An Introduction to Narratology

‘Fludernik’s Introduction to Narratology will give undergraduate majors and graduate readers a formative overview of international narrative scholarship, as well as a practical manual for informed critical and interpretive practice.’

Bruce Clarke, Texas Tech University, USA

‘Written by one of the world’s leading narrative scholars . . . An Introduction to Narratology is an excellent starting place for student readers coming to the field for the first time. It is also a first-rate reference work for more advanced students and for other readers who want to learn more about this excitingly active and diverse area of enquiry.’

David Herman, Ohio State University, USA

An Introduction to Narratology is an accessible, practical guide to narratological theory and terminology and its application to literature.

In this book, Monika Fludernik outlines:

• The key concepts of style, metaphor and metonymy, and the history of narrative forms
• Narratological approaches to interpretation and the linguistic aspects of texts, including new cognitive developments in the field
• How students can use narratological theory to work with texts, incorporating detailed practical examples
• A glossary of useful narrative terms and suggestions for further reading.

This textbook offers a comprehensive overview of the key aspects of narratology by a leading practitioner in the field. It demystifies the subject in a way that is accessible to beginners, but also reflects recent theoretical developments and narratology’s increasing popularity as a critical tool.

Monika Fludernik is Professor of English at the University of Freiburg, Germany. She is the author of The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction (Routledge, 1993) and Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology (Routledge, 1996), which was the co-winner of the Perkins Prize of the Society for the Study of Narrative Literature.
An Introduction to Narratology

Monika Fludernik

Translated from the German by Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik
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This volume was conceived as a textbook for students at the beginning of their academic career. It could form part of an introductory course to narrative studies or of an introductory module in literary studies. Although most of the examples are taken from literatures in English, the book attempts to cater to a wider audience of literature students in foreign language departments. It could also serve as a brief introduction for more advanced readers with no previous exposure to narratology who wish to catch up with developments in this field.

This introduction differs from the many other available textbooks on narrative and narrative theory in two strategic ways. First, I have tried to integrate narratological analysis with more general issues concerning reading of narrative and literary texts. These include the framing of books by the means of blurbs and cover texts, censorship, and questions of mimesis and realism as well as stylistic considerations and the use of metaphor in narrative. Second, the volume reflects my own particular line of narratological thinking and the tradition from which it developed. Thus it is the only available English language textbook on narrative studies with a heavy emphasis on German research in narratology. It also foregrounds linguistic and diachronic aspects of narrative studies.

In addition to these content-related departures from the familiar model of introductory accounts of narrative, the book also offers two chapters designed to meet the pedagogical needs of teaching staff: a chapter of textual interpretations that illustrates narratology in its practical application and one containing advice on how to avoid some of the more common terminological pitfalls that can be encountered when writing about narratives. The volume is rounded off with a glossary and an up-to-date bibliography.

This book is a translation of the second edition of *Einführung in die Erzähltheorie*. In the interests of the wider English-speaking readership, two chapters (9 and 12) have been replaced by new versions since the originals used German example texts. In the book as a whole, too, many of the German-language examples have been replaced by English illustrative material in order to facilitate matters for an international readership more attuned to literature in English. I have also found it necessary to rewrite passages in earlier chapters to clarify and explain more fully what I was trying to illustrate. Never has it become more obvious to me how different even quite simple German academic discourse is from that in English, how the order of presentation and the logic of combining arguments are handled in entirely untranslatable ways in the two languages. The text printed here is therefore a rewriting as well as a translation of the original German volume. It tries faithfully to do the same things as the original,
but achieves this objective by sometimes introducing different sentences and different example passages from those employed in the source text.

My most extensive thanks go to Patricia Häusler-Greenfield, without whose enthusiasm, professional know-how and willingness to revise and rethink, and without whose patience with my perfectionist quibbling, this text would not have been completed in its present form. It has been a great joy to work with her on this book, and I have found our discussions entirely fascinating and inspiring, especially on how some things just cannot be expressed in a certain way or how a specific word will just eventually make all the difference to a sentence. I should also like to take this opportunity to thank Pat for being a superb teacher of writing in English while I was still in a junior position in Vienna. I have profited immensely from her instructions on how to combine verbs and nouns or nouns and adjectives in English and on how to listen to the cadence of syllables in a sentence to produce a euphonious discourse in my favourite non-native language. My own students, I am sure, are currently learning a great deal from the lessons I have absorbed from Pat.

