

Basic Elements of Narrative

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David Herman

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For Susan, whose story is interwoven with mine

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Preface

The Scope and Aims of This Book

This book outlines a way of thinking about what narrative is and how to identify its basic elements across the many communicative media in which stories are produced and interpreted, exchanged and transformed. Relevant storytelling media range from print texts, television, and spoken discourse in face-to-face interaction to comics and graphic novels, cinema, and computer-mediated environments such as e-mail, blogs, hypertext narratives, and interactive fiction. (I focus special attention here on face-to-face storytelling, print texts, graphic narratives that involve word-image combinations, and, to a lesser extent, film.) The book does not purport to offer an exhaustive survey of competing approaches to the problems of narrative study into which it delves from a specific, focused perspective. Yet that perspective, which I hope will prove relevant for creators of stories as well as narrative analysts, is itself a distillation of ideas developed by scholars working in quite disparate traditions within the field – and also in other, more or less closely neighboring fields. Thus, even as it makes its own case for how to characterize core features of narrative and cross-compare the way those features manifest themselves in various storytelling media, the book does provide a synoptic introduction to key ideas about narrative. In this sense, the book is designed both to whet the reader's appetite for more details about the traditions of narrative scholarship in which my own study is grounded, and to provide a basis for assessing those traditions from the vantage-point developed here.

Chapter 1 gives a thumbnail sketch of the overall approach. In this opening chapter I suggest that narrative can be viewed under several profiles – as a cognitive structure or way of making sense of experience,

as a type of text, and as a resource for communicative interaction – and I then use this multidimensionality of narrative as a basis for analyzing it into its fundamental elements. I specify four such elements, arguing that they will be realized in any particular narrative in a gradient, “more-or-less” fashion; hence these elements in effect constitute conditions for *narrativity*, or what makes a story (interpretable as) a story. After this initial synopsis of my overall argument, chapter 2 interrupts the exposition of the model to review some recent developments in the field of narrative inquiry, providing background and context for my approach. The remaining chapters of the book pick back up with the explication of the model outlined in chapter 1, zooming in on each of the four basic elements in turn. Chapter 3 focuses on the element of *situatedness*, or how stories are grounded in (= both shape and are shaped by) particular discourse contexts or occasions of telling, providing an overview of some of the frameworks that have been developed for studying this aspect of narrative. Chapter 4, which is concerned with the second basic element, *event sequencing*, steps back from my primary case studies to examine the conceptual underpinnings of the claim that modes of representation can be more or less prototypically narrative, invoking the ideas of text types and text-type categories for this purpose. The chapter uses these ideas to highlight, first, the specific kind of causal-chronological structure that serves to distinguish stories from descriptions, and second, the concern with particularized events (rather than general patterns and trends) that sets stories apart from certain kinds of explanations.

Chapters 5 and 6 bring my main case studies back into the foreground to explore, respectively, the third and fourth elements: on the one hand, *worldmaking/world disruption*; on the other hand, how stories represent – and perhaps make it possible to experience – *what it’s like* to undergo events within a storyworld-in-flux. In chapter 5, I draw on Nelson Goodman’s suggestive idea of “ways of worldmaking” (Goodman 1978) to examine what is distinctive about the process by which people use spoken and written discourse, images, gestures, and other symbolic resources as blueprints for creating and updating storyworlds, or global mental models of the situations and events being recounted in a narrative. In chapter 6, I probe the story–mind interface from two different perspectives, discussing how the representation of experiencing minds constitutes a critical property of narrative but also how narrative

might afford crucial scaffolding for conscious experience itself. Finally, the glossary at the end of the volume assembles some keywords for narrative study, as well as a list of foundational studies where more information about these keywords can be found.

As this summary suggests, there are multiple routes through the book, which has been designed to accommodate the background and interests of different kinds of readers. Rather than following the chapters in sequence, readers who are unfamiliar with the range of recent scholarship on narrative may wish to begin with chapter 2 to get their bearings within the field, next move back to the synopsis of the model in chapter 1, and then pick up with its further development in chapters 3 and following. Readers with more expertise in narrative theory, meanwhile, may wish to concentrate instead on my characterization of the basic elements of narrative. Alternatively, advanced readers may wish to focus their attention on specific chapters dealing with particular narrative elements.

