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TALES OF THE CITY

A Study of Narrative and Urban Life

How do we picture urban life and formulate our experience of it? *Tales of the City* brings together the academics' abstract tales with the vivid stories about a particular city, Milton Keynes, and the often moving self-narrations of its residents. It explores the role of story-telling processes for the creative constructing of experience, with particular attention to personal narrations. The story that is now emerging, told by many individual actor-narrators, is of the city as a natural setting for human life, in stark contrast to the pessimistic anti-urban tales of many academic narrators. Drawing on narrative studies, cultural and linguistic anthropology and social theory, Professor Finnegan skilfully examines the narrative conventions and cultural implications of our multiple tales of the city, and relates them to profound mythic themes about urban life, community and the creative role of the active, reflecting individual.

RUTH FINNEGAN is Professor in Comparative Social Institutions at the Open University. Her many publications include *Limba Stories and Story-Telling* (1967), *Oral Poetry* (1977), *The Hidden Musicians* (1989) and *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts* (1992).

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 1RU, United Kingdom
<http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1998

Typeset in Concorde Regular 9.25/13 pt [vN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Finnegan, Ruth H.

Tales of the city: a study of narrative and urban life/Ruth Finnegan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0 521 62334 0 (hb). – ISBN 0 521 62623 4 (pb)

1. Milton Keynes (England) – Social life and customs – Historiography. 2. Milton Keynes (England) – Social life and customs. 3. City and town life – England – Milton Keynes. 4. Storytelling – England – Milton Keynes. 5. Narration (Rhetoric)

I. Title.

DA670.M66F56 1998

942.5'91'0072-dc21 97-35263 CIP

ISBN 0 521 62334 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 62623 4 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

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Preface

This study started from my curiosity about the notion of the city and about how people living in my own town conceived of this – ‘ordinary’ people, I thought, as distinct from the academics. This rather unformulated curiosity first led me into investigating some local life stories. Then the narrative element in these personal tales became an additional focus, feeding into my long-standing interest in story-telling. And I began to realise that these personal tales were not the only ones that structured our ideas of urban culture, and that stories of the city by other tellers too were part of the mix.

I ended up with the seemingly rather simple aspiration of bringing together a series of stories about the city – those of the intellectuals (ostensibly abstract and above the battle) with the self-narratives of urban residents and with the tales told in and of a city by its planners, its local groups, and outside commentators in the media and elsewhere. What do these many tellers have to say about urban living? Equally important (or perhaps the same question), what are the narrative processes through which they formulate it?

Bringing together stories ‘across the board’ like this is a bit unusual. It would be easier to follow the many studies that mainly stay with one type of tale or teller, whether this be autobiographical tales, the theories circulated among academics, or the stories of groups which have somehow been classified as ‘other’ within our own culture or elsewhere (the ‘submerged’, perhaps, the ‘folk’ or the ‘oppressed’). Other studies do look at verbal genres across a culture as a whole, but with less interest in the contrasting as well as overlapping tales that are told through them. Insights from these more detailed works and from the current explosion of interest in narrative analysis lie behind the interdisciplinary analysis in this volume – it would have been impossible without them. But none of these approaches are exactly what my study is about. I decided to pursue the rather different endeavour of bringing together a series of stories of the city that are more often kept separate and analysing them within the same narrative framework. Their interaction and overlaps can tell us something about the actualisation of our mythologies of urban life.

The attempt is impossible of course, for there are unending tales of the city. All I could try to do was to include enough to convey something of the

multiplicity and range of the stories, anchoring them, in anthropological tradition, to the narrations of one specific locality and one set of local tellers but at the same time – unlike some ethnographic accounts – also relating them to the more abstract story-telling by the culture’s theorising intellectuals. I hope that despite the inevitable selectivity, this attempt to analyse a range of different types of stories within the same narrative frame can throw light on our story-telling processes and our storied views of the city.

One practical problem is how to deal with the self-narratives. Referring to the academic stories and even to some of the localised urban tales can be done relatively briefly: many are already in the public domain. But the personal tales cannot be presented so cursorily. I have therefore reproduced some lengthy excerpts in chapters 4–6. This has disadvantages, perhaps explaining why many studies of self-narratives end up dispensing with the narratives themselves. It inevitably lengthens the book and adds to its expense. It probably unbalances it too, for though the self-stories are indeed of the essence, so too are the other tales. And as is now widely recognised, verbal texts on a page can seem quite unilluminating, for they are only a partial representation of orally delivered narrations. But it would be impossible to convey the reality of our multiple urban stories and how they can be analysed as narratives without including examples of some substance rather than just snippets of quotation: hence the six personal tales in the heart of this book.

