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Amie L. Thomasson
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Fiction and Metaphysics

This challenging study places fiction squarely at the center of the discussion of metaphysics. Philosophers have traditionally treated fiction as involving a set of narrow problems in logic or the philosophy of language. By contrast Amie Thomasson argues that fiction has far-reaching implications for central problems of metaphysics.

The book develops an “artifactual” theory of fiction, whereby fictional characters are abstract artifacts as ordinary as laws or symphonies or works of literature. The metaphysical consequences of recognizing abstract artifacts include a new set of basic ontological categories, a clearer understanding of the difference between genuine and false parsimony, and a basis for an adequate ontology of the everyday world. By understanding fictional characters we come to understand how other cultural and social objects are established on the basis of the independent physical world and the mental states of human beings.

In taking seriously the work of literary scholars and in citing a wide range of literary examples, this book will interest not only philosophers concerned with metaphysics and the philosophy of language, but also those in literary theory interested in these foundational issues.

Amie Thomasson is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Texas Tech University.

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Acknowledgments

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1996: 295–320) contribute to Chapters 3 and 7 and are included with kind permission from Kluwer Academic Publishers. An earlier version of Chapter 4 appeared in *Kriterion* as “The Reference of Fictional Names” (3. Jahrgang, 1993, Nr. 6: 3–12). Finally, Chapter 5 grows out of work in two articles in *Conceptus*: “Die Identität fiktionaler Gegenstände” (vol. XXVII, 1994, Nr. 70: 77–95) and “Fictional Characters: Dependent or Abstract? A Reply to Reicher’s Objections” (vol. XXIX, Nr. 74, 1996: 119–144). Thanks to the editors of *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Kriterion* and *Conceptus* for permission to include this material.

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Introduction: From Fiction Into Metaphysics

Although examples from fiction and mythology have long provided a source of interesting puzzles and counterexamples that have guided the development of theories from Frege to Russell to Kripke, fiction has been seen as a sideshow issue in metaphysics. Even the Meinongian minority, which has done much to bring the topic of fiction back into discussion, has done little to dispel the image of fiction as a strange metaphysical jungle beyond the boundaries of traditional metaphysics.

Lying behind the sideshow view of fiction is an assumption shared by believers and disbelievers in fictional objects alike: Fictional characters are (if anything) odd, freakish entities, quite unlike common or garden objects. Disbelievers have used the supposed freakish nature of fictional entities as grounds for rejecting them, alleging that they would be too unruly to accommodate in a theory and fearing that by handling such oddities we will be led into contradiction. Believers have boldly, smilingly embraced their odd creatures, proposed special ontological realms to house them, and shown how, by handling them carefully, we can accommodate their curious tendencies and avoid contamination by contradiction.

The key to seeing the centrality of fiction in metaphysics lies in giving up this assumption and recognizing the similarities between fictional objects and other entities. In the view I propose here, fictional characters are abstract artifacts – relevantly similar to entities as ordinary as theories, laws, governments, and literary works, and tethered to the everyday world around us by dependencies on books, readers, and authors. I argue that taking fictional characters to be abstract artifacts not only provides a better way of understanding fictional characters, it also makes the study of fiction of more central relevance to other issues in metaphysics.

For, as cultural artifacts and as abstract entities, fictional characters are not alone. Like fictional characters, other artifacts from tools to schools

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and churches present difficulties such as how to lay out clear identity conditions for them, and how to analyze the relationships they bear to basic physical entities and to the practices and intentional acts of the individuals who create them and the communities of which they form a part. Solving such problems for fictional characters thus shows a route for solving these problems for other cultural artifacts, abstract or concrete.

Still less does their abstractness place fictional characters in a unique position. Instead it lands them in the same waters as such diverse entities as numbers, universals, laws, theories, and stories. Postulating any such abstracta leads to problems for those wishing to offer even partially naturalistic accounts of reference and knowledge. Once again, resolving these problems for fictional characters shows a path via which such difficulties may be avoided for a variety of abstract entities.

Perhaps most significantly, by combining both characteristics – by being both abstract entities and created artifacts – fictional characters fall firmly between traditional divisions of entities into the categories of concrete physical particulars and ideal abstracta. Properly accounting for fictional objects and other abstract artifacts demands breaking out of traditional category schemes that rest on bifurcations between the real and the ideal or the material and the mental. A finer-grained system of categories is required not only to accommodate fictional characters but also to do justice to the great variety of entities in the everyday world, from concrete cultural artifacts, to social institutions, to abstracta such as theories, laws, and works of music.

Treating fiction as a metaphysical sideshow is unfortunate not merely for fiction but also for metaphysics. For serious study of fiction reveals the inadequacies of traditional category systems, demonstrates how to handle other abstract artifacts, and provides occasion to reexamine the old question of what to admit into one's ontology. Based on the results from studying the case of fiction, I close by sketching an answer to the question of what we should bring into our ontology. By allowing for mental states, spatiotemporal objects, and things that depend on them in various ways, we can, from a relatively spare basis, account for a far wider range of things than is usually recognized: a true ontological bargain. One important advantage of this picture is its ability to offer a better analysis of cultural entities and abstract artifacts generally, among them the fictional objects that serve as our starting point. And so what seemed like a small corner of metaphysics – the problem of fictional objects – provides the seed to develop a new comprehensive metaphysical picture better able to do justice to the wide variety of entities in the world around us.