

*The Cambridge Introduction
to Narrative*

Third Edition

What is narrative? How does it work, and how does it shape our lives? H. Porter Abbott emphasizes that narrative is found not just in literature, film, and theater but everywhere in the ordinary course of people's lives. This widely used introduction, now revised and expanded in its third edition, is informed throughout by recent developments in the field and includes one new chapter. The glossary and bibliography have been expanded, and new sections explore unnatural narrative, retrograde narrative, reader-resistant narratives, intermedial narrative, narrativity, multiple interpretations, and more. With its lucid exposition of concepts and suggestions for further reading, this book is not only an excellent introduction for courses focused on narrative but also an invaluable resource for students and scholars across a wide range of fields, including literature and drama; film and media; society and politics; journalism; autobiography; history; and still others throughout the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

A specialist in narrative, autobiography, modernism, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, H. Porter Abbott is an internationally recognized scholar in the field of narrative and the work of Samuel Beckett. He taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara, from 1966 to 2005, with stints as Chair of English and Acting Dean of Arts and Humanities, and continues as Research Professor Emeritus.

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Third Edition

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University of California, Santa Barbara



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In memory of Jon Pearce

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Preface to the Third Edition

Much has happened in the ever-growing, always interesting field of narrative study during the thirteen years that separate this edition from the last. Accordingly, there has been much to weigh in deciding what to add without sacrificing clarity or making this book too big. I have kept the same order of chapters, some of which have needed more revision, some less, and some hardly any. Major additions have been made to Chapters 2 and 3, and a major change has been made to Chapter 14, now split into two chapters. The Glossary has been revised and considerably extended. The Bibliography less so, as a long Bibliography can be intimidating.

As in the first and second editions, so in this third edition of *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, the primary challenge has been adopting a “beginner’s mind.” This is a concept I stole (with some abuse) from a practice in Zen Buddhism. What it means for me is to introduce concepts and distinctions in narrative theory while adopting at the same time the perspective of a reader with no knowledge of the subject, yet who is eager to acquire it. The ancillary challenge has been to achieve lucidity without reduction. It is a book, in other words, that is not for dummies, but it is at the same time a book seeking to avoid theoretical thickets that hinder more than they help.

More than anything, this perspective helps me bear in mind (again!) how little is, or can be, definitively settled in studying a phenomenon that depends on subjective response – a problem that is compounded, of course, when more than one subject is responding. Perhaps this explains why so many narratological terms have been used in multiple ways, in multiple contexts, and with multiple implicit and explicit meanings (as in plot, voice, focalization, narrator). In the two editions so far, and now in this one, I have foregrounded this subjective dimension as a caution without diminishing the conviction that we can achieve precision and maintain engagement despite the difficulties and uncertainties inherent in the field. For this reason, also, my general approach is necessarily descriptive rather than prescriptive.

As in the first two editions, I have continued to assume that I could write an introduction that kept to a level that was basic in the sense that whatever

nameable approach a scholar or teacher might assume as a narrative theorist (feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, ecocritical, cognitivist, rhetorical, ethical, linguistic, queer, place, natural, unnatural), here would be the relevant fundamentals of narrative. Arguably, understanding these fundamentals becomes even more important in grasping those exotic texts, hovering in the outer reaches of narrative, which achieve their effects by playing havoc with these fundamentals. Finally, my approach is postclassical, in the sense affirmed by Herman (1997) and reaffirmed by Phelan (2017) and others, that it does not abolish the classical but revises and expands it. Though my training as a textual critic inclines me to draw on literary examples, my aim is to address those concepts and distinctions that have the greatest practical leverage for work across the medial, as well as the disciplinary, spectrum.

The number of scholars and nonscholars who have helped me this time around with their published work and lectures and conversations is far too large for me to list them here. They have my silent thanks. More immediately, my thanks as ever to Cambridge University Press and especially to their spring-loaded, unflagging, and unfailingly positive editor, Ray Ryan. For friendly and helpful critiques of the second edition, thanks go to Jan Alber and James Fanning. For lending their knowledge and expertise, warm thanks to Rebecca Abbott and Jason Abbott. For the stunning art that has graced the covers of all three editions, my thanks once again to Siu Zimmerman. And, finally, heartfelt thanks to my first and best reader, and loving companion of fifty-five years, Anita Abbott.

