

1 Story: 'the orders by which we live our lives'

We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future. (Barbara Hardy)

We all tell stories and we live in their midst. Barbara Hardy's famous comment (1968 p. 5) well sums up the myriad ways we use narrative to experience and shape our lives. More than just a tool for formulating our autobiographies, story-telling is the frame for our general accounts too, even – as recent commentators now forcefully remind us – for our great meta-theories about the affairs and destiny of humankind.

This view of the major role of narrative in organising our knowledge and our experience underlies the present volume. In one form or another such a perspective is scarcely new. But it has been gathering greater momentum in recent years through the current interests in 'story' within social, cultural and literary theory. In this volume these recent approaches are brought together with the comparative work on myth and story within anthropology, folklore and narrative analysis.

Among the many instances of narrative in our culture are those to do with the concept and experience of urban life. There are many tales of the city (in the large sense of the term 'city', that is, which encompasses 'town', 'urbanism' and 'urban life' generally).¹ It is hardly surprising that much story-telling should focus on this topic or take it as the setting – by the turn of the millennium, after all, more than half of the world's people will live in cities (Sanjek 1990 p. 154). Tales of the city are thus scarcely marginal, but likely to play a significant role in our experience and understanding.

So how do we think about cities? What tales do we use to shape our understanding and our experience of urban life? And how do they work? This volume undertakes the at first sight simple task of telling some of these stories of the city and analysing their nature and significance.

In one way this is indeed a straightforward and familiar task. We are habituated not only to tell stories, but also to compare them, accept or reject them, put them in context. This may be partly an unselfconscious activity, but one we are well accustomed to undertaking. Thus an exploration of the

2 Story: 'the orders by which we live our lives'

many stories we tell and are told about urban life – an experience likely to be familiar to readers of this volume – can draw on everyday experience of ourselves as story-telling and story-hearing beings.

But taking it further demands some effort at standing back and seeing our stories as strange. It is when we are faced with *unfamiliar* story-telling that we must work at recognising the conventions that shape it. To see the patterns in what the tellers and hearers experience as 'natural', we need to approach them as both outsider and insider, from the viewpoint, as it were, of the visiting Martian anthropologist.

This dual stance of both familiarity and distancing is a necessary perspective for approaching the tales in this volume. We can listen for example to the local stories about the town(s) we happen to live in, on the surface unproblematic and concerned merely with specificities – but perhaps, seen from a more distant view, also drawing on wider cultural themes and narrative conventions. The personal stories of individual lives can be treated similarly.

My beginnings – well my roots are very firmly working class. My dad was a factory worker all his life, and my mum worked part-time jobs in shops and factories. My first recollection – I can vaguely remember they both came from Southall. But it was a kind of family joke, because my father came from one side of Southall and my mother came from another, and . . . my dad was from the wrong side of the railway track and the railway ran through the middle . . . So that was a sort of family joke. My father's mother and father had a greengrocery shop. And my grandfather who I really don't remember, he died when I was about five I suppose. I only have a vague recollection of him, but he used to go off to Covent Garden to collect the vegetables every morning on his horse and cart. (Brenda Dawson's story; for continuation, see Chapter 4 pp. 60ff.)

That sounds merely individual and personal. But such self-narratives too repay the effort not only to hear their individual voices at all but also to uncover their taken-for-granted narrative conventions and imagery.

The 'Martian anthropologist' figure has become something of a cliché, itself not without narrative overtones. But hackneyed as it is, it conveys the essential idea that there *are* topics which an outsider might wish to ask about in the taken-for-granted ways of our own culture. And what could at first seem more natural than the familiar accounts we hear and tell about the city or than the firsthand experiences of our own lives? In the same spirit, I am also mostly laying aside issues about the 'truth or falsity' of stories to focus instead – as the visiting anthropologist might do – on uncovering the conventions through which tales are formulated and told. This means ex-

ploring the sense in which they might indeed be analysed as 'stories' as well as the relations between varying genres of these tales.