Readers should also note that the Appendix contains narrative materials to which I frequently revert in my discussion. I provide context for and synopses of all these stories, and readers may wish to familiarize themselves with the illustrative narratives before moving on to the chapters in which they feature as my primary case studies (chapters 3, 5, and 6). Included in the Appendix are: (1) a reproduction of Ernest Hemingway's 1927 story "Hills Like White Elephants"; (2) the full transcript of a story originally told in face-to-face interaction and excerpted at various points in my discussion, namely, Monica's telling of the narrative to which I have assigned the title *UFO or the Devil* (based on a phrase used by Monica as she launches her story); and (3) some pages (= sequences of panels) from Daniel Clowes's 1997 graphic novel, *Ghost World*, along with (4) screenshots from Terry Zwigoff's 2001 film adaptation of Clowes's novel. Although I also discuss a range of other illustrative texts, I use these narratives as examples throughout my analysis in part to maintain a constant focus across chapters, facilitating exploration of the constraints and affordances of various storytelling media, and in part to make the book appropriate as a standalone teaching text, complete with its own small corpus of stories. However, the model presented here is of course meant to be extensible, and those using the book in classroom settings may wish to test its possibilities and limitations by examining other narrative case studies.

Storytelling Media and Modes of Narration

At several points in my discussion (e.g., the previous paragraph) I use the term *storytelling media* to refer, in general terms, to the various semi-otic environments in which narrative practices can be conducted (see also Ryan 2004). But not all storytelling media are created equal. Some afford multiple communicative channels that can be exploited by a given narrative to evoke a storyworld, whereas others afford only a single channel when it comes to designing blueprints for storyworlds. Thus, as a print narrative with only a verbal information track, Hemingway's "Hills" can be characterized as monomodal. By contrast, the graphic-novel version of *Ghost World*, though also a print text, engages in multimodal narration, since the novel exploits both a verbal and a visual information track to engage in narrative ways of worldmaking. Zwigoff's film adaptation of *Ghost World* is likewise multimodal, though what were originally word-image combinations are now remediated by way of two different semiotic channels, namely, the filmed image-track and the audiorecorded sound-track.

Meanwhile, in its original context of telling *UFO or the Devil* also involved multimodal narration, since Monica recounted her and Renee's experiences with the big ball using not only the expressive resources of spoken discourse but also (one can infer) the further information track provided by gestures. Thus, in line 5 of the transcribed version of the story, the analyst can hypothesize that pointing gestures accompanied Monica's use of the demonstrative pronoun in *this* [↑]*way* as well as her subsequent reference to a vector of motion within her and her interlocutors' current field of vision: *comin up through here* (see the Appendix for the full transcript). But my hedges in this context ("one can infer," "the analyst can hypothesize that") are themselves pertinent to the topic under discussion, since they underscore that Monica's original narrative performance is unavailable for analysis in its own right. Instead there is an audiorecording that itself translates the narrative into a different medium – as an act of storytelling that exploits only the channel of spoken discourse. And then my transcript re-translates this remediation into the medium of print! In other words, audiorecording a face-to-face storytelling situation recasts a complex, multi-channel communicative process as monomodal narration, and the act of transcription in turn creates a differently monomodal artifact. The converse

situation holds when a print narrative is adapted as a movie; in that case, single-channel, monomodal narration is translated into multimodal storytelling.¹

These considerations suggest the relevance of the distinction that theorists such as Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) and Jewitt (2006) draw between modes and media. In their work, modes are semiotic channels (better, environments) that can be viewed as a resources for the *design* of a representation formulated within a particular type of discourse, which is in turn embedded in a specific kind of communicative interaction. By contrast, *media* can be viewed as means for the dissemination or production of what has been designed in a given mode; thus media “are the material resources used in the production of semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001: 22). This distinction between modes and media captures the intuition that, as is the case with *UFO or the Devil*, a text or discourse can be designed in one kind of environment (e.g., face-to-face communication) but distributed or produced in another (e.g., as an audiorecording or a printed transcript). In short, not only do different storytelling media afford different modes of narration (cf. Herman 2004) but what is more, a variety of media can come into play during the process of transmitting, transcribing, and archiving stories, with consequences that need to be explored more fully by narrative analysts.

