

My Narratology

An Interview with James Phelan

DIEGESIS: What is your all-time favorite narratological study?

Phelan: I find this question impossible to answer in anything other than a contingent way—as in “at this moment, I’m picking X, but if you ask me tomorrow or even a few hours from now, I could very well pick Y, Z, A, B, C, D... .” Candidates for X include the usual suspects so important to the history of narrative theory—from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to Shklovsky’s *Theory of Prose*, from Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel” to Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, from Barthes’s “Introduction to the Structuralist Analysis of Narrative” to Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*. From a more personal perspective, there’s outstanding work by my colleagues in Project Narrative at Ohio State, Frederick Aldama, Jared Gardner, Angus Fletcher, Brian McHale, Sean O’Sullivan, Amy Shuman, Robyn Warhol, and Julia Watson. And, not surprisingly, I find much to like in all the essays and books I’ve had a hand in editing over the last twenty-plus years. I could go on with studies that were especially important to me at different points in my own thinking about narrative and narrative theory (shout out to Ralph W. Rader’s “Fact, Theory, and Explanation”), but it’s time to identify my contingent X: Peter J. Rabinowitz’s “Truth in Fiction: A Re-examination of Audiences,” an essay that I read and admired many years before I met Peter.

The essay is a terrific example of what Peter and I, after we began collaborating in the early 1990s, dubbed theorypractice, that is, an inquiry in which there’s two-way traffic between theory and interpretation. Peter takes up the interpretive problem of the ontological relation between John Shade and Charles Kinbote in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (does Shade invent Kinbote, or vice versa?—and related stumbers) and in order to address that problem proposes his rhetorical model of audiences. This model, which identifies actual, authorial, narrative, and ideal narrative audiences, provides a way to sort out levels and kinds of “truth” in fiction. As many people reading this answer know, the model also explains the double-consciousness actual readers have while reading fiction. As we take on the narrative audience role, we believe in the reality of the fictional characters and events, but that belief exists within our larger, tacit knowledge as members of the authorial audience that the characters and events are invented. Thus, what’s true for the narrative audience is not necessarily true for the authorial audience, and the actual audience simultaneously occupies—and negotiates the relation between—the two positions.

This distinction between the authorial and narrative audiences is a wonderful illustration of narratology at its best, much like Genette's distinction between who speaks and who perceives: it theorizes phenomena whose presence we've only been dimly aware of, but once they've been theorized so many of us say "of course." The essay is also a favorite because Peter doesn't "solve" the interpretive problem in the sense of arguing that his model provides a definitive view of the ontological relation between Shade and Kinbote. Instead, he uses his model to explain why the debate is not likely to be resolved: Nabokov has not found a way to signal clearly the beliefs of his narrative audience, and, thus, actual readers are free to choose whether Kinbote invents Shade or vice versa. Finally, the essay is a favorite because it is not itself the last word on audiences: it does not, for example, adequately work out the relation between the narrative audience and the narratee. In other words, in addition to advancing our knowledge of how narratives work, "Truth in Fiction," like all my other candidates for X, provides the impetus for further questioning and discovery.

DIEGESIS: Which narrative would you like to take with you on a lonely island?

Phelan: Another impossible question that I'll answer in a contingent way, but without getting into what would be an even longer discussion of candidates. My choice is Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. It's a rhetorical theorist's dream, doing dazzlingly smart (and sometimes controversial) things with author-audience relationships by means of McEwan's handling of progression, voice, style, temporality, the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of his narrative, and the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told. After I wrote a couple of treatments of the novel in the mid-2000s (in *Experiencing Fiction* and in *The Nature of Narrative*), I thought I had a pretty good handle on it. But after some recent re-readings, I've realized that much of it had exceeded—and still exceeds—my grasp. Being alone with it on an island would keep me well-occupied for a long time.

DIEGESIS: Why narratology?

Phelan: Because reading fiction and because Sheldon Sacks.

To be more expansive, here's a short version of a longer story I've told before (Phelan, "Five Questions"); I repeat it because it's still my best answer to the why question.

