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## Book review

**Richard Gerrig**, *Experiencing narrative worlds: On the psychological activities of reading*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993; Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998. 274 pp. \$40 (hb.).

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Narrative makes up a significant part of our daily life. For example, while preparing to write this review, I gave a talk about my research to my department. The next day a colleague hailed me in the campus bookshop to explain that she hadn't been able to attend and to ask what I said and how it was received. I said it went well. I added that my talk had been contentious in one respect, but that I wasn't challenged in the way I had anticipated. I could tell by her expression that I had engaged her interest in this little narrative. She had a narrative of her own to tell about why she had missed the talk. My narrative, although it was quite short, focused on a conflict, that of being contentious; in order to convey the situation I also had to position myself as a protagonist with particular goals, describe the other characters, and briefly give an impression of the setting. My story held the attention of my colleague: it gave her an example of the kind of conflict that she too might encounter, since it is one that tends to characterize our profession.

In the terms of Gerrig, my colleague's attention showed that she was *transported* by my narrative; the quality of her attention allowed her to *perform* the story as a listener. Gerrig's principal claim is that these two features typify narratives, whether the narratives we encounter are fictional or non-fictional. In his book, Gerrig's intention is to bring to bear the insights of a range of psychological studies in the cognitive tradition to illuminate these fundamental aspects of narrative experience. This means that in general he will disregard the long tradition of narrative analysis from Aristotle to Wayne Booth: we find no discussions of plot, point of view, or discourse styles; reader identification with characters is dismissed; the implied author makes only a brief appearance, and reader response theorists such as Iser or Holland receive only passing mention.

In fact, Gerrig's principal argument is a reasoned dismissal of the basis of much prior narrative analysis. He proposes that the underlying cognitive processes are the same whether the recipient is hearing a story about an event of yesterday or reading a novel: he asserts that "there is no psychologically privileged category 'fiction'" (p. 197). When considering how it is possible for us to become engaged in fictional accounts, Gerrig rejects the commonly repeated argument (originating with

Coleridge) that we suspend disbelief (Coleridge, 1983 [1817]: 6). He dismisses this as the ‘toggle’ theory of fiction: throw the switch that suspends belief for fiction; throw it back for real events. Through a series of theoretical arguments and reports of empirical studies, Gerrig sets out to show why any psychological distinction between fiction and non-fiction is illusory.

Gerrig’s arguments primarily depend on treating narrative as information. In this respect it would make no difference to my colleague, then, whether the contention in my talk was described as a real event or as an occurrence in a fiction: as an item of information, it would receive the same cognitive processing. It might be thought that one of the difficulties for this view is that my colleague will regard me differently according to whether I actually confronted an audience with the contentious arguments, or only spoke about imagining that I had done so. But for Gerrig, this question cannot arise until later: the central feature of narrative understanding is to infer successfully what the narrator intended to say. In this respect, my colleague acts as a ‘side-participant’ to my story, as Gerrig puts it: she is not the object of an illocutionary act, but the witness of one. She receives the benefits of the story without incurring any liabilities; she performs the story in understanding it, but is not one of its participants. For Gerrig, this is the standard situation for narrative comprehension. He maintains that “the only experiential distinctions between fiction and non-fiction are those that readers effortfully construct” (p. 241).

One type of evidence to support this position is behavioral. Fiction can have real effects in the world: viewers of the movie *Jaws* became afraid of bathing in the sea. Thus, information (regardless of its source) cannot easily be compartmentalized psychologically: we often do incorporate information from fiction into nonfictional knowledge structures. For example, when I walk down Baker Street in London, I feel differently about that part where Sherlock Holmes was supposed to have lived. Gerrig follows Spinoza in holding that belief is an immediate concomitant of comprehension, unlike Descartes, who supposed that we first comprehend, then assess for believability. What we do in the case of fiction is rather the ‘willing construction of disbelief’ (p. 230). Even then, information can become established in memory as though it had been acquired from real experience. Gerrig points to a series of elegant studies with children and adults, showing that real consequences can follow the overt fabrication of an imaginary state of affairs. For example, adult subjects are offered two identical bottles with sugar in them from which they can choose to make a sugar solution to drink, but only after they are asked to write a label for each bottle where one label reads *sucrose*, the other *cyanide*. Although knowing quite well that the second label is false, subjects still prefer not to take their sugar from the bottle labelled cyanide (p. 185). This demonstrates what Gerrig calls the nonpenetration of emotional experience by beliefs: we can feel pity or fear for a fictional character, although knowing that the character doesn’t exist outside the page. Such phenomena occur in daily life as well as in fiction. Phobics cannot control their fear by knowing that the feared object is actually harmless.