Preface to the Second Edition

Narrative existed long before people gave it a name and tried to figure out how it works. It comes to us so naturally that, when we start to examine it, we are a bit like Monsieur Jourdain in Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, who discovered he had been speaking prose all his life without knowing it. Accordingly, in this revised and expanded second edition, I have continued to imagine as my first reader someone without any preconceptions about the field of narrative. I trust this has kept me honest to the degree that it has helped me to look with a critical eye at my own preconceptions. In the interval since the final draft of the first edition of *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* was sent to the press (on, of all dates, September 11, 2001), much has been published in the robust field of narrative study, including four fine introductions to narrative as a specifically literary form, each of which, in its distinctive way, works well as a complement to this book. The interval saw much else, including the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, a scrupulously edited volume that is as comprehensive as it is indispensable.

I see all of this work, along with the work that has gone before, falling into an inverted pyramid. The present book is situated where the pyramid comes to a point: the transaction between the mind and the narrative medium that makes narrative happen. As such, this book, like the first edition, is not an overview of approaches to narrative. It is, rather, my best attempt to harvest and make readable what is known about how audiences and the forms of narrative interact. As such, it draws on the overlapping elements of formalist, reader-oriented, cognitive, and rhetorical approaches, which encompass much of the work going on here at the base of this upside-down pyramid, and provides a foundation for any other viable approach. Because narrative is everywhere that human beings are, and involved in almost everything they do, this pyramid of knowledge just keeps expanding upward and outward.

I am grateful to Cambridge University Press and to my indefatigably helpful and enthusiastic editor, Ray Ryan, for encouraging me to enlarge the book for this second edition. In doing so, I have at the same time sought to economize sufficiently to keep the book affordable. The big change is the addition of two

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new chapters (11 and 12), one on the fiction/nonfiction distinction (“Narrative and truth”) and the other on the kinds of world-creating that narrative does (“Narrative worlds”). These subjects are both, currently, lively areas in the study of narrative and more closely intertwined than may at first appear. I have also made additions of varying length to a number of the other chapters at those points where I felt more was needed for clarity or where my thinking has changed. The names of some of the authors whose work has helped me along the way were absent from the first preface, either by inadvertence or because I was not then familiar with their work. Here they are now: Frederick Aldama, Jerome Bruner, Lubomír Doležel, Emma Kafalenos, Uri Margolin, Brian McHale, Alan Palmer, James Phelan, John Pier, Meir Sternberg, and Lisa Zunshine. Special thanks to Brian Richardson and James Phelan for their suggestions and words of encouragement for this edition. Thanks, too, to Edward Branigan, Tracy Larabee, Byram Abbott, and Jason Abbott for assistance in research. David Herman trained his eagle eye on the entire manuscript, rescuing me from error while expanding my mind. I am deeply grateful for this and for his unfailing support. Finally, as in the past, so now again, heartfelt thanks to my most trusted and beloved first and best reader, Anita Abbott.

Preface to the First Edition

The purpose of this book is to help readers understand what narrative is, how it is constructed, how it acts upon us, how we act upon it, how it is transmitted, how it changes when the medium or the cultural context changes, and how it is found not just in the arts but everywhere in the ordinary course of people's lives, many times a day. This last point is especially important. We are all narrators, though we may rarely be aware of it. A statement as simple as "I took the car to work" qualifies as narrative. As we seek to communicate more detail about events in time, we become involved in increasingly complex acts of narration. We are also the constant recipients of narrative: from newspapers and television, from books and films, and from friends and relatives telling us, among other things, that they took the car to work. Therefore, though much of this book is devoted to narrative in literature, film, and drama, it grounds its treatment of narrative by introducing it as a human phenomenon that is not restricted to literature, film, and theater, but is found in all activities that involve the representation of events in time. In its early chapters, the book moves back and forth between the arts and the everyday. At the same time, the book honors the fact that out of this common capability have come rich and meaningful narratives that we come back to and reflect on repeatedly in our lives.