In the Spring of 1973, two-thirds of the way through what was proving to be a difficult year for me in the M.A. program at the University of Chicago, I decided to enroll in "The Eighteenth-Century Novel." I signed up not because I had a burning desire to re-read *Pamela* and *Tom Jones* but because so many of the Ph.D. students advised me to take a course from Sheldon Sacks. He opened the course by asking, "Do we read the same books?" In 1973, Sacks could assume that we'd all answer in the affirmative. He therefore moved

quickly to a demonstration of the gap between that “yes” and our ways of talking about books. He asked us what *Pride and Prejudice* was about and then suggested that, on the basis of our thematic answers (“the interrelations of pride and prejudice”; “marriage in an acquisitive society”; “the unreliability of first impressions”), we should either revisit our assumption that we do read the same books or re-examine our ways of talking about our experience. By the end of the class, through further questioning and some well-chosen interventions of his own, Sacks had begun moving us toward his way of thinking about novelistic form by suggesting that one powerful way of connecting our critical commentary to our experience would be to focus on our emotional investment in Elizabeth’s progress toward her eventual marriage to Darcy.

All this was music to my ears, though I was not yet able to recognize the larger symphony to which these pleasing notes belonged. As the course went on, I felt that I was learning not just Eighteenth-Century Fiction but why I had been struggling so much during my first two quarters of the M.A. program: I had been living in that gap between experience and critical discourse, reading with pleasure (and other responses) on my own and then ignoring those responses as I participated in class discussions and wrote papers about themes and historical contexts and other things I barely understood. Sacks’s approach not only emphasized the link between the experience of reading and the work of analysis but his questions also made interpretation a much more rigorous and challenging enterprise than anything I had previously encountered. “Based on what we see of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in the first two chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*—his heartless teasing of her, her distorted values—why do most readers intuit a comic rather than a tragic or pathetic form?” “How does Fielding construct the form of *Tom Jones* to assure his audience both that Tom will marry Sophia Western and that if Tom were a real person rather than fictional character he would meet a very different end, one consistent with the prophecy that he was born to be hanged?” “How is the principle of progression underlying *Tristram Shandy* different from the principles underlying Fielding’s and Austen’s novels?” With every new question, I found myself intrigued but initially stymied, and thus increasingly impressed with the way Sacks reasoned to the answers, sometimes with our collaboration but often on his own. I doubted that I’d ever be able to reason about experience and interpretation—or narrative technique, form, and effects—the way he did, but I loved trying to, almost as much as I loved listening to Sacks do it.

Ever since taking Sacks’s course, I’ve been trying to write my own version of the larger symphony I sensed behind his captivating pedagogic performances. My critical prose, I am acutely aware, is a far cry from any music worthy of the name, but I also take solace in occasionally hearing resonant harmonies behind the terministic screen of rhetorical theory.

DIEGESIS: Which recent narratological trends are of particular interest to you?

Phelan: Can I say that I'm interested in them all? As the editor of *Narrative* and co-editor (with Rabinowitz and Robyn Warhol) of the Ohio State University Press series on the Theory and Interpretation of Narrative, I have an abiding interest in trends in the field—and even in one-off studies that may not produce larger trends. But to be more specific: I try to follow developments in cognitive narratology, unnatural narratology, feminist and queer narratology, post-colonial narratology and in work that falls outside the boundaries of any clearly recognized “Adjective + Narratology” such as Brian McHale’s work on narrative in poetry and the additional studies it has inspired. I also am interested in developments in the study of narrative across media and across disciplines, because these movements open up valuable dialogic relations with existing narrative theory.

As far as the direction of my own work and in keeping with my answer to #3, I remain interested in working on the movements of the rhetorical symphony. I'm currently working on an argument that post-classical narratology, with all its beneficial attention to contexts, ideology, and other disciplines, nevertheless remains hampered by its ties to classical narratology's fundamental conception of narrative as a structured sign system. This conception leads to the view that narrative is best understood in terms of its constituent units (character, narrator, event, narratee, etc.) and their structural relations. This view in turn leads to the story / discourse distinction as a central theoretical construct for thinking about narrative. I find that construct increasingly inadequate to account for the complexities of the way narrative works. It leads to a Newtonian account of an Einsteinian narrative universe. To take just one small example, scenes of character-character dialogue challenge the story / discourse binary because they are simultaneously story (they're events) and discourse (they're devices of disclosure, narration by another means). I'd like to replace that the static story / discourse distinction with a more dynamic view of narrative rooted in relations among authors, resources for storytelling, and audiences. This view in turn would replace the conception of narrative as a structured sign system with a conception of it as a rhetorical action: in order to do something in the world, somebody tells somebody else that something happened. This view would replace the focus on constituent elements and their possible combinations with one on author-audience relationships as determinative of how (and whether) particular elements get used. This view also opens up a greater recognition of the effects audiences have on how narratives come to be the way they are, including how authors can take advantage of readers' unfolding responses to narrative in their authorial construction of new parts of the narrative. I'm trying to work out these ideas and their consequences in a book-in-progress whose working title is *Somebody Telling Somebody Else*.