Our culturally specific concepts about 'the city' or about 'urban living' and their formulation in stories are approached from the same perspective. To consider what these are and how they are formulated and narrated in 'stories' we need to look not just to the 'obvious' locus of the intellectuals' accounts, but also to tales of specific cities and – a dimension too often overlooked by social theorists – to the narratives through which urban dwellers themselves formulate their experience. These differing types of tales, furthermore, can be illuminated by being analysed within the same narrative framework. They are brought together here in rather the same way that an anthropologist visiting an unfamiliar society might try to consider their varying tales or speech forms within one overview, presenting and comparing those told by local intellectuals, by members of particular groups or localities, and by individuals telling of their own lives.²

This volume thus presents and analyses examples of the multiple stories of the city, told by a range of tellers in our culture. Examples from the corpus of personal narratives by dwellers in one particular urban area are given throughout chapters 4–6, six of them at some length. Chapter 4 provides some introduction to the context and performance conventions for these individuals' tales, also taking up the complex issue of how far these formulations of life-experiences can indeed be regarded as 'stories'. Their narrative conventions are considered in chapter 5, while themes of urban living are more directly explored in chapter 6. Chapter 3 meantime recounts a range of stories about the planning, reception and experience of the town in which the personal narrators are living (the 'new city' of Milton Keynes in southern-central England), specific to the locality but also with evocations of wider mythic themes. And these in their turn inter-relate with that other type of narrative which the Martian visitor would also find in circulation: the crystallised and abstract tales of cities told by the scholars, the subject of chapter 2.

Providing some analysis of these tales of the city, both personal and more abstract, is the task of this book. This largely lies in elucidating the narrative themes and conventions that, even if not fully visible to their tellers, lie behind our many narrations of the city. It concludes by broadening the perspective to consider the significance of this multiplicity of stories and story-telling in our culture, of the processes by which they are constructed and told, and their implications for our understanding not only of urban theory but of our own lives and culture.

Before moving to the stories themselves, however, let me say a little more

4 Story: 'the orders by which we live our lives'

about the background to this study. The rest of this chapter briefly describes how I see my own study relating to the wider work on narrative, and my approach to the delineation and analysis of 'story'.

Perspectives on narrative

There is of course a long literary tradition of studying the arts of narrative, chiefly from cultures of literate and western peoples. This has embraced not only the creativities of individual narrators but also the conventions of style, genre and (though less often) of distribution and reception. Complementing and overlapping this have been studies by anthropologists, socio-linguists and folklorists of the structures and functions of unwritten stories throughout the world, not least of those great myths that arguably underlie and shape our cultural and personal conditions.

These approaches continue relevant. But recent years have also seen an explosion of interest in the concept of narrative. The scope has extended from the original literary context into studies right across the social and human sciences, even more widely. The term 'narrative' has become a fashionable one and now appears in a whole range of sometimes unexpected contexts.

One of the most prominent recent settings for narrative analysis has been in the study of individual lives. Numerous works now revolve round the idea that the self – or life, or personal experience – is essentially constructed by or through narrative, that is, by the stories that we tell ourselves or that others tell about us. The basic concept of 'life as narrative' appears widely in work by psychologists and psychotherapists: the idea that, as Jerome Bruner put it, 'a life as led is inseparable from a life as told . . . not "how it was" but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold' (Bruner 1987 p. 31). The expanding psychological literature on autobiographical narrative (Neisser and Fivush 1994, Rubin 1996 and a stream of influential works by Jerome Bruner) is now mingling with parallel studies by anthropologists, linguists, folklorists and oral historians on orally delivered life stories and personal narratives, and with studies by sociologists and others interested in auto/biographical texts and processes.³ Work of this kind forms an important background to the treatment here, not only for the personal stories considered in chapters 4–6 but also for the general idea of narrative as a mode for recounting and experiencing our lives.

The model of narrative as in some sense formulating reality is also now being extensively applied to other contexts in which we interpret or control the world. A huge proliferation of academic work now utilises the concept

