The Shape of Things to Come

An Interview with Lindsay Holmgren

DIEGESIS: What is narrative research for you?

Holmgren: Narrative research has several valences in my view. First, narrative 're-search' *per se* can be understood as the study of narrative theories themselves: introducing theories, questioning and expanding existing theories, and perhaps developing new theories or dimensions of narratology that accommodate evolving understandings of narrative and of the world it (re)presents. My major influences have largely been those invested in rhetorical and characterological theories of narrative (e.g., Wayne Booth, James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz, Dorothy Hale); reader-oriented approaches (from Geneva School phenomenologists such as Georges Poulet to feminist/affective and cognitive theorists such as Robyn Warhol and David Herman); and philosophical approaches (Roland Barthes, Paul Ricœur, Umberto Eco). For me, narrative theory is employed in the service of enhancing my understanding of the object of inquiry itself – the literary text, the interview, the film – rather than with a view toward contributing to the development of narrative theory *qua* theory. Therefore, my own work begins from that starting point, and my narratological scholarly contributions are an outgrowth of that endeavor. Presently, my research involves the application of narrative theory to the study of real-world human activity and experience, whereas earlier in my career, I applied narrative theory to the study of fictional texts.

You'll probably notice my use of the term *applied* in both cases – whether that application is to literary texts or to non-literary productions. By contrast, narrative theorists tend to refer to applied narrative theory (and, typically more pejoratively, "instrumentalized" narrative theory) when referencing narratological approaches to non-literary events and texts. But given the focus on "things to come," I'd like to press on that qualifier 'applied' as it relates specifically to narrative research: in my view, it is the *manner* in which narratological concepts and complementary research are applied that distinguishes literary narrative research from its applications in real-world, non-fictional analyses. For instance, while I might engage literary criticism alongside narrative theory in my analysis of Jesmyn Ward, I might instead engage empirical research and economics alongside narrative theory to assess phenomena in the actual world. Does this mean, at times, a questioning or reorientation of the various narrative theories being applied to non-literary texts? Of course – just as it does in the assessment of literary narrative – and as a result, new or expanded narrative theories might be articulated. That a new, elaborated, or revised narrative theory might result from that application, however, is a separate question for me.

Most importantly for my purposes, the research begins with engaging narrative methodologies alongside others (e.g., linguistic anthropology) in my work, and applying extant narrative theories in my assessment of the resulting data. Without a doubt, narratological training equips researchers to evaluate productively the storied experiences of human research participants. Because my research is specifically concerned with time (the 'fourth dimension of narrative'), narratological methodologies offer by far the best common ground in which to root the work of my interdisciplinary team, which I describe below.

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

Holmgren: I'm currently the principal investigator on an interdisciplinary project that engages narrative theory to investigate how young people – roughly ages 18–30 – are responding to the existential phenomena most pressing today. We are collecting our data through three, roughly hour-long interviews with hundreds of students and recent graduates across Canada over the span of ten years. Focusing on the narrative features of their responses, we assess how phenomena such as climate change, pandemics, and war are influencing their comportment toward time in the short and long terms, and how that comportment affects their professional and economic behavior. The time horizons of their experience are built into the narratives they develop and will no doubt shift from one interview to the next. The first round of interviews was completed earlier this year (2023), the second round will occur in 2025, and the third we plan for 2032. How young people frame time horizons across this range, and how those horizons shift with newly influential existential phenomena (the role of generative AI or the increased threats of the climate crisis, for example) is of particular interest to me, and we are exploring how those time horizons bear on their mental health and economic decision-making. As a byproduct of our research, we also have learned a great deal about the breadth and effectiveness of university resources at the five major research institutions that are part of the study: the University of Alberta, the University of British Columbia, Dalhousie University, McGill University, and the University of Toronto.

DIEGESIS: Imagine you were to present your project in a brief social media post (max. 280 characters) – what would this post look like?