There is some basis for Gerrig’s position in neuropsychological study: research by Squire (1986), for example, has shown that the sensory and motor cortex is reactivated during recall to reconstitute the form and features of an original event. A sim-

ilar process almost certainly underlies the imaginative response we make to reading descriptions of fictional characters or environments that we have not encountered in reality. Reading appears to recruit specific or generic images from memory, enabling us to construct the detailed sensory imagery that many readers report. Such imagery often has a persuasive quality of veridicality. Gerrig argues that we cannot simultaneously be aware of its fictionality; this awareness can only occur *post hoc*.

It is not clear, however, why fictional imagery should not co-occur with a sense of its fictionality. Gerrig's position seems less plausible if we examine questions of literary narrative. Although Gerrig discusses examples of literary fiction quite often in the book (a refreshing change from many psychologists' treatment of narrative), the experimental studies he cites, whether his own or those of others, are invariably based on short narratives specially constructed to meet experimental constraints. This restricts the generalizability of his conclusions and makes them less ecologically valid than they at first appear. A principal liability of his approach comes from treating narratives primarily as information; although referring to emotional consequences, he gives little consideration to the role of emotions and feelings during reading. Gerrig's unsatisfactory treatment of literary questions appears from his handling of two standard debates.

First, he accepts the arguments, put forward by Pratt (1977), Fish (1980), Eagleton (1983), and other recent theorists, that there are no surface distinctions that separate literary from non-literary language (in Miall and Kuiken, 1998, we discuss several empirical studies that cast doubt on this claim). He seems to accept at face value Fish's notorious 'experiment' with a set of critics' names left behind on the blackboard from a previous class (Fish, 1980: 323). Since the names could be construed as poetic by his students, Fish offers this as an argument against 'poetic' language (p. 101). The outcome is not surprising, since Fish (the authoritative) teacher told his students to treat the names as a poem, but it cannot be construed as an argument against 'literary' language. Gerrig concludes, however, that "The 'look' of the language ... cannot differentiate factual and fictional assertions" (pp. 100–101). A specific aspect of the 'look' of fictional language is its use of metaphor. Steen (1994) showed that readers could reliably distinguish between metaphors from either newspapers or novels in a series of judgments on a semantic differential task: without being informed of their source, his readers found literary metaphors generally conceptually richer, less conventional, more expressive, and more playful. While it is certainly possible to find narrative passages that could be read either as excerpts from fiction or from a newspaper story, as Zwaan (1991) did in an important study, this appears to be a special case. The newspaper and novel selections discussed by Gerrig (pp. 98–99) are not interchangeable in this way, since the novel extract has several devices signalling fictionality not present in the news report.

Most obviously, unlike the newspaper account, the novel passage is controlled by the point of view of the main character; this is signalled in particular by a series of words conveying the judgments he makes. The character is surveying the people in a department store, "studying the crowd of people for signs of bad taste in dress" (p. 99). Privileged access to a character's mind and feelings in this way is, of course, a typical marker of fictional narrative. Even if the passage were to occur, as Gerrig

suggests, as an ornate example of the New Journalism, this sign lets us know that, at this point, the journalist is fictionalizing, since in the real world, he cannot know what the person is thinking. In the present case, the structure and tone of the passage also invite us simultaneously to share the character's point of view and to find it tendentious, that is, to view it as inadequate. This stereoscopic perspective is typical of literary texts, which present familiar ideas or objects, but within a framework that invites us to judge them: "Several of the outfits, Ignatius noticed, were new enough to be considered offenses against taste and decency" (p. 99). Since all clothes must be new at some point, this comment is hyperbolic: it both defamiliarizes the idea of the new, invoking a feeling of contempt for it, while casting doubt on the reliability of the character's perceptions (our contempt may be better directed to the character). In the context of Gerrig's larger argument, it is hard to see a logical difference between this double response and that of the reader who both credits the scene while knowing, at the same time, that it is fictional (and some postmodern novelists, such as Fowles or Calvino, have deliberately sought to create this impression; Brecht sought to produce it on the stage). In any fictional narrative there may be passages that lack this double perspective – as Coleridge put it, "a poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be, all poetry" (1983 [1817]: 15); but these will not be the passages that primarily determine the reader's understanding and attitude towards the text.