Finally this brings me to the thanks due to other parties involved in this project. My gratitude extends first and foremost to Luise Lohmann, who has (wo)manfully struggled with typing and formatting the many versions of the chapters. I would also like to thank Carolin Berger-Krauße and Jeff Thoss for help with bibliographical items and proofreading. Special thanks go to Jan Alber for compiling the index.

This translation, like the original, is dedicated to my academic teachers in narratological thinking – Dorrit Cohn and Franz Karl Stanzel, with somewhat belated wishes for their eighty-fourth and eighty-fifth respective birthdays in August 2008. Without their example and inspiration my own narratological research would never have been possible.
1 Narrative and narrating

When we speak about narrative today, we inevitably associate it with the literary type of narrative, the novel or the short story. The word *narrative*, however, is related to the verb *narrate*. Narrative is all around us, not just in the novel or in historical writing. Narrative is associated above all with the act of narration and is to be found wherever someone tells us about something: a newsreader on the radio, a teacher at school, a school friend in the playground, a fellow passenger on a train, a newsagent, one’s partner over the evening meal, a television reporter, a newspaper columnist or the narrator in the novel that we enjoy reading before going to bed. We are all narrators in our daily lives, in our conversations with others, and sometimes we are even professional narrators (should we happen to be, say, teachers, press officers or comedians). On occasion, we even take on the role of narrator: for example, when we read bedtime stories to small children. Narrating is therefore a widespread and often unconscious spoken language activity which can be seen to include a number of different text-types (such as journalism or teaching) in addition to what we often think of as the prototypical kind of narrative, namely literary narrative as an art form.

But that is not all. As research is showing increasingly clearly, the human brain is constructed in such a way that it captures many complex relationships in the form of narrative structures (Polkinghorne 1988), metaphors or analogies. Just as we may describe a personal relationship metaphorically as a house that one partner has built painstakingly and lovingly and which the other casually allows to deteriorate until the plaster crumbles and the roof caves in, we may also conceive of each of our lives as a journey constituted by narration. Throughout our lives, things frequently happen without prior warning and bring about radical changes in the course of events, for example the first unexpected meeting with one’s future partner. In reconstructing our own lives as stories, we like to emphasize how particular occurrences have brought about and influenced subsequent events. Life is described as a goal-directed chain of events which, despite numerous obstacles and thanks to certain opportunities, has led to the present state of affairs, and which may yet have further unpredictable turns and unexpected developments in store for us. It is therefore not surprising that psychoanalysis should have incorporated the telling of the patient’s life story into the therapeutic process; indeed, many psychologists give the act of narration a central position in therapy (Linde 1993, Randall 1995).

The significance of narrative in human culture can be seen from the fact that written cultures seek their origins in myths which they then record for posterity. In an explanatory process rather like that of individual autobiographical narratives, historians then begin to inscribe the achievements of their forefathers and the progress of their nation.
down to the present in the cultural memory in the form of histories or stories. Other areas of culture and society also create their own histories. There is historical linguistics, which ‘narrates’ the development of European languages from proto-Indo-European to present-day Dutch, French, Slovenian or Hindi. And, in the same way, there are music history, literary history and the history of physics. The nation state has its own story. So does current progress in genetic engineering, and the rise and fall of institutions (such as mercantilism or slavery) are also represented in narrative form. Narrative provides us with a fundamental epistemological structure that helps us to make sense of the confusing diversity and multiplicity of events and to produce explanatory patterns for them.

Narratives are based on cause-and-effect relationships that are applied to sequences of events. In historiography, a number of different narrative explanatory models have been applied. From a safe distance one might – to borrow a metaphor from biology – talk about the birth, maturity and demise of a nation. One can also analyse the series of contingencies that have resulted in a particular state of being. One example of this might be the question of why Minnesota has come to have such a strong ethnic German community. (This cannot be described as the inevitable result of a developmental process but is rather related to the chance events of expulsion and resettlement in the age of the Counter-Reformation.) But there are also non-narrative models of historical explanation, such as those which assume that history follows certain natural laws, or those which conceptualize current events as recurrences of crucial moments in a nation’s history: 9/11 as a ‘repetition’ (also in the Freudian or Derridean sense) of Pearl Harbor.