of 'narrative' or 'story' to examine interpretations and accounts at every level, whether by individuals, groups or institutions, thus extending the idea of narrative well beyond the explicitly 'artistic' works traditionally studied within a literary framework. Studies of organisations, for example, now describe the viewpoints transmitted by managers and their associates as stories: we hear of the 'corporate culture narratives', for example, or of management consultants as story-tellers projecting the 'epic tale' of the manager as hero (Salaman 1997 pp. 253ff., cf. Boje 1991, Clark and Salaman 1996, Roe 1994). A report on industrial urban restructuring is presented as its 'stories of crises' (Metcalf and Bern 1994), while ideas about tourism or about locality are analysed as 'travellers' tales' and 'stories of places' (Robertson *et al.* 1994, Thrift 1997). Therapists, doctors and nurses are described as interpreting and perhaps shaping their patients' 'stories' of their lives, illnesses or death (Epston and White 1992, Freedman and Combs 1996, Riessman 1990, Sandelowski 1991). It has become commonplace for people's interpretations and assumptions about almost anything – from political events or the nature of government to personal tragedies, ethnic interaction or gender relations – to be labelled and analysed as 'stories'. One succinct summary of this general perspective is Geertz's well-known description of culture as the ensemble of 'stories we tell ourselves about ourselves' (1975 p. 448).

The same terminology is also applied to academic accounts. Scepticism about scholars' claims to 'objectivity' or to 'scientific methodology' is scarcely an innovation. But one outcome of the current fashion of berating the claims of 'positivism' has been a preoccupation with both the relativity of academics' theories and the fluidity and elusiveness of what they study. Postmodernist assessments portray such theorising no longer as authoritative accounts of reality but as merely one set of possible 'stories' among others. Thus the theories and interpretations of anthropologists, for instance, or of philosophers, historians, lawyers or economists have all on occasion been approached as narratives.⁴ It has now become not only acceptable but even obligatory in some circles to label such accounts as 'stories' or 'narratives', signalling their crafted, contingent and in a sense fictional nature and reacting against a 'realist' or correspondence theory of truth.

The grand theories that sanction wide-reaching philosophical or disciplinary paradigms are not exempt from this critique – the foundational 'meta-narratives' as Lyotard has it (1984 p. xxiv). Clegg writes of the 'good story' told by the key theorists of modernity like Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel, each 'a grand master of narrative' who gave his theory 'a

6 Story: 'the orders by which we live our lives'

narrative structure in which a central idea of capitalism, differentiation, Protestantism, individuation, played an ambivalent heroic role' (1993 p. 15). Landau (1991) similarly regards the great 'narratives of human evolution' as essentially versions of the widespread hero tale, while Schafer pinpoints the basic narrations in psychoanalytic theory (1992). The contending meta-narratives underpinning historical study can be seen the same way: stories about deeds of personal actors as contrasted to plots driven by class-based causes or by epochal historical stages which move the action forward; or as stories exemplifying what Tonkin calls the 'myth of realism' (1990, cf. also White 1973, 1987). General theories across the social science and humanistic disciplines are now commonly analysed not as something of a higher order, but as themselves constructed – like stories – to convey the tellers' position and deploy the conventions of a recognised genre.⁵

These recent approaches point up questions about the (often hidden) conventions and themes through which these accounts are formulated – about the interest not just of their overt content but also of their poetics. There is a lot more narrative around, it seems, than we realised! They also have the merit of focusing attention onto the processes by which theories are constructed and disseminated, interesting parallels to literary creation, and of encouraging the sceptical analysis of dogmatic would-be 'above-the-battle' pronouncements. They thus form an illuminating background to the present study's aim of treating a series of differing 'stories of the city' rather than recommending one 'true' or permanent interpretation. They feed too into the more general view, cited at the start, which envisages story-telling as crucial to our existence and realisation as human beings.

Some positions taken up in current studies are controversial, or at any rate have been less utilised in the present study. Recent approaches to narrative have sometimes been closely associated with, or colonised by, scholars publishing under the banner of postmodernism and/or cultural studies. These highly visible if sometimes elusive clusters of writing are often taken to represent a new and distinctive approach to culture. In some senses this is a misleading claim. The basic ideas are shared among writers of many different backgrounds, as scholars deploy a new vocabulary to re-convey the essentially interpretative and socially constructed – rather than 'objective' – nature of accounts given by individuals or organisations. But there is also a special push in many 'cultural studies' publications to produce a distinctive critical perspective on the political or self-interested nature of the 'stories' under study, giving the term connotations not so dissimilar to those of the once much-used 'ideology'. Publications in this vein invoke writers like Gramsci (1971) and Foucault (e.g. 1972, 1980) to highlight issues about

hegemony and power, sometimes taken as near-obligatory models in any analysis of story-telling, as of cultural life in general. The concept of story has become a dominant theme in cultural studies, where 'narratives and their interwoven textures are the stuff of life' and 'a theory is a story with a plot whose ending is satisfactory explanation' (Inglis 1993 pp. 244–5). But their analysis is sometimes so tightly directed to the critical dissection of power, consumption and the storied inequalities of race or gender that it screens out other issues.