Second, Gerrig's account of identification is unsatisfactory. Readers often do identify with fictional characters, sharing their goals and feeling what they feel; yet Gerrig finds the occurrence of 'anomalous suspense' decisive in arguing against identification as a necessary feature of fiction. How can it be possible, he asks, that knowing the outcome of a given narrative, we continue to experience suspense while reading it. In a series of clever studies, Gerrig was able to show experimentally that uncertainty could be induced in readers about outcomes that they apparently knew perfectly well (p. 165). For example, for readers acquainted with such familiar historical facts as 'Charles Lindbergh was the first solo pilot to cross the Atlantic', he created short narratives leading up to this statement suggesting that Lindbergh encountered much opposition and controversy prior to making the flight. He found that readers took longer to verify the truth of the historical fact, compared with readers whose narratives led up to the fact with no controversy. Inducing suspense, then, made the fact less certain.

In explaining this result, Gerrig argues that it could not be due to identification with a character, because his experimental stories rarely described the main character experiencing suspense. He points out that, in a typical horror movie, we may be shown an oblivious victim being stalked by a monster: this creates great suspense, although we know that the victim herself does not feel it (p. 170). Moreover, we can experience the same suspense each time we view the scene. Thus identification with the victim cannot be necessary for suspense. Gerrig goes on to argue that suspense arises from the contrast between schematic expectation (what the narrative suggests is typically or likely to be the case), compared with the actual outcome; when the latter is already known, yet suspense is still felt (anomalously), this argues for the cognitive processes supporting schematic expectations running off automatically,

that is, being impenetrable to prior knowledge. This is another argument for not distinguishing fictional from non-fictional narratives: the cognitive process in question operates the same in either context.

But Gerrig is too quick to dismiss identification. In the case of the movie, our feelings are proleptic: the suspense of the scene comes from anticipating only too well what the victim is about to experience when the monster bursts in. Similarly, although Gerrig's narrative made no mention of the suspense of Lindbergh himself prior to his flight, this does not preclude readers feeling suspense on his behalf. A process that readers often seem most prompt to initiate is empathy with a character, whether or not any information is provided about that character's feelings. Gerrig's proposed schematic expectations certainly occur, but they seem likely to evoke not situational inferences but affective ones. The delay in verifying the previously known outcome is thus due to a mismatch between feelings. Frijda (1988), whose laws Gerrig mentions elsewhere, describes a Law of Conservation of Emotional Momentum (Frijda, 1988: 354), which helps to explain such phenomena. While feeling empathic probably has no significant implications in the Lindbergh narrative, arising as it does only from a conflict between prior knowledge and the doubt induced by the experimental manipulation, in literary narratives such feeling often provides a pivotal framework for understanding. Thus, in Gerrig's fiction extract (p. 99), we are invited to share the main character's judgments even while we condemn them. Such play of feelings opens us to the polyvalence that Schmidt (1982) suggested was typical of literary texts, i.e., our awareness of alternative meanings while reading.

Gerrig argues, also following Fish (1980), that since readers belong to particular interpretive communities their interpretations are constrained, despite the often noted ambiguity of literary texts (p. 118). Alternative meanings appear to be an integral component of literary reading, however, as the 'new clothes' example suggests. Not only is the doubling of meaning a consequence of the feelings aroused in the reader, but feelings, by their close association with episodic memory and self-referential issues, are the vehicle of individual construal. As a result, literary readers actually differ in their interpretations far more than Fish and his colleagues have noticed. Gerrig repeats the argument of Cohen (1979) that metaphor invites intimacy, because it draws on shared knowledge. Gerrig extends this proposal to include any kind of 'innovative' language in narrative, which thus invites 'collaboration'. But such language may be intimate not because of what it invokes in terms of shared understanding, but because it calls on the reader's own experience, feelings, and memories (p. 125); innovative, or foregrounded language is likely to evoke feelings, as critics such as Shklovsky (1965 [1917]: 9) or Mukarovsky (1977: 73) proposed. In sum, it seems probable that literary language has distinctive markers, such as the rich metaphors studied by Steen, the signs of internal point of view, and the conflicting feelings associated with empathy, and that these markers invoke processing strategies more complex and multimodal than the simple or everyday narratives that are the main focus of Gerrig's discussion.

Gerrig's book offers a thoughtful and productive review of recent psychological studies of narrative. Its contention that there is a single set of strategies for under-

standing all narratives seems unproven, however. The colleague I met in the bookshop accepted my point of view, as well as appearing to identify with it, but there was no doubling of meaning, no ambiguity inviting individual construal, such as we find in literary narratives ranging from Jane Austen to the New Journalism. There was conflict in my story (an elementary plot), and an ending that helped to create anomalous suspense. Gerrig's account of narrative experience seems to account rather well for such ordinary, everyday narratives, and it provides some assistance in understanding responses to the elementary narratives that are the usual object of empirical study. But the distinction between everyday narrative and the more complex narratives of literature will not be erased as readily as Gerrig proposes. The methods of cognitive analysis provided in this book leave much still mysterious about the experience of performing narrative or being transported by it.

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