Having said this, we may well ask: what is not some kind of narrative, or rather, how should narrative be defined in order to distinguish it from non-narrative discourse?

So far we have made use of the term narrative in a way that reflects its popular usage, namely with a multiple meaning. In order to arrive at an explanation for the particular type of narrative involved in a story, we must now turn to the useful distinctions made in narrative theory (also known as narratology), which will clear up at least some of the confusion.

We said above that narrative is derived from ‘narrate’ and that narration is a very widespread activity. Narrative is therefore closely bound up with the speech act of narrating and hence also with the figure of a narrator. Thus one could define everything narrated by a narrator as narrative. But what is it, exactly, that a narrator narrates? Is it a particular novel? Or is it the story that is presented in this novel?

At this point Gérard Genette’s distinction between the three meanings of the French word récit (‘narrative’) provides a way out of our dilemma. Genette draws a distinction between narration (the narrative act of the narrator), discours or récit proper (narrative as text or utterance) and histoire (the story the narrator tells in his/her narrative). The first two levels of narrative can be classed together as the narrative discourse (Fr. discours; Ger. Erzählerbericht) by putting together the narrative act and its product, thus making a binary distinction between them and the third level, the story (Fr. histoire; Ger. Geschichte). The story is then that which the narrative discourse reports, represents or signifies.

These distinctions enable us, for example, to account for the fact that the same story can be presented in various guises. The life story of Charlemagne may be told in a number of ways in different historical works, and the story of Snow White in Grimm’s version is totally different from modern reworkings or parodies of the story’s content. Whereas in the fairy tale the stepmother’s cruelty, with its cannibalistic traits, is
foregrounded, and eating in general plays an important role, in modern versions of the Snow White story the excessive cruelties of Grimm’s fairy-tale world are often eliminated, and instead the potentially scandalous role of Snow White in the household of the seven (male) dwarfs gives cause for speculation. Thus different narratives focus on quite different aspects of the story; or, more precisely, the stories that we reconstruct from different narrative texts often complement each other. By means of parody or by reflecting current issues and concerns, they fill the gaps that earlier versions of the ‘same story’ (fable) left in their presentation; or they simply rewrite the story, for example from a feminist viewpoint. There is, therefore, a level of the story (the fable) that may be taken as the starting point for all Snow White narratives. Moreover, there are numerous textual or narrative manifestations of this fable in the different sequences of events and character constellations, that is to say, in the different plots that constitute the level of the fictional worlds in the many Snow White narratives. The existing texts about Snow White differ from each other quite markedly despite their common core, the fable.

In this respect fictional narrative, whether in fairy tale, novel or television film, differs radically from historical writing. The author of a novel or a film script develops a fictional world and produces both the story and the narrative discourse that goes with its product, the narrative text. Historians, by contrast, construct the most convincing and consistent account of events possible from their sources (which may also be narratives). What is most important here is that they are not allowed to contradict the statements made by their sources without good reason (such as the unreliability of the author of a source text or problems with dating). The historian is not free to invent his/her own story; the only room for speculation is in the areas of indeterminacy between the fixed points provided by historical sources. Despite these restrictions, historical discourses do not tell a single, unambiguous story since each historian has a particular view of things and tends to emphasize certain aspects of the age and the events being described while omitting others.

History always has to do with perspective. No historian or novelist can ever reproduce in toto the (real or fictional) world, otherwise s/he would undergo the same fate as Tristram Shandy in Laurence Sterne’s novel of the same name (1759–67). After several hundred pages of narrative, Tristram has still not managed to describe his birth, since he is so carried away by the minutiae of the prehistory of his conception. But narrative also involves selection. Every history, moreover, can be traced back to a particular perspective. It betrays the view of the author, his/her nationality and place of origin, the age in which s/he writes (or wrote), and it is tailored to a readership which has certain prejudices, historical convictions and expectations. History as historiography is never objective, however great its commitment to telling the truth. History teaching in schools, for example, has traditionally subscribed to the notion of the nation state, one result of which has been an analysis of the state’s relations with other nations in terms of the friend/enemy binary oppositional metaphor. Another consequence of this is that the events of world history have been presented predominantly from ‘our’ (i.e. a European or Western) point of view. Events that were of consequence for the nation state tend to be consistently upgraded and included in the historiographer’s text and plot, while events and developments of central importance abroad are often relegated to the periphery or else left out altogether. History teaching in the West has therefore reflected the enduring Eurocentrism of Western democracies, and in this context the empires of the Chinese, the Moghul
Thus far, we have established that fictional narratives create fictional worlds, whereas historians collectively seek to represent one and the same real world in explanatory narrative and from a variety of different perspectives. As readers, we construct the story (characters, setting, events) from the narrative text of a novel, whereas in historical writing it is the historians who produce a story on the basis of their sources and set it down in verbal form. We may represent this as shown in Figure 1.1 below.