The concept of 'text' is another frequently recurring image in recent work on story, especially in cultural studies where it is often associated with the semiotic and structuralist analyses of writers such as Saussure and Barthes. Human beings are here essentially 'signifying' animals and the underlying model of communication tends to be a linguistic one, drawing liberally on such metaphors as ('en-' and 'de-') 'coding', 'signification', 'reading' or 'inscribing' (enunciated for example in Hall 1997). These may not be the most effective metaphors for indicating the *telling* and contexted performance of stories.

Criticisms of the limited scope of a cognitively based model of human culture bring us back to some earlier and still continuing perspectives on narrative, predominantly from anthropology and folklore. These suggest that focusing on a narrow concept of 'text' can inhibit a full account of story-telling. Earlier critiques questioned the practice of taking 'the verbal story-text' as *the* unit for analysis (for example in Labov's seminal work, 1972) on the grounds that this drew attention away from the equally constitutive aspects of performance, circulation or enactment. Similar queries could be raised about the recent predilection for taking 'text' as the key term for analysing cultural processes. The concept is no doubt broader than some previous usages, but it still turns the spotlight more on somewhat decontextualised cognitive signification (and general political import) than on the kinds of issues that are now increasingly uncovered by scholars working on performance, artistic conventions and the ethnographic settings of speaking.⁶ My own perspective, as in earlier works, accords more with this latter approach. Although the overview nature of my project here has precluded the kind of detailed study of performances and stylistics practised so successfully by linguistic anthropologists and others writing in the ethnography-of-speaking and performance traditions, I would agree that any analysis of stories should also include some attention to *story-telling* and to questions of context, delivery and active participants.

The implicit tone of many narrative analyses circulating under the 'post-modernist' head is that of demolishing pretension and undermining unwar-

8 Story: 'the orders by which we live our lives'

ranted authority-claims. Critical scrutiny of scholars' statements continues, of course, to be pertinent. So too does the inclusion of other voices than those of the scholars or the establishment. But I am more doubtful about the position that since final truth is impossible, there is no point in aspiring to a reasoned detached judgement of the evidence, or about a form of relativism that suggests that every story, every theory, is equally acceptable (issues to be returned to in chapter 7). In this respect criticisms of the postmodern turn in 'literary anthropology' are well taken (e.g. Reyna 1994, Spencer 1989 esp. pp. 159ff.). The more extreme postmodernist positions also run the risk of blurring *any* distinctions between differing types of accounts. All are 'constructed' – true enough perhaps, but we hear less of the actual ways in which they *are* so constructed as narrative. The term 'story' can be just another fashionable kneejerk label unless there is also some explanation of how far and in what sense this notion is really appropriate for examining specific cases.

My own scope is more limited. While my study certainly draws on some aspects of this recent work, it is concerned neither to demonstrate some all-embracing relativist model, nor to classify *all* theories and descriptions of 'reality' equally as stories. Rather it focuses down on certain features of story and applies these to the cluster of accounts that I refer to as the tales of the city – those multiple narratives in our culture formulating the ideas and experiences of urban living. I will be exploring the sense in which these accounts can indeed be analysed as forms of 'story', how they are structured as narrative, and how this can illuminate their nature and their cultural roles.

I would thus take issue with certain current positions or wish to go beyond them. But in a more general sense this volume necessarily builds on both earlier and more recent work on narrative. It draws on the view of story as art-ful communication – a view consonant with traditional literary analysis but no longer confined just to that; on the role of myth as elucidated in anthropology and folklore; on the idea of self-as-narrative that now appears across so many disciplines, most notably in psychology; on the relevance of contexting, performance and process from folklore, sociology and, above all, from anthropology; on structured conventions of plot, style and protagonists from literary, anthropological and narratological studies; and on issues about relativism, the multiplicity of our storied views of 'reality' and the construction of narratives now being debated among postmodern writers and their critics. It also draws on that in one sense outmoded, but in another still vital, anthropological aspiration to a holistic rather than separated view of culture. Here that evinces itself not in the impossible project of

covering 'everything' but in the more modest aim of bringing together multiple narrations relative to one key topic in our culture rather than – as so often – treating them separately.