Throughout I speak of ‘our culture’ – an elusive term. Consonant with our contemporary suspicion of over-neatly bounded units of analysis, I am fairly unrepentant about leaving it undefined – or, rather, leaving it to my readers to recognise it as and where they may. However, let me add that while the overall coverage ranges much wider, the setting is England and the specific locale that of Milton Keynes, the Buckinghamshire town in southern-central England. This in part makes it a companion volume to my earlier book on music-making in Milton Keynes, providing a second look at the same town and another attempt to bring together activities or genres that other studies tend to keep apart. This second volume is less founded in detailed ethnographic observation than *The Hidden Musicians*, however, and focuses on a different dimension of city life, for I have returned to earlier interests by focusing not on music but on story-telling.

The wider implications of the local tales are relevant throughout, not just their ethnographic uniquenesses. In Britain the image of ‘Milton Keynes’ has for many people become a kind of epitome of some key urban stories in contemporary culture, a revealing locale therefore to explore our tales of the city. The town’s very specificity has come to give it a wider symbolic interest.

The study thus revolves round the multiple ways in which we use narrative to formulate our ideas and experience of urban life. As I have said, the tales are never-ending, both in general and as presented through the stories heard and told in a particular town. Not all are told here, let alone concluded. Other tellers will add yet more stories. But this work does at least endeavour to bring onto the same stage a series of our stories on the subject, from the abstract stories of the theorists, the colourful tales of a particular town, and the often moving narratives told by some of its inhabitants. It tries to analyse them *as* stories, to reveal the conventions behind their construction. And within the story of my work on this study I have also been rediscovering and retelling the plot that is so obvious – even fashionable – in theory but hard to pinpoint in practice: that the opposition between ‘ordinary’ and ‘academic’ which is still a familiar starting-point to the tale takes on a different look by its conclusion.

Acknowledgements

It must be obvious that this book could not have been started let alone completed without the help of many others. On a personal as well as intellectual level I am especially grateful to Delia Gray both for her support in general discussion and, more particularly, for contacting the Fishermead dwellers and recording their personal stories; to Dianne Cook for her help every single working day and especially for her assistance with the transcription; to my mother through a lifetime's mischievous telling of tall and not-so-tall tales which continued even through the final months of her life as I started writing this book; and for the long support and interest of my husband, David Murray, in too many ways to list. I am appreciative too of the many friends in Milton Keynes for their co-experience in creating and telling the storied life of this city. I was also greatly helped by discussion with colleagues. This was generously forthcoming both in everyday scholarly interaction (especially within my own institution of the Open University – and special thanks to my helpfully critical colleagues in the 'Culture, media and identities' course team) and at gatherings where I presented some of this material in an earlier form: especially at the Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association's Auto/Biography Group in November 1994 (written up as Finnegan 1996), seminars in the Universities of Joensuu and Helsinki, Finland in March 1996, and the mind-blowing conference on 'Narrative and metaphor across the disciplines' in the University of Auckland in July 1996. I would also express my appreciation for the constructively challenging comments from the anonymous readers for the Press, and for Diane Illott's perceptive and thorough copy editing: you have all certainly improved the final version. Above all, I and all the readers of this book owe a great debt to the narrators of the moving and unique personal stories recorded and analysed in this volume. Except for George Rowe and Jenny Linn-Cole I cannot thank them by name, for our agreement was that they would appear under pseudonyms. But let me salute and thank them all.

I have sincere thanks to express to many libraries or archives and to their staff, among them the Living Archive in Wolverton, Milton Keynes (thanks especially to Roger Kitchen and Sue Quinn for many kindnesses and encouragement); the City Discovery Centre, Bradwell Abbey, Milton Keynes; the Local Studies section of the Milton Keynes Central Reference Library;

the Commission for the New Towns; and, as always, the Open University Library, especially the ever-smiling assistants on the desk and the wonderfully efficient Inter-Library Loan section. I owe a great debt to John Hunt (Project Officer, Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University) for his expert cartographic assistance with Figures 3.1, 3.2, 4.1 and 6.2 and to Paul Smith (then of the Open University Library) for tracing the poster for Figure 3.5 as well as for his many years' collegueship. I also gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance in the earlier stages of this work given by both the Faculty Research Committee and the Sociology Research Group in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Open University.

For permission to reproduce copyright material grateful acknowledgement is due to the following: the Commission for the New Towns, 414–28 Midsummer Boulevard, Central Milton Keynes MK9 2EA, for Figures 3.2, 3.3, 3.8, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1 (street in Fishermead), 6.2, 6.3, 6.4 and the cover photograph, and for the extracts from *The Planning of Milton Keynes* in Chapter 3; Mike Levers, Open University, for Figures 3.6 and 6.1 (terraced houses); Faber and Faber Ltd for Figure 3.4; *Punch* for Figure 3.5; Vera Stone for Figure 3.7; The Living Archive, The Old Bath House, 205 Stratford Road, Wolverton, Milton Keynes MK12 5RL on behalf of the People's Press for permission to reproduce the poem 'The New City'; Bill Billings for his poem 'Old Jacks Dog Died'; Anita Packwood for her poem 'In the Sinking Sunlight'; Norine Redman for her poem 'Early Spring at Peartree Bridge'; and, finally, the narrators of the personal tales in chapters 4–6: they retain the copyright in their own words but gave permission for them to be quoted in this study.