To return to the fairy tale: if one identifies narrative with story (fable), then representations of this story in other media are also narratives. In the English-speaking world it is therefore customary to analyse not only the novel and the film as narrative genres but also drama, cartoons, ballet and pantomime. In this sense, the ballet Sleeping Beauty, which presents an underlying story that also exists as a narrative in the form of a fairy tale, could be seen as an alternative manifestation of the same story (fable). The Russian Formalists, who were active in the 1920s and 1930s, coined the useful term fabula (E. fable) for this basic level of narrative. It can also be regarded as the source of a number of versions of the same story, in different media. In what follows I shall therefore make a distinction between the fable (story) and the more particular realization of the subject matter at the level of the plot, that is to say that level of the narrative which is reconstructed by the reader from the discourse as the narrative’s ‘story’. I will refer to this in future as the plot level or fictional world. (The Russian Formalists called it syuzhet, but this term is open to misunderstanding since the term sujet in other languages tends to refer to the thematic level of a narrative.)

Let us return to the question of how narrative is to be defined. In German-speaking countries, definitions tend to be rather narrow and relate to the figure of the narrator. This is bound up with the etymologically more closely related German expressions Erzähler (‘narrator’) and Erzählung (‘narration’). Thus, narrative is the story that the narrator tells. German research here continues the tradition of Goethe’s tripartite distinction between epic, lyric and drama whereby the epic is the prototypical narrative category. The epic has a bard, a narrator who tells the story. According to this traditional view there are, therefore, literary genres with an underlying story – drama, for example – but these are not genuinely narrative since they normally do not have a narrator persona as teller of the story. Narrative is therefore defined as ‘story plus narrator’, as is represented in Figure 1.2.
In such a conception of narrative, narrative is merely a subset of the genres that include a story.

In the Anglo-Saxon world, on the other hand, as a result of Seymour Chatman’s influential book *Story and Discourse* (1978), a broader definition of narrative has emerged, which also includes media other than purely verbal (oral or written) narrative discourses. Gerald Prince, in his standard work *A Dictionary of Narratology* (1987), still defines narrative thus:

**Narrative:** The recounting [. . .] of one or more real or fictitious EVENTS communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) NARRATORS to one, two or several (more or less overt) NARRATEES.

(Prince 2003: 58)

Chatman, on the other hand, defines *narrative* as a conjunction of discourse and story, but extends the definition of discourse to cover several media. Moreover, by analogy with the narrator in the traditional mould, he introduces the figure of a ‘cinematic narrator’ who is comparable to the narrator in the novel and fulfils a similar mediating function in the presentation of the story. Since the present introduction has been designed for the benefit of students pursuing introductory courses in a range of language and literature departments, I shall concentrate more on the traditional verbal narrative medium and consider film and drama only in certain chapters. Especially in the analysis of plot and action schemas, drama will figure prominently since the analysis of plot in the novel and the treatment of plot in drama are very largely in agreement.

The term *plot analysis* brings me to a further point, namely the significance of action sequences for the definition of narrative. Traditionally, a story is understood as a sequence of events that has a beginning, a middle and an end. It normally creates suspense as a result of complications in the middle part that are cleared up when these conflicts are resolved at the end of the work. The quotation from Prince cited above seeks to restrict narrative in a minimal version to ‘one [. . .] or several’ events. But this is only an extreme version of the thesis which holds that story and action exert a reciprocal influence on each other.