What's in a 'story'?

Against that general background of approaches to narrative, let me briefly sketch my own view of 'story' and its key features.

Understanding the term is in one way easy. 'Story' is no technical concept but a familiar and readily used word in everyday speech, a shared understanding that I will be drawing on. But its very centrality in everyday language also – as so often – carries a wealth of meanings and unspoken assumptions. There is a vast literature on definitions of 'story' or 'narrative', and on the approaches and controversies that relate to these definitions. I will not enter into the details of these debates (handily summed up in Riessman 1993 pp. 17ff.), but for the purposes of this volume I must begin with my own somewhat simple characterisation of what features I consider are significant in 'story' – not so much a definition as an indication of the main areas I will be focusing on in my analysis.

I take 'story' to be essentially a presentation of events or experiences which is *told*, typically through written or spoken words. This brash statement immediately needs further elaboration. The main dimensions to which I will be drawing attention throughout – not exactly definitional criteria, but significant for the view I take of the key properties of story – are: first, a temporal or sequential framework; second, some element of explanation or coherence; third, some potential for generalisability – something of the universal in the particular; and finally the existence of recognised generic conventions, varying for different types of story-telling or tellers, which relate to the expected framework, protagonists and modes of performance/circulation. In the stories presented in this volume I take it not only that most or all of the above will be detectable, though perhaps to different degrees and in differing forms, but that these are also salient features for analysis.

These features broadly recur in one form or another in the now-vast literature on narrative analysis and are not so far, either, from the conventional wisdom about what we mean by 'story' in everyday conversation. Indeed our general understanding of the term 'story' – and certainly mine in this study – emerges from this complex and continuing interplay between our everyday usage and the more theoretical debates of the scholars. However, the particular approach is specific to this study, developed not as a

10 Story: 'the orders by which we live our lives'

contribution to general issues of definition but merely as the working basis for analysing the stories in this volume.⁷

Each of these features needs further comment.

A series of past tenses depicting events set within some kind of temporal framework is what we normally expect of a 'story'. We readily accept the tales of Adam and Eve, of Cinderella or of an individual's life experiences as stories in that they present a sequence of events (whether 'fictional' or 'true' is not an issue) in contrast to, say, a synchronic description of a landscape or the Sermon on the Mount. Despite some complexities and controversies, this temporal element is a widely accepted view of story in conventional wisdom – the presentation of events taking place in the past.

Temporal framing is not limited just to the literal use of grammatical past tenses however, or to strict chronological sequence in some 'objective' sense. Our main expectation of a story may be its presentation of *past* events, but a narration can also include present and future references, and its sequential element can be deployed in varying ways. And while the events may all in one sense be depicted as in the past, from the standpoint of the story's main timescale they may still be to come (like the then-future sequel in the Garden of Eden narrative, the 'lived happily ever after' closure in many tales, or the 'what happened to the main characters later' ending to some novels). Events are not necessarily presented in exact chronological sequence either, but also through flashbacks and previews, and a story can be cyclical or circumlocutory as well as linear. Some kind of temporal ordering is of the essence, but the route is not always a linear one and can also wander through byways, diversions and circularities.

But a mere listing of past events with no connecting thread does not make a story. We expect something more than just temporal sequence, something to give it an intelligible plot. This 'something more' takes various forms. The story may communicate to audiences in a familiar and thus satisfying framework through recreating one of the widely recognised plots identified by literary analysts and folklorists (notably Propp 1968, also Burke 1945, Lüthi 1987, Paulme 1976, Prince 1989, Scholes and Kellogg 1966). It is more often possible than we might at first imagine to detect the patterns of the hero-tale, the rags-to-riches plot, the growth to maturity, the effects of villainy, or the fall from grace: the Golden Age lost. Or it may take the form of some underlying evaluative theme which – unlike a chronicle merely recounting a series of unrelated events – conveys a unifying moral ordering to listeners sharing this viewpoint. Such elements are matters of degree. They may not appear explicitly nor be equally convincing to all auditors. But some kind of explanatory framework or sense of intelligible causality is part of what we