shared semiotic system” – grew out of “a complex interplay of intellectual traditions, critical-theoretical movements, and analytic paradigms distributed across decades, continents, nations, schools of thought, and individual researchers.” Herman uses Wellek and Warren's influential *Theory of Literature* as a nodal point, moving in and out from there to show the overlapping connections among a wide range of superficially competing critics who nonetheless represent, if not “a singular continuous tradition of research,” then at least “a cluster of developments marked by family resemblances.” One of