Such a mutually interdependent relationship between story and action is, for the most part, the norm – in most narratives the story is concerned with chains of events. Events are, therefore, a characteristic feature of narrated worlds. Many narrative genres rely almost exclusively on the reader’s interest in what happens next (‘And what happened then?’). Yet the primary concern in narratives is not actually chains of events.
but the fictional worlds in which the characters in the story live, act, think and feel. New theoretical proposals in narratology, such as possible-worlds theory (see Chapter 10) and ‘natural’ narratology (Fludernik 1996) have therefore focused on the existence of fictional characters in a fictional world. From the point of view of cognitive theory, acting, thinking and feeling are constitutive to human existence in this world. Therefore, the existence of a human character in and of itself will produce a minimal level of narrativity for the play or fiction in which s/he occurs. Rather than basing narrativity on plot or on the presence of a teller figure, these theories take the presence of a character to be sufficient to produce narrativity.

The emphasis on the ‘human’ character is crucial. One criterion of what makes a narrative a narrative is the requirement of having a human or human-like (anthropomorphic) protagonist at the centre. Texts describing genes during cellular fission are only ‘narrative’ to the extent that they outline sequences of events. But it is agreed among narratologists that ‘real’ narratives are those that have human protagonists or anthropomorphic characters (the talking hare in the fable, the speaking car, and so on). Even if not all narratives place the thoughts of the characters at the centre of the story, the representation of the interior world of the protagonists is characteristic of a fictional narrative since it is only in fiction that it is possible to see into the minds of other people (Hamburger 1957/1993). However, in order to take account of the discovery that sequences of events in factual texts are also in some sense narrative, I introduce the term narrative report for sequences of events and note that narratives typically include chains of events in report form, and that these reporting sections are also employed in non-narrative genres such as a biological essay on cellular fission.

A final criterion for what does or does not constitute a narrative results from the temporal location of what happens in a narrative. This also relates to the centrality of the protagonists as ‘real-world’ figures from a cognitive point of view. The existence of every human being is bound to a specific time and place. What happened before this moment is past, though fixed in memory, and what comes after will be the future, which will turn into the present and, ultimately, the past. One important distinction, therefore, between the lyric and the narrative is that poems frequently do not situate their speaker in a particular time or space, so that the existential location of the ego in time and space which is typical of narrative is missing. This also means that such poems cannot be classified as narrative.

Summarizing the criteria outlined above, we can now define narrative as follows.

A narrative (Fr. récit; Ger. Erzählung) is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure). It is the experience of these protagonists that narratives focus on, allowing readers to immerse themselves in a different world and in the life of the protagonists. In verbal narratives of a traditional cast, the narrator functions as the mediator in the verbal medium of the representation. Not all narratives have a foregrounded narrator figure, however. The narrator or narrative discourse shape the narrated world creatively and individualistically at the level of the text, and this happens particularly through the (re)arrangement of the temporal order in which events are presented and through the choice of perspective (point of view, focalization). Texts that are read as narratives (or ‘experienced’ in the case of drama or film) thereby instantiate their narrativity (Fr. narrativité; Ger. Narrativität).
The penultimate sentence of this definition refers to stylistic techniques in narratives which I will describe in detail in Chapter 4. For instance, narratives sometimes start out with a final state of affairs and then trace all the events leading up to it, as for example in One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) by Gabriel García Márquez. Likewise, narratives may choose between a number of different perspectives, for example that of portraying the events from the point of view of the narrator or of one of the characters, or of allowing the reader an insight into the thoughts of one character but not of the others. In films these effects are often achieved by the use of close-ups. These possibilities will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 8. Thus between the plot and the discourse levels of a narrative, various kinds of restructuring take place, which are also conditioned by the different media of representation. Dramas, films and novels shape their surface discourse in different ways.

In this chapter, we have seen that there are fictional (invented) and non-fictional narratives, and that there are verbal (novels and conversational narratives), visual (ballet) and verbal-visual (drama, film) narratives. Verbal narratives frequently have a narrator who produces the narrative discourse or narrative text. From the text the reader constructs the underlying world and story or action structure (also called the plot), which is a manifestation of the fable or network of motifs of the story. These relationships can be represented as in Figure 1.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Narrator’s report/text</th>
<th>Sequence of sounds and images</th>
<th>Danced events and stage setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>Short story</td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot level</td>
<td>Plot 1</td>
<td>Plot 2</td>
<td>Plot 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fable</td>
<td>Fable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.3 Fable, plot and discourse in different media
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