Acknowledgments

I taught *Ghost World* in two recent classes at Ohio State University, and I wish to acknowledge, first, some of the students whose insightful comments helped me better understand the range of Clowes's references and the importance of his achievement, as well as the complex relationship between the graphic-novel and film versions of his narrative. My special thanks go to Josh Steskal, Carrie Waibel, John Nees, Pat Carr, and Aaron Seddon. Further, I wish to acknowledge here just a few of the many other people who have helped me sharpen the arguments presented in this study, rethink the broader context of my approach, or simply maintain the conviction that I should keep working on the book until I could finish it: Porter Abbott, Jan Alber, Anita Albertsen, Jens Brockmeier, Apostolos Doxiadis, Monika Fludernik, Jared Gardner, Richard Gerrig, Per Krogh Hansen, Dan Hutto, Matti Hyvärinen, Brian Joseph, Anne Langendorfer, Barry Mazur, Paul McCormick, Brian McHale, Chris Meister, Sean O'Sullivan, Ruth Page, Bo Pettersson, Jim Phelan, Arkady Plotnitsky, Peter Rabinowitz, Andrew Salway, Debby Schiffrin, Ulrich Schnauss, Roy Sommer, Meir Sternberg, and Michael Toolan. I am also extremely grateful for the comments and criticisms offered by the anonymous reviewer, whose detailed report saved me from a number of errors and infelicities, helped me clarify several of my key claims, and more generally improved the overall quality of this book. At the press, I am grateful to Emma Bennett, Hannah Morrell, Louise Butler, and Janet Moth for their patience, professionalism, and dedication to making this the best book possible. I also thank Ohio State University's College of Humanities for the publication subvention that helped defray the cost of reprinting some of the material included in the Appendix.

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In some of the chapters of this book I have drawn on material published in other contexts, and though all this material has since been substantially revised, I am grateful for permission to use it here:

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Pages 21, 26, 35, and 38 of Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 1997) (sequences A–D in the Appendix) are reprinted by permission of Fantagraphics Books.

Screenshots 1–7 from Terry Zwigoff’s film adaptation of *Ghost World* © 2001 MGM.

The Elements

A prototypical narrative can be characterized as:

- (i) A representation that is situated in – must be interpreted in light of – a specific discourse context or occasion for telling.
- (ii) The representation, furthermore, cues interpreters to draw inferences about a structured time-course of particularized events.
- (iii) In turn, these events are such that they introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld involving human or human-like agents, whether that world is presented as actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc.
- (iv) The representation also conveys the *experience* of living through this storyworld-in-flux, highlighting the pressure of events on real or imagined consciousnesses affected by the occurrences at issue. Thus – with one important proviso – it can be argued that narrative is centrally concerned with *qualia*, a term used by philosophers of mind to refer to the sense of “what it is like” for someone or something to have a particular experience. The proviso is that recent research on narrative bears importantly on debates concerning the nature of consciousness itself.

For convenience of exposition, I abbreviate these elements as (i) **situatedness**, (ii) **event sequencing**, (iii) **worldmaking/world disruption**, and (iv) **what it’s like**.

Getting Started

A Thumbnail Sketch of the Approach

Toward a Working Definition of Narrative

The overall aim of this book is to sketch an account of some of the distinctive properties of narrative. At a minimum, stories concern temporal sequences – situations and events unfolding in time. But not all representations of sequences of events are designed to serve a storytelling purpose, as we know from recipes, scientific explanations of plant physiology, and other genres of discourse. What else is required for a representation of events unfolding in time to be used or interpreted as a narrative? This book develops strategies for addressing that question, and the present chapter provides a thumbnail sketch of my approach. The next chapter then situates the approach in the context of the growing body of research on stories and storytelling, while the remaining chapters provide a more detailed description of the model presented in synoptic form here.