This rhetorical view of narrative also underlies my interest in current debates about fictionality, nonfictionality, and their interrelations (see the linked

essays in *Narrative* 2015), debates that have been sparked in part by Richard Walsh's *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*. Richard makes the important point that fictionality should not be conflated with generic fictions, though in the rest of his book he addresses the consequences of his approach to fictionality for fiction. But others have begun to explore its consequences beyond generic fictions. Especially notable is the work by the fictionality group at the University of Aarhus, whose members include Henrik Skov Nielsen, Stefan Iversen, Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen, Lasse Gammelgaard, and Louise Brix Jacobsen (who has recently moved to Ålborg). By distinguishing between fictionality and generic fictions, we become aware of how pervasive uses of fictionality—discourse about nonactual states such as thought experiments, what if scenarios, mini-parables, and so on—are within nonfictional discourse. We can become similarly aware of the presence of nonfictional discourse (actual places, historical personages, even truth claims about the nature of the world) within generic fictions. Among the important next steps are to further refine the definition of fictionality—Nielsen and Zetterberg Gjerlevsen have proposed “signaled communicative invention,” which is very good but still leaves gray areas such as the use of extended metaphors (e.g., “music” in my answer to question #3); to increase our understanding of the functions and effects of fictionality within global nonfiction and vice versa. The ultimate goal, worth pursuing even if impossible to reach, is a comprehensive rhetorical account of discourse.

Finally, I've recently become increasingly interested in narrative medicine. Its potential to show real world effects not just of narrative but of narrative theory is very exciting, and its realization of that potential would be extremely valuable not just for the field but for patients. I look forward to exploring issues in this movement along with my colleague Jared Gardner when we co-direct the 2016 Project Narrative Summer Institute to be held at Ohio State next July under the rubric “Narrative Medicine across Genres and Media” (more information can be found at <http://projectnarrative.osu.edu/programs/summer-institute>).

DIEGESIS: What is the future of narratology?

Phelan: Since I'm answering very close to *Back to the Future* Day (October 21, 2015), I'll start by quoting the estimable Doc Brown: “the future is not yet written!” And I'll also go outside the film's diegesis and adapt a quotation from its director, Robert Zemeckis: “I always hated – and I still don't like – [predictions] about the future. I just think they're impossible, and somebody's always keeping score” (quoted in Leopold; where I've written “predictions,” Zemeckis writes “movies”).

In other words, I think the best answer is that the future of narratology will be whatever the international narrative theory community makes it. And that's a good thing. But in the near term, I expect the trends I mentioned in answering question #4 to continue. I'll hazard one other prediction: in a return to some of its roots, narrative theory will become more interested in the differen-

ces, similarities, tensions, and complementarities of narrative theory and novel theory.

DIEGESIS: What other question would you like to answer?

Phelan: Why isn't narrative theory more central to the study of the humanities in North America and especially in the United States? This question is part-ament, part-invitation to reflect on the field and its relation to the structure of the academy in North America. Although narrative theory has productively expanded its scope beyond literary narrative, its most plausible location in the college and graduate school curriculum is still in literature departments. And literature departments remain tied to the paradigm of literary history as the primary principle for organizing knowledge. From the perspective of that paradigm, narrative theory is a luxury or an extra rather than part of the discipline's core. No English Department would go without a specialist in modernism, but lots of them go without a narrative theorist. As the humanities struggle, it becomes harder for narrative theory to keep let alone expand its place in literature departments. As perhaps is already evident, this problem is far easier to diagnose than to solve, so I will just say that those of us in the academy in North America should be looking for solutions.

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James Phelan is Distinguished University Professor of English at the Ohio State University. He is the editor of *Narrative*, a co-editor of the Ohio State University Press series on the Theory and Interpretation of Narrative, and the author of numerous books and essays, developing and deploying a rhetorical theory of narrative: *Worlds from Words* (1981), *Reading People, Reading Plots*

(1989), *Narrative as Rhetoric* 1996), *Living to Tell about It* (2005), *Experiencing Fiction* (2007), *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* (2012, co-authored with David Herman, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, and Robyn Warhol) and *Reading the American Novel, 1920-2010* (2013). Phelan is also a co-author, with Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, of the 40th anniversary edition of *The Nature of Narrative* (2006).

James Phelan
Department of English
Ohio State University
421 Denney Hall
164 West 17th Avenue
Columbus, Ohio 43210-1370
E-mail: phelan.1@osu.edu

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