

# The Shape of Things to Come

## An Interview with Eva von Contzen

*DIEGESIS*: What is narrative research for you?

*von Contzen*: Narrative research is the entryway into understanding the continuities and discontinuities of how human beings have been telling stories. It offers a toolbox of rich, diverse, and flexible approaches that allow for focusing on a wide range of aspects that are relevant to narratives. I first got in touch with narratology when I was still at secondary school; I had a very ambitious teacher of German who introduced us to Franz K. Stanzel's work. I was intrigued by the idea of approaching narrative texts systematically and zooming in on their narrative design in order to get a better grasp of the functions of narrative texts. Even though I no longer believe in the neat order of a model such as the typological circle, I am still fascinated by the idea that, in theory, it must be possible to encapsulate all narratives in a systematic way – if only as a fiction! For the same reason, I have great sympathies with the structuralists and their attempt to approach narration in a systematically structured, coherent way. During my studies, I was taught Gérard Genette, of course, and then discovered Monika Fludernik's work. At that point, I was already interested primarily in medieval narratives, and Fludernik's *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996) was – at that time – one of the few works in English that included premodern (medieval, early modern) narratives from the start as well. I was hooked: to both diachronic and historical narratologies as well as to cognitive approaches to narrative.

Narrative research, however, is also work in progress: even though narration is such a ubiquitous practice, there are always aspects that have previously not been in the focus, or that require new and nuanced approaches due to the endless creative potential of narrative forms in the hands of their users, both in literary and non-literary, everyday contexts. For a long time, narrative research has had a strong, if not exclusionary, interest in narratives from the eighteenth century onwards as well as in narratives that originated in Western cultures. Both these biases – a temporal as well as a spatial bias – have led me to pursue interdisciplinary historical research. If one takes the promise of narrative research seriously – that is, that it can help us better understand all narration, regardless of the historical context or the culture from which it stems –, then narrative research is inevitably an inherently interdisciplinary undertaking which requires a joining of forces between various experts. Such inter- and sometimes even transdisciplinary work is of course very common in narrative research (see, for instance, Maria Mäkelä's projects!), but I'm thinking of a particular kind of interdisciplinarity here: one that looks at various narratives at certain points in time and from

different cultures. I might make confident claims about a (necessarily limited) corpus of twentieth-century British novels, but to infer more general insights on the ways in which narratives ‘in general’ work from such a study is bound to fail.

While narrative research has the great, perhaps even unique, potential to do interdisciplinary work that is worthy of its name – because narrative theorists usually share the knowledge of theories, approaches, and terms, and develop them further in an open and constructive debate – there is, I would say, not enough such work between what I have called mainstream narratology and the fields of historical or diachronic narratology (see von Contzen 2018a). The former tends to be limited on the temporal and spatial biases I have mentioned above, whereas the latter work closely with premodern and non-European material and has, in fact, created research hubs of their own. In the last three decades or so, there has been a plethora of studies by classicists, medievalists, and scholars of Byzantine or Islamicate cultures that have made quite an impact on our understanding of premodern narratives. Yet much of their work has gone unnoticed by mainstream narratology – because the corpora of texts are much less accessible and known to scholars of modern and contemporary narratives. I find this gap, which is certainly widening rather than closing, unfortunate and even potentially damaging to the great project of narrative research. Perhaps this is why I have, from the time of my PhD onwards, worked towards opening a critical dialogue between the various fields of narrative research – my first narratological article was in this journal, and programmatically called a ‘manifesto’ for a medieval narratology (von Contzen 2014; see also von Contzen / Kragl 2018; von Contzen / Tilg 2019).

Most importantly, however, narrative research is great fun: it has brought me together with wonderful scholars (we always share the same narratological language, no matter our preferences and the ‘schools’ we may come from; see e.g. Birke et al. 2022), and it has led me to inquire into topics that to others may seem absurd. When I first became interested in lists about ten years ago, I was several times advised against pursuing my interest. Not by narratologists, mind you! Researchers of narratives immediately understood that lists, especially in literary contexts, not only pervade literature but are also an endless source of both frustration and delight, and I received many excellent recommendations of texts to look at from the narrative studies community. Unsurprisingly, my work on lists (i.e. on their functions in literary texts, readers’ responses to them, and intertextual links, as well as the history of the epic catalogue) has been shaped considerably by my narratological background (see, e.g., von Contzen 2017; 2018; 2020).

*DIEGESIS*: How would you describe your current research project to a wider audience?

*von Contzen*: Why read something new when you can read something old in a new way? In my current project I am researching contemporary retellings and their historical roots. Retellings are texts that take their inspiration from a source text and adapt the source to a new (later) context. In the course of literary history,

this practice is not unheard of; in fact, it has always been of the key generators of creating new stories in any genre. Yet in recent years, the number of retellings specifically of premodern texts – retellings based on either ancient or medieval source material – has risen considerably. Examples include Madeline Miller’s novels *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018), Patience Agbabi’s *Telling Tales* (2014), Michael Hughes’s *Country* (2018), Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), Maria Dahvana Headley’s *The Mere Wife* (2018), and Natalie Haynes’s *A Thousand Ships* (2019). Many of these novels retell the original story or cluster of stories (e.g., the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Canterbury Tales*, and *Beowulf*) from an outsider’s perspective and have a strong political, revisionist focus.