One of the main goals of this book is to develop an account of what stories are and how they work by analyzing narrative into its basic elements, thereby differentiating between storytelling and other modes of representation. Here at the outset, it may be helpful to provide an orienting statement of features that I take to be characteristic of narrative.¹ A relatively coarse-grained version of the working definition of narrative on which I will rely in this study, and that I spell out in more detail as I proceed, runs as follows: rather than focusing on general,

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abstract situations or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people² – and of what it was like for them to experience what happened – in particular circumstances and with specific consequences. Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change – a strategy that contrasts with, but is in no way inferior to, “scientific” modes of explanation that characterize phenomena as instances of general covering laws. Science explains the atmospheric processes that (all other things being equal) account for when precipitation will take the form of snow rather than rain; but it takes a story to convey what it was like to walk along a park trail in fresh-fallen snow as afternoon turned to evening in the late autumn of 2007.

Yet just as it is possible to construct a narrative about the development of science, to tell a story about who made what discoveries and under what circumstances, it is possible to use the tools of science – definition, analysis, classification, comparison, etc. – to work toward a principled account of what makes a text, discourse, film, or other artifact a narrative. Such an account should help clarify what distinguishes a narrative from an exchange of greetings, a recipe for salad dressing, or a railway timetable. This book aims to provide just this sort of account, drawing integratively on a number of traditions for narrative study to characterize the factors bearing on whether a representation of a sequence of events functions as a story. Another overarching goal of the book is to enable (and encourage) readers to build on the ideas presented here, so that others can participate in the process of narrative inquiry and help create more dialogue among the many fields concerned with stories, ranging from the humanities and social sciences (literary studies, creative writing, (socio)linguistics, history, philosophy, social and cognitive psychology, ethnography, communication studies, autobiography and life-story research, etc.) to clinical medicine, journalism, narrative therapy, and the arts.³

The next two sections of this chapter seek to move closer to a working definition of narrative. I begin by noting that narrative can be viewed under several profiles simultaneously – as a form of mental representation, a type of textual or semiotic artifact, and a resource for communicative interaction – and then identify four basic elements of narrative (some of them with sub-elements), which might also be viewed as conditions for narrativity, or what makes a narrative a narrative. Subsequent

chapters zoom in on these elements or conditions in turn, offering a more in-depth treatment of the core features synopsized below.

Here at the outset, it is important to address a broader – indeed, foundational – issue pertaining to my attempt to identify basic elements of narrative. This issue can be approached by way of the distinction between what might be termed “etic” and “emic” approaches to narrative study – a distinction also applied to narrative research by Georgakopoulou (2007: 39ff.) in an important recent book that bears significantly on my own analysis, and that I return to at the end of this section. The etic/emic distinction, coined by Pike (1982), is based on the contrast between phonetic and phonemic differences. Phonetic differences include, for example, all the various shades of difference among tokens of the consonant [p] that may be produced by speakers of English when they pronounce the first sound in the word *put*, such as aspirated [p^h] versus unaspirated tokens. Whereas in Hindi such differences do affect the meaning of utterances containing the [p] sound (i.e., the differences are phonemic), in English these differences do not (i.e., the differences are merely phonetic). By contrast, shifting from an unvoiced to a voiced bilabial stop, that is, from [p] to [b], does change the meaning of an utterance in English, as anyone hearing or reading *put* versus *but* would recognize. To extrapolate from this distinction: whereas etic approaches create descriptive categories that are used by analysts to sift through patterns in linguistic data, whether or not those categories correspond to differences perceived as meaningful by users of the language being analyzed, emic approaches seek to capture differences that language users themselves orient to as meaningful. Accordingly, a question for any account of the basic elements of narrative is whether those elements are in fact oriented to as basic by participants engaged in storytelling practices (= emic), or whether the elements are instead part of a system for analysis imposed on the data from without (= etic).