This book is descriptive rather than prescriptive; it seeks to describe what happens when we encounter narrative, rather than to prescribe what should happen. All along the way questions arise that are very much alive in current work on narrative. These are often tough issues, and, with a few important exceptions (as for example the definition of narrative that I employ), I try to keep these issues open. In organization, the book introduces the subject of narrative by moving outward from simplicity to complexity, from the component parts of narrative in Chapters 2 and 3 to its numerous effects, including its extraordinary rhetorical power and the importance of the concept of "closure," in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 6 deals with narration and the key role of the narrator.

Chapters 7 and 8, in taking up issues connected with the interpretation of narrative, shift the focus from the power of narrative to the power of readers and audiences. In this sense, narrative is always a two-way street. Without our collaboration, there is no narrative to begin with. And if it is true that we allow ourselves to be manipulated by narrative, it is also true that we do manipulating of our own. These chapters take up this interplay of audiences and narratives in the process of interpretation and culminate in Chapter 8's treatment of three fundamentally different ways of reading that we all engage in: intentional, symptomatic, and adaptive. The differences between them are important and bring in their wake different understandings of what we mean by meaning in narrative.

Chapter 9 turns to the differences that different media make in narrative and to what happens when you move a story from one medium to narrate it in another. Chapter 10 opens out the subject of character, both as a function of narrative and as intimately connected with what we loosely call "the self" in autobiography. In the final two chapters, we return to the broad subject of narrative's role in culture and society. Much of politics and the law is a contest of narratives. Chapter 13 looks at the ways in which these conflicts of narrative play out, particularly in the law. And in Chapter 14, I look at the ways in which narrative can also be an instrument by which storytellers and readers seek to negotiate the claims of competing and often intractable conflicts. Stories, for example, that are told over and over again (cultural masterplots) are often efforts to settle conflicts that are deeply embedded in a culture.

In this book, I have endeavored to avoid writing another anatomy of narrative, of which there are fine examples available in print (Genette, 1980; Prince, 1987). Instead, I have sought at all times to restrict focus to the most useful concepts and terminology. The field of narratology has produced a great arsenal of distinctions and terms. I have kept my selection of these to a minimum, using only those that are indispensable. These key terms will be found throughout the book and are featured in boldface in the Glossary. As such, this is a foundational book. The tools and distinctions it supplies can be employed across the whole range of nameable interpretive approaches.

Nonetheless, by selecting the terms I do and by treating them the way I do, I have written a study that is bound to be controversial. The simple reason for this is that all studies of narrative are controversial. Despite a burst of energetic and highly intelligent research over the past thirty years and the genuine progress that has been made, there is not yet a consensus on any of the key issues in the study of narrative. If, like language, narrative is an inevitable human capability that we deploy every day without conscious effort, it is also, like language, a complex and fascinating field that often seems to defy our best

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analytical efforts at exactitude. Therefore, and above all else, I have aimed at clarity in this introduction to narrative. I have also been highly selective in recommending, at the ends of Chapters 2–14, secondary texts that seem at this date to have stood the test of time (though for some areas, like hypertext narrative, the works have only barely been tested). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge here the assistance I have received from the work on narrative by many brilliant scholars, among them: M. M. Bakhtin, Mieke Bal, Ann Banfield, Roland Barthes, Emile Benveniste, Wayne Booth, David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Claude Bremond, Peter Brooks, Ross Chambers, Seymour Chatman, Dorrit Cohn, Jonathan Culler, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Monika Fludernik, Gérard Genette, A. J. Greimas, David Herman, Paul Hernadi, Wolfgang Iser, Roman Jakobson, Fredric Jameson, Robert Kellogg, Frank Kermode, George P. Landow, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Wallace Martin, Scott McCloud, J. Hillis Miller, Bill Nichols, Roy Pascal, Gerald Prince, Vladimir Propp, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Eric Rabkin, David Richter, Paul Ricoeur, Brian Richardson, Robert Scholes, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Marie-Laure Ryan, Saint Augustine, Victor Shklovsky, Franz Stanzel, Tzvetan Todorov, Boris Tomashevsky, Hayden White, and Trevor Whittock.

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