Holmgren: I think I should start by admitting that I have never been on the social media outlets that participate in the 280-character regime. Does that say something about my *own* comportment toward time and its sound-bite status? No doubt! So, with that caveat (confession?) behind us, here we go: "I explore how our most pressing contemporary existential phenomena are rooted in, and perhaps shifting, Western comportment toward time, and how those potential shifts influence the economic choices and mental health of young people entering the work force."

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

Holmgren: There are a few aspects of my research that are particularly innovative. The first is the degree to which my research team is interdisciplinary, and I've been thrilled by how that interdisciplinarity has enriched my largest research project at the moment. On my team are: *Amy Shuman*, Professor Emerita at the Ohio State University, a sociolinguist and narrative theorist, who trained our team in research methodologies, oversaw our question development, and continues to advise us; *Rita Charon*, a Professor of Medicine at Columbia University, who coined "narrative medicine" and developed the field; *Sam Hull*, an attorney with an economics and history background who helped to write the research proposal for this project; *Ryan Shah*, a political scientist and attorney, who, like Sam, helped articulate the current research project; *Kariuki Kirigia*, an Anthropologist by training and Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto, cross-appointed in African Studies and the School of the Environment; *Noah Ciubotaru*, a philosopher whose graduate training is in academic publishing; *Joelle Moses*, an independent sustainability researcher and advocate; *Anna Torvaldsen*, an English Literature PhD Candidate; and *Leon Picha*, an Indigenous Peoples researcher and consultant, who is himself Indigenous. Our shared commitment to listening with the underlying goal of improving the lives of our interlocutors is, in my view, what bonds this team most strongly, and our commitment to the role of narrative methodologies in enabling us to achieve that end is what guides our approach to the work.

Also innovative is the work's commitment to remaining within liminal theoretical spaces. I don't want the work to be able to define itself as precisely and squarely immersed in – and thus emanating from – any entrenched theoretical position. While rhetorical narrative theory, for instance, is important to the research, our approach doesn't view any specific narratological sub-category as holding a uniquely privileged position in our work. In fact, de-privileging specific positions is crucial to the work as a matter of principle, and the interdisciplinarity of the team is a by-product of that approach. You might say that we are staunchly inclusive in our investigation and willing, as a result, to apply the subdisciplines of narrative theory we deem to be most beneficial to the actual human beings whose lives the work is designed to benefit.

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

Holmgren: In an ideal world, we would help people reorient themselves toward time in a healthier, more realistic manner than conventional Western comportment toward time has engendered. Our relationship to 'Time' exists in tension with the slow, millennial horizons of planetary, environmental existence while accommodating the breakneck pace of, say, generative AI. Similarly, ancient inquiries into human understanding are part of *long, slow* lessons rooted in the humanities, and yet the humanities are *swiftly* disappearing from institutions of higher learning. These kinds of temporal tensions are demanding a reorientation

toward time that the young people we've interviewed might not necessarily have the theoretical or linguistic tools to develop, and this condition, I argue, is at least partly an institutional failure. Common institutional practices such as excessively stressful time pressures often encourage compensatory consumption as a result of overwork . . . which, in turn, begets overconsumption. We hope to influence policy at institutions of higher learning such that practices like these would be replaced by a stronger emphasis on quality learning outcomes and better, more balanced approaches to productivity. In our ideal world, public policy, too, would reflect these lessons.

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

Holmgren: It's a complicated question in that it tacitly asks a bigger question: "What is your vision of the future of *narrative* – as a category, as an object of inquiry, as an act?" I'll come to that question next, but first, I will answer this question a little more straightforwardly. Ideally, narrative research will continue to have greater impact on policy and help generate better responses to climate change, radical shifts in education and assessment, mental health concerns, and others, rather than serving as, say, a partisan political tool. Moreover, narrative theory will remain central to the articulation of occluded histories, giving voice to persons and stakeholders (such as non-human species and the natural environment) that some currently dominant histories marginalize. Increasingly, these goals have involved narrative research being applied within various disciplines other than the study of narrative literature, and I am hopeful those migrations will continue to be executed with care. To be sure, and with reference to my first answer (above), I *am* troubled by the instrumentalization of 'narrative' in careless ways or as a shorthand for a related concept. An example might be '*the* narrative' employed as a shorthand for what we might call the popular imagination. A good deal of work has been done in this arena, and I note especially that of Maria Mäkelä, Hanna Meretoja, and Paul Dawson. Importantly, I think narrative theory can contribute to analyzing how those shorthands, for instance, come to pass and what they signify. It's crucial, in my view, for narratologists to remain generous in our approach to these uses, enabling narrative theory to respond productively to this historical moment. I also think that continued work in fictionality studies will be important, and that new means of generating narrative will trouble both the category itself and the concept of fictionality.