For example, Eggins and Slade (1997) draw on Labov’s (1972) approach to narrative analysis and Plum’s (1988) work on storytelling genres in face-to-face discourse to differentiate between full-fledged narratives and anecdotes (defined as reports of remarkable events plus the reactions they caused), exempla (defined as reports of incidents coupled with the interpretation of those events), and recounts (defined as the giving of a more or less bare record of events).⁴ But the question

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remains whether these are emic categories to which participants themselves orient, using them to make sense of different kinds of communicative activity, or whether such differences go unnoticed in the business of talk and are instead viewed by storytellers and their interlocutors as instances of the broader category “narrative.” To what extent do participants themselves discriminate between anecdotes and recounts, for example, in their own practice, and how would we go about finding that out? Similar questions can be posed about the model presented in this book – for example, whether participants in face-to-face discourse, readers of written texts, or viewers of films would discriminate among the categories of description, narrative, and argument in the manner suggested by my account later in this chapter and also in chapter 4. Further, for what populations do the critical properties of narrative outlined in this study indeed constitute basic elements of narrative, such that texts, discourses, or mental representations lacking one or more of those properties would be categorized by members of those populations as something other than a story? And how robust are these effects: within a given population, how important is a given element identified in my approach as basic?

To be addressed adequately, these questions must be explored via empirical methods of investigation, whether in controlled laboratory settings, through statistical analysis of responses to questionnaires, or in more naturalistic environments through techniques of participant observation, followed by interpretation of the data elicited in that fashion. I do not undertake these methods of inquiry here; instead, I argue for a particular approach to identifying the basic elements of narrative in the hope that it might provide a basis or at least a context for further studies of this kind. The book draws on my own native intuitions about stories and storytelling, coupled with traditions of narrative scholarship, to construct a model that I argue provides emic categories for narrative study, and not just etic ones. The possibilities and limitations of the model will not be fully evident, however, until others test it against their own intuitions about what constitutes a story – as well as the intuitions of broader populations whose narrative practices might be studied through the empirical approaches just mentioned.

This last point affords a segue back to a recent study that I mentioned above and that I wish to return to for a moment in concluding this

section. The study in question is Georgakopoulou's (2007) ethnographically oriented analysis of stories told in face-to-face interaction, and more specifically in non-interview settings where peers or family members tell (and retell) stories about events from their immediate as well as longer-term past, co-narrate shared stories, engage in projections of future events, and also produce truncated yet heavily evaluated reports that Georgakopoulou terms *breaking news* (Georgakopoulou 2007: 40–56; cf. Norrick 2000, 2007). Building on Ochs and Capps' (2001) pathbreaking account (discussed below and also in my next chapter), and in particular their working assumption that “mundane conversational narratives of personal experience constitute the prototype of narrative activity rather than the flawed byproduct of more artful and planned narrative discourse” (2001: 3), Georgakopoulou argues that the development of models appropriate for research on everyday storytelling has been hindered by the kinds of narratives assumed to be canonical or prototypical. In the domains of sociolinguistics, life-story research, and other fields concerned with narratives produced in face-to-face interaction, Georgakopoulou suggests, the canonical or prototypical narrative is the kind of story on which Labov's (1972) influential account was based: “namely, the research or interview narrative that is invariably about non-shared, personal[-]experience past events, and that occurs in response to the researcher's ‘elicitation’ questions or prompts” (Georgakopoulou 2007: 31).⁵ By contrast, adapting a term first suggested by Bamberg (2004b), Georgakopoulou proposes to shift the focus of research on everyday storytelling to “small stories” whose structure and functions do not map directly onto the narratives featured in the Labovian model:

small stories . . . can be brought together on the basis of their main characteristic, namely that they are presented as part of a trajectory of interactions rather than as a free standing, finished and self-contained unit. More specifically, a) the events they report have some kind of immediacy, i.e. they are very recent past or near future events, or are still unfolding as the story is being constructed; b) they establish and refer to links between the participants' previous and future interactions . . . including their shared stories. In this way, the stories are not only heavily embedded in their immediate discourse surroundings but also in a larger history of interactions in which they are intertextually linked and available for recontextualization in various local settings. (Georgakopoulou 2007: 40)

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By focusing on such noncanonical stories, and by drawing on ideas from linguistic ethnography, Conversation Analysis, and other approaches to talk-as-interaction, Georgakopoulou aims to “document local theories of what constitutes a narrative and what the role of narrative is in specific communities” (2007: 21).