When approaching these texts, I’m interested in three questions: first, why are we witnessing this surge of retellings now? I am researching into the potential factors that have influenced this development, which I see as a mixture of our current political and cultural climate (at least in many western parts of the world) that has led to revisionist approaches to literary texts, especially canonical ones. A related aspect concerns a critical awareness for the canon of literature and its biases. It is certainly not a coincidence that many authors of retellings are women. Paradoxically, though, even if the patriarchal framework of a text such as Homer’s *Iliad* is called out in a retelling and rewritten so as to give voice to suppressed or silenced (female or otherwise marginalized) characters, the retelling ascribes itself into the well-established canonical tradition of a male-centered, narrowly European canon (see, e.g., Cox 2019; Cox / Theodorakopoulos 2012 on feminist approaches).

Second, I am also focusing on the formal features of retellings. Because they rely on a source text or source texts, they engage with both the formal aspects of the source(s) – the ‘how’ – and the more obvious plot details – the ‘what.’ The narrative strategies that come into play when retelling a text deserve closer attention, yet important and useful theories such as Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) or Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsests* (1997 [1982]) do not do justice to strategies of retelling. Rather, I go back to premodern ideas of retelling: in ancient and medieval times, retelling was the norm rather than the exception, and we can learn from premodern authors’ reflections on their practices and from handbooks of rhetoric and poetry – and thus let our modern theories be inspired by our narratological forerunners.

Third and last, I would like to pursue the idea that one strand of the history of literature has always been a history of retellings – one that has been marginalized and suppressed due to post-Romantic ideas and ideals of the genius author and the ‘newness’ of literary works. I’m intrigued by the notion that good stories repeat themselves, and we should take them seriously as a driving force in literary history.

*DIEGESIS*: Imagine you were to present your project in a single twitter message – what would this tweet look like?

*von Contzen*: Old stories told anew, with a twist: why are readers so into retellings of ancient and medieval stuff right now? And is this really as new as it seems? I argue that literary history has always been derivative; we just have to take the model of premodern literature seriously.

*DIEGESIS*: What are the most innovative aspects of your current project?

*von Contzen*: As I have argued above, narrative theory suffers from certain temporal (as well as cultural) biases: we tend to focus on the historical periods and texts we are comfortable with and thereby lose sight of what was similar or different in other periods and contexts. Also, we tend to overestimate what is unique and special of a given genre in a given time, and to underestimate what is very common or highly uncommon once it is put in a diachronic or comparative perspective. In my project, I'm trying to bridge the gap between historical narratology and mainstream narratology by bringing the two together: when analysing contemporary retellings, I can, of course, rely on the wealth of excellent research in narratology on contemporary and experimental story-telling, formal aspects and character, fictionality and so forth. At the same time, I can draw on classicists' and medievalists' likewise excellent and thought-provoking studies on premodern features of narrative and their functioning (see, e.g., Bumke 2005; Lieb 2005), which helps me throw into relief the striking similarities between some aspects of retellings that have been remarkably stable over the centuries – or, as the case may be, the peculiarities of contemporary retellings that are signs of their (i.e., our) time. I am aware that I'm in the fortunate position of having been trained both as a classicist and a medievalist, in addition to my background in general literary studies, which is a great asset. Also, I'm trying to break new ground in thinking about literary history again (something that has gone out of fashion in the past decades): How can we approach literary history anew, not by focusing on the canon but by focusing on strands of literary activity such as, indeed, retellings and reworked material from the past?

*DIEGESIS*: In an ideal world, what could your project hope to achieve?

*von Contzen*: In an ideal world, my little project would inspire others to embark on more and more rigorous narratological work – across centuries and across cultures. Such work can only ever be interdisciplinary, and as such it would certainly lead to a different pace in researching texts. We would inevitably be slower as a field as it takes time to learn from one another and to collaborate, but I envisage a gain in knowledge and expertise on a global level that would, in the end, be beneficial to all. How great would it be if a classroom reading of, say, a twentieth-century British novel like Ali Smith's *Companion Piece* (2022) led to discussions about ancient and medieval examples of story-telling, about texts from South Africa, China, and Peru that exhibit similar features or share key topoi and plotlines? New open-minded, collaborative research practices could be eye-opening in teaching, too, and ultimately debunk biases of quasi-nationalist thinking. Perhaps somewhat less utopian, I hope that my project instigates more en-

agement with historical and diachronic narratologies. I would love a more frequent and ongoing dialogue between historically oriented narratologists and those that research modern and contemporary or current phenomena in a more synchronic perspective as I firmly believe that we could all profit from such an exchange.

*DIEGESIS*: What is your vision of the future of narrative research?

*von Contzen*: I see narrative research continue to thrive in the future. As long as people tell and write stories, there will be a need for experts to explain their functioning, research their history, and map their developments. Narrative theorists are also much needed when it comes to researching newly emerging narratives and narrative forms, especially in the context of new technologies – I’m thinking especially of generative AI and the consequences these ‘narratives’ have on our engagement with texts, our concepts of fictionality, and even the cultural practices of writing and telling stories more generally. However dire the picture which is now sometimes painted of the future of text-creation – I am still optimistic that this change, too (which is no doubt a major one, perhaps comparable to the invention of printing or the Internet), will lead to both challenges and new, never-before envisaged options that we can critically observe, analyse, and shape in the years to come.

Eva von Contzen is professor of English literature including the literatures of the Middle Ages at the University of Freiburg, Germany, where she is also Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies. She was principal investigator of the project “Lists in Literature and Culture: Towards a Listology,” funded by the European Research Council (2017–2022). Her research interests include lists of all kinds, historical narratology, medieval narration across a wide range of genres, literary history, the epic catalogue, and cognitive literary studies. Her most recent publications include *Enlistment. Lists in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* (2022), co-edited with James Simpson, and *Literary Lists. A Short History of Form and Function* (2023), co-authored with Roman Barton and Anne Rügemeier.

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