And this brings me back to the question of what 'narrative' is as a category today. As a person for whom the rhetorical and philosophical features of narrative have always been paramount, I find the question of what narrative *is* particularly fraught in the context of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). I spent the first half of 2023 writing policy recommendations for the use of GenAI across all faculties at McGill University (where I work). As a result, its theoretical and practical implications have maintained an uneasy and imposing position in my approach to my research, my teaching, and my understanding of 'narrative.' The impact GenAI will have on narrative production and analysis is daunting,

to say the least, and I think that continuing to identify and define 'narrative' in the context of GenAI is critical. Does that mean narratologically analyzing GenAI in some of the ways we narratologically examine the natural environment? The gaming industry? Perhaps. Indeed, I can imagine a range of ways in which narrative theory can approach these questions, but for now, I personally will continue (at least for a while) to work with narrative produced by human beings.

With this in mind, I am very pleased that our research stems from interviews and the recorded language of actual human beings crafting extemporaneous responses to questions about some of the most difficult concerns of contemporary experience. These are stories that emerge from consciousness and tell us something about where these young people situate themselves in the world. It is an enterprise in locating and defining unique deixes, but that also seeks to develop a general understanding of an at least vaguely shared sense of where we are, and where we are heading. What I am discovering through the research is perhaps a discernable shift in comportment toward time. More on that soon!

Importantly, I'd like to thank the editors for inviting me to contribute my thoughts here. Those who have contributed to these questions before me I admire a great deal, and I'm honored to be in their company.

Lindsay Holmgren is an Associate Professor in the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University, where she also directs the Laidley Centre for Business Ethics and Equity. Holmgren is a Past President of the International Society for the Study of Narrative, and she currently serves the society, along with Dan Punday, as Conference Liaison. Holmgren has published on a variety of concerns in narrative studies, including work on metalepsis and narrative telepathy in late-19th- and early-20th-century Anglo-American literature and film, as well as conversations in narrative medicine. Currently, Holmgren focuses her work on narrative and economics for which she has received a decade of federal funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Her recent contribution to the *Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*, "Narrative and Economic Modelling," highlights the theoretical foundations for some of that work.

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland (1974 [1970]): *S/Z: An Essay*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York, NY.
Booth, Wayne C. (1963): *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago, IL.
Eco, Umberto (1979): *The Role of the Reader*. Bloomington, IN.
Herman, David (2009): *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Hoboken, NJ.
Hale, Dorothy (2022): *The Novel and the New Ethics*. Stanford, CA.
Mäkelä, Maria / Meretoja, Hanna (2022): "Critical Approaches to the Storytelling Boom." In: *Poetics Today* 43 (No. 2), pp. 191–218.
Phelan, James (2004): *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character*. Ithaca, NY.
Rabinowitz, Peter J. (1998): *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*. Columbus, OH.
Ricœur, Paul (1990): *Oneself as Another*. Chicago, IL.
Ricœur, Paul (1983): *Time and Narrative, Volumes 1–3*. Chicago, IL.
Shuman, Amy (2017): "Empathy and Speaking Out." In: *Fabula*; 58 (No. 1–2), 90–104.
Warhol, Robyn (2003): *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Narrative Forms*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP.

Lindsay Holmgren, MA, PhD
McGill University
E-mail: lindsay.holmgren@mcgill.ca