Despite some terminological and methodological differences, Georgakopoulou’s analysis and my own are arguably quite consonant in their underlying assumptions. Though readers are advised to come back to the following remarks after they have had a chance to read the rest of this chapter (and perhaps the subsequent chapters as well), it may be worth underscoring at this point the links between Georgakopoulou’s and my approaches. For one thing, as chapter 3 explores in more detail, in the model developed here one of the basic elements of narrative is the embeddedness of stories in a specific discourse context or occasion for telling. To paraphrase Heraclitus: the same story cannot be told twice, because the context in which the first telling takes place is irrevocably altered by that initial narrative act – this being a way of capturing what Georgakopoulou terms the “social consequentiality” (2007: 148) of situated storytelling acts. Shifting to a different issue, it is true that my account is based on the premise that there are modes of representation that are prototypically narrative, and also that there are identifiable critical properties associated with those modes of representation. Yet chapter 4 begins by characterizing such properties as more or less evident in a given story and anchors them in the patterns of use by virtue of which certain texts or discourses come to count as narratives. In other words, what constitutes a prototypical story is defined in a gradient, more-or-less way, and emerges from the strategies on which people rely in their everyday narrative practices.⁶ And as I also discuss in chapter 4, what is considered to be prototypical can vary across different contexts; think of the prototypical cold day in Tampa, Florida, versus Helsinki, Finland. Hence Georgakopoulou’s “small stories” might be redescribed as modes of storytelling in which, because of a shift of communicative circumstances, the normal and expected range of narrative practices differs from the practices used for relatively monologic narration in an interview setting, for example. Yet both sets of practices fall within the scope of narrative viewed as a kind or category of texts, and are oriented to as such by participants.

Profiles of Narrative

Part of the challenge of analyzing stories into their basic elements is that narrative can be viewed under several profiles: as a cognitive structure or way of making sense of experience; as a type of text, produced and interpreted as such by those who generate or navigate stories in any number of semiotic media (written or spoken language, comics and graphic novels, film, television, computer-mediated communication such as instant messaging, etc.); and as a resource for communicative interaction, which both shapes and is shaped by storytelling practices.

Among the most resonant and often cited words about stories and storytelling are the following, from Roland Barthes's 1966 essay, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives":

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances. . . . Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting . . . stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society. . . . All classes, all human groups, have their narratives. . . . Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes [1966] 1977: 79)

Emphasizing in this passage the ubiquity of narrative, Barthes goes on in the rest of his essay to identify key aspects of narrative – defining traits that might be argued to be basic elements of narrative irrespective of the medium or context in which it appears.

For example, Barthes suggests at one point that we human beings have a narrative language within us that consists in part of "sequence titles" (*Fraud, Betrayal, Struggle, Seduction*, etc.) that we use to make sense of stories. According to Barthes, such titles, or labels for kinds of events, allow us to segment or "chunk" the flow of narrative information and

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make sense of things characters are doing (1966: 101–2). Elsewhere he suggests that “the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narrative as what is *caused by*,” such that “narrative [can be thought of as] a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*” (1966: 94). In other words, if a sequence of panels in a graphic novel first shows two characters walking along a sidewalk and then shows them seated in a restaurant, readers will assume, all other things being equal, that the characters’ being in the restaurant is a result of their having walked to it. This default assumption can be forestalled or dislodged only if the text provides other, supplemental information. For example, the text might rely on a different style of typography or different colors for the borders of particular panels (or different clothing and hair styles for the characters) to suggest that the restaurant scene is remembered from an earlier time rather than one the characters encounter after their stroll.

