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GREGORY CURRIE  
UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO



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“And the poets – the perverse follow them; hast  
thou not seen how they wander in every valley and  
how they say that which they do not.”

*The Qu’ran*

“The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily.  
That is what Fiction means.”

*The Importance of Being Ernest*

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## Preface

There are fictions that contribute to the enterprise of philosophy. And there are intellectual traditions for which fiction is a natural means to the expression of philosophical ideas. But the tradition in which I feel most at home is not one of them, and I leave it to others to explore the ways in which fiction does or could contribute to a philosophical explanation of the world. Instead I shall treat fiction itself as something that needs explaining. This is a book written in the belief that there are certain very general questions about the nature of fiction, the answers to which can be discovered more or less a priori by appeal to the methods of philosophy rather than to those of the critic or literary historian. How we come to have the kind of fiction we do have is one question; how it is possible for us to have any fiction at all is another, and that is the question I want to ask. It is a question that resolves into several others: What, if any, are the characteristics that distinguish a work of fiction from a work of nonfiction? What sorts of entities must the world contain in order for there to be fiction? What psychological and linguistic resources must we bring to the world in order to be producers and consumers of fiction?

I said that the method I favor is more or less a priori. But it is tempered by the knowledge that we must not abandon our common, everyday perception of what sort of thing fiction is, or we shall be in danger of constructing an elaborate theory that relates only marginally to the phenomenon it seeks to explain. Throughout the book examples of fictional works of various kinds will appear, sometimes as test cases

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### *Preface*

against which we can judge the explanatory power of a hypothesis, sometimes merely to relieve the sense of abstractness generated by extended philosophical arguments. But there is something that we must bear in mind in choosing our examples and our arguments: Fiction is a category that includes the bad and the mediocre as well as the good. If literature rather than fiction were our subject things would be different, for we cannot separate the enterprise of explaining literature from an understanding of good literature. To say of something that it is literature is, except in certain special circumstances, to ascribe to it a certain kind of value. Not so with fiction; I learn nothing about the merit of what I'm reading when I learn that it is fiction. Good fiction is no better a guide to the nature of fiction than the characters of saints are a guide to human nature.

Distinctions of form will be no more relevant here than distinctions of quality. *The Canterbury Tales*, *Purple for a Shroud*, *The Man from Ironbark*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Garden of Forking Paths* are all fictional works in my sense. The theory embodies no preference for the printed or even the written word; an impromptu story for the children, told and forgotten, will count as fiction in my sense. It applies also to those kinds of fiction that appear in media of visual presentation, plays and movies being the obvious examples. I shall argue that paintings, sculptures, and even photographs can be works of fiction. Any medium that enables us to represent, enables us to make fiction.

I have not in general tried to give self-contained explanations of philosophical ideas that I borrow from other areas and other writers: possible worlds, counterfactuals, proper names and definite descriptions, conventions. A comprehensive account of these things would have doubled the length of the book and been a poor substitute for the exemplary clarity of Kripke, Lewis, Stalnaker, and others. So I've made do with brief explanations and references to the relevant literature. The exception is Grice's theory of meaning, dealt with in Chapter 1. Because it is central to my account of fiction and because I need to emphasize certain features of the theory at



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the expense of others, I have chosen to give it a fuller exposition. Partly for this reason, and partly because I have tried to be explicit about the fundamental assumptions I make, Chapter 1 moves rather more slowly than the rest of the book. Readers familiar with the sort of material that would be contained in an elementary course in the philosophy of language will be able to move very quickly up to Section 1.8. Thereafter the exposition gets a little denser, but anyone at or above the level of advanced undergraduate work in philosophy should be able to follow the arguments. Agreeing with them might be more difficult.

The philosophy of fiction lies at the intersection of aesthetics, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of mind. The problems I have chosen to deal with, and the manner in which I deal with them, make this book rather heavily weighted in the direction of the last two of these disciplines. Some of the issues that arise when we think of fictional works as works of art – issues concerning, for example, the nature of appreciation, the differences between literary, visual, and musical works – I have explored in *An Ontology of Art* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

I have a number of people to thank for their criticisms and suggestions concerning various parts of this book. Among them are Ismay Barwell, Frank Jackson, Don Mannison, Alan Musgrave, Graham Oddie, Roy Perrett, Graham Priest, Barry Taylor, Pavel Tichý, and Aubrey Townsend. Special thanks are due to David Lewis. The comments of two readers for the Press were most helpful. Penelope Griffin's careful reading has helped to improve the clarity of this book. The errors and unclarity that remain are my own responsibility.

While this book was being written I knew of Kendall Walton's work on fiction and make-believe only through his articles, published mostly in the 1970s. Later, with the book already at the Press, I was fortunate enough to obtain a copy, in typescript, of his *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, to be published by Harvard

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University Press. I was then able to make some emendations to those parts of the text where I discuss his views. I thank Kendall Walton for allowing me to see his book, and I heartily recommend it to the reader.

It will be apparent that I have been greatly influenced, through his writings, by the late Paul Grice.

Some material published elsewhere and now much revised is included in this book. That material appeared originally in the following places: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (1985); *Philosophy and Literature* 10 (1986); *Philosophical Studies* 50 (1986); *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1988). I thank the editors of these journals for permission to reprint this material.