Barthes’s larger point here is that narrative is not (or rather, not only) something *in* the text. To the contrary, stories are cognitive as well as textual in nature, structures of mind as well as constellations of verbal, cinematic, pictorial, or other signs produced and interpreted within particular communicative settings. In other words, narratives (the *Iliad*, an episode of the *Star Trek* television series, the film or graphic novel versions of *Ghost World*, anecdotes exchanged among friends during a party, the courtroom testimony of a witness to a crime) result from complex transactions that involve producers of texts or other semiotic artifacts, the texts or artifacts themselves, and interpreters of these narrative productions working to make sense of them in accordance with cultural, institutional, genre-based, and text-specific protocols. Indeed, as these examples suggest, different communicative situations can involve very different ground rules for storytelling. If I watch a *Star Trek* episode with the same mindset as a prosecuting attorney cross-examining a witness, or vice versa, I am apt to misconstrue the narrative at issue – with potentially disastrous consequences. By the same token, although a witness giving testimony and a screenwriter producing a screenplay for an episode in a TV series are both subject to constraints on the sorts of narratives they can generate, the constraints are radically different. Narratives that would be censured in court as too extravagant (violating for example the stricture against hearsay) might well get a screenwriter fired for being too formulaic and boring.

In short, an essential part of our mental lives, narratively organized systems of signs are also socially constituted and propagated, being embedded in social groups and constructed in social encounters which are themselves represented after the fact by way of narratives. Hence it behooves scholars of narrative to explore how people weave tapestries of story by relying on abilities they possess as simultaneously language-using, thinking, and social beings. Or, to put the same point another way, a truly cross-disciplinary approach to stories (only barely hinted at in the present volume) may help reveal the extent to which human intelligence itself is rooted in narrative ways of knowing, interacting, and communicating.⁷

Narrative: Basic Elements

In the approach developed in this book, stories can be analyzed into four basic elements, some with sub-elements of their own. I characterize narrative as (i) a mode of representation that is situated in – must be interpreted in light of – a specific discourse context or occasion for telling. This mode of representation (ii) focuses on a structured time-course of particularized events. In addition, the events represented are (iii) such that they introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld, whether that world is presented as actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc. The representation also (iv) conveys what it is like to live through this storyworld-in-flux, highlighting the pressure of events on real or imagined consciousnesses undergoing the disruptive experience at issue. As noted previously, for convenience of exposition these elements can be abbreviated as (i) **situatedness**, (ii) **event sequencing**, (iii) **worldmaking/world disruption**, and (iv) **what it's like**.

Consider the following two texts, both of them concerned with human emotions. The first is an excerpt from an encyclopedia article on the topic (Oatley 1999: 273); the second is a transcription of part of a tape-recorded interview with Monica, a 41-year-old African American female from Texana, North Carolina, who in the transcribed excerpt

refers to the fear that she and her childhood friend experienced as a result of being pursued menacingly by a large, glowing, orange ball that Monica characterizes earlier in the interview as “[a] UFO or the devil.”⁸ (See the Appendix for a full transcript of the story and also for a description of the transcription conventions I’ve used to annotate the text here and elsewhere in the book.)

Text 1

An emotion is a psychological state or process that functions in the management of goals. It is typically elicited by evaluating an event as relevant to a goal; it is positive when the goal is advanced, negative when the goal is impeded. The core of an emotion is readiness to act in a certain way . . . it is an urgency, or prioritization, of some goals and plans rather than others; also they prioritize certain kinds of social interaction, prompting, for instance, cooperation, or conflict.

Text 2

- (26) But then ... {2} for some reason I feel some heat > or somethin
other <
- (27) and I < look back >
- (28) me and Renee did at the same time
- (29) it’s right behind us. ... {1.0}
- (30) We like-... {2} /we were scared and-/..
- (31) “AAAH” you know=
[...]
- (33) > =at the same time. <
- (34) So we take off runnin as fast as we can,
- (35) and we still lookin back
- (36) and every time we look back it’s with us. ... {5}
- (37) It’s just a-bouncin behind /us/
- (38) it’s no:t. > touchin the ground, <
- (39) it’s bouncin in the air. ... {5}
- (40) °Just like this ... {2} behind us°
- (41) as we run. ... {1.0}
- (42) We run all the way to her grandmother’s
- (43) and we open the door
- (44) and we just fall out in the floor,
- (45) and we’re cryin and we scre:amin
- (46) and < we just can’t breathe.> ... {3}
- (47) We that scared..

Text 1 exemplifies what Jerome Bruner (1986) calls “paradigmatic” or logico-deductive reasoning.⁹ The author uses definitions to establish categories in terms of which (a) emotions can be distinguished from other kinds of phenomena (goals, events, evaluations, etc.), and (b) different kinds of emotions can be distinguished from one another. The author also identifies a core feature (readiness to act) that can be assumed to cut across all types of emotion, and to be constitutive of emotion in a way that other features, more peripheral, do not. In turn, the text links this core feature to a process of prioritization that grounds emotion in contexts of social interaction.

By contrast, text 2 exemplifies what Bruner characterizes as “narrative” reasoning. In this text, too, emotion figures importantly. But rather than defining and sub-categorizing emotions, and explicitly associating them with aspects of social interaction, Monica draws tacitly on emotion terms and categories to highlight the salience of the narrated events for both Renee and herself at the time of their occurrence – and their continuing emotional impact in the present, for that matter. Monica uses terms like *scared* (lines 30 and 47), reports behaviors conventionally associated with extreme fear (screaming, running, feeling unable to breathe), and makes skillful use of the evaluative device that Labov calls “expressive phonology” (1972: 379), which can include changes in pitch, loudness, rate of speech, and rhythm, as well as the emphatic lengthening of vowels or whole words. Thus in lines 31 and 46, Monica uses heightened volume, on the one hand, and a slower rate of speech combined with an increase in pitch, on the other hand, to perform in the here and now the emotional impact of past experiences. In other words, more than just reflecting or encapsulating pre-existing emotions, the text *constructs* Monica (and Renee) as an accountably frightened experiencer of the events reported. Monica’s story provides an account of what happened by creating a nexus or link between the experiencing self and the world experienced; it builds causal-chronological connections among what Monica saw that night, her and Renee’s emotional responses to the apparition, and the verbal and nonverbal actions associated with those responses. Text 1 abstracts from any particular emotional experience to outline general properties of emotions, and to suggest a taxonomy or classification based on those properties. By contrast, text 2 uses specific emotional attributions to underscore the impact of this unexpected or noncanonical (and thus reportably noteworthy) sequence of events, which happened on this one occasion, in this specific locale, and in this particular way, on the consciousness of the younger experiencing-I

– to whose thoughts and feelings the story recounted by the older narrating-I provides access.¹⁰

Hence, besides using principles of reasoning to develop definitions, classifications, and generalizations of the sort presented in text 1, people use other principles, grounded in the production and interpretation of stories, to make sense of the impact of experienced events on themselves and others, as in text 2. But what are these other principles? Or, to put the question differently, assuming that “we organize our experience and memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (Bruner 1991: 4), what are the design principles of narrative itself? What explains people’s ability to distinguish storytelling from other kinds of communicative practices, and narratives from other kinds of semiotic artifacts?

To capture what distinguishes text 2 from text 1, it is important to keep in mind the ideas about categorization developed by cognitive scientists such as George Lakoff (1987) and Eleanor Rosch ([1978] 2004) – ideas that Marie-Laure Ryan (2005a, 2007), among other story analysts (cf. Herman forthcoming b; Jannidis 2003), has used in her own proposals concerning how to define narrative. I return to these ideas in more detail in chapter 4, and readers may wish to read that chapter immediately after the following paragraphs to get a fuller sense of the conceptual underpinnings of the model presented in an abbreviated fashion here. In any case, the work on categorization processes suggests that at least some of the categories in terms of which we make sense of the world are gradient in nature; that is, they operate in a “more-or-less” rather than an “either-or” fashion. In such cases, central or prototypical instances of a given category will be good (= easily recognized and named) examples of it, whereas more peripheral instances will display less goodness-of-fit. Thus, a category like “bird” can be characterized as subject to what Lakoff calls *centrality gradience*: although robins are more prototypical members or central instances of the category than emus are (since robins can fly, for example), emus still belong in the category, albeit farther away from what might be called the center of the category space. Meanwhile, when one category shades into another, *membership gradience* can be said to obtain. Think of the categories “tall person” and “person of average height”: where exactly do you draw the line? Narrative can be described as a kind of text (a text-type category) to which both centrality gradience and membership gradience apply.