

Chapter 2

Defining narrative

The bare minimum

Simply put, narrative is *the representation of an event or a series of events*. “Event” is the key word here, though some people prefer the word “action.” Without an event or an action, you may have a “description,” an “exposition,” an “argument,” a “lyric,” some combination of these or something else altogether, but you won’t have a narrative. “My dog has fleas” is a description of my dog, but it is not a narrative because nothing happens. “My dog was bitten by a flea” is a narrative. It tells of an event. The event is a very small one – the bite of a flea – but that is enough to make it a narrative.

Few, if any, scholars would dispute the necessity of at least one event for there to be narrative, but there are a number who require more than this. Some require at least two events, one after the other (Barthes, Rimmon-Kenan). And more than a few go even further, requiring that the events be causally related (Bal, Bordwell, Richardson). To both of these camps, my examples of narrative above would appear too impoverished to qualify. In my own view and that of still others (Genette, Smith¹), the field of narrative is so rich that it would be a mistake to become invested in a more restrictive definition that requires either more than one event or the sense of causal connection between events. Both of the latter are more complex versions of narrative, and in their form and the need that brings them into being they are well worth study in their own right. But in my view the capacity to represent an event, either in words or in some other way, is the key gift and it produces the building blocks out of which all the more complex forms are built.

That said, it is important to note that most of us – scholars, readers, viewers – find it difficult sometimes to call some longer, more complex works narratives, even though they contain numerous examples of these little, and sometimes not so little, narrative building blocks. This is one of the reasons why there has been such a debate about what deserves the title of narrative. Marie-Laure Ryan put the matter well: narrative is a “fuzzy set defined at the center by a solid core of properties, but accepting various degrees of membership.”² John Bunyan’s

Grace Abounding (1666), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953), and Tom McHarg's *The Late-Nite Maneuvers of the Ultramundane* (1993) are full of narratives and micro-narratives, yet many would hesitate to call the works as a whole narratives. They just don't seem to have the cumulative effect of narrative. More than anything else, the cause of hesitation is the lack of *narrative continuity or coherence*. A longer text may have thematic coherence, as *The Waste Land* does, and still lack narrative coherence. Or a longer text may have nothing but quite recognizable narratives, as does a collection of short stories, and yet lack sufficient narrative connection between the narratives to be called a single narrative. By contrast, *picaresque novels*, like the classic *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) or Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), are considered narratives because the events, different as they may be, belong to the same chronology from beginning to end and share the involvement of at least one character.

There are, then, two major uses of the term narrative:

- 1) *Compact and definable*: this is the narrative unit that I am mostly focussing on in this chapter. This is the building block for longer narrative structures. Though people disagree on the definition of narrative at this level, it is still possible to do so and to be usefully consistent. One of the things I like about my definition is that it allows me to recognize many of the other definitions as definable narrative subsets and useful in their own right.
- 2) *Loose and generally recognizable*: these are the longer structures that we call narratives even though they may contain much non-narrative material. Most of these come in recognizable *genres*: tragedy, comedy, epic, short story, and an abundance of other genres of film, drama, poetry, and prose, either fictional or nonfictional. No one has yet come up with a precise way of determining when any long text no longer qualifies as narrative and should be called something else. But usually the defining characteristic we look for at this level is some kind of narrative coherence.

Going back to the compact form of narrative, the definition that I have chosen is controversial in yet another way, since there are a number of scholars who would also dispute my other term – “representation” – as much too broad. Here, for example, is a definition of narrative that appeared in the first edition of Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987):

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. . . . [A] dramatic performance representing (many
fascinating) events does not constitute a narrative . . . , since these

events, rather than being recounted, occur directly on stage. On the other hand, even such possibly uninteresting texts as “The man opened the door,” “The goldfish died,” and “The glass fell on the floor” are narratives, according to this definition.

In the second edition of his *Dictionary* (2003), Prince broadened his definition of narrative, but as he notes there, scholars “with tradition on their side” would still maintain “that narrative is essentially a mode of verbal presentation and involves the linguistic *recounting* or *telling* of events.”³ For these scholars a narrative requires a *narrator*. Films and plays, because they only rarely use narrators and rely instead on acting and other elements to communicate the story, fall outside their definition of narrative. But for many other scholars, requiring a narrator is a needless constraint. For them, the narrator is one of a number of instruments – among them actors and cameras – that can be used in the narrative process of representing events. As we noted in the first chapter, even fixed, silent instruments like paintings can convey the events of narrative. In this book, I accept this larger definition of narrative. I do so in part because it allows us to look at the full range of the most interesting and vital aspect of the field: the complex transaction that involves events, their manner of representation (whether it be by narrator, actor, paint, or some other means), and the audience. The difference between events and their representation is the difference between *story* (the event or sequence of events) and *narrative discourse* (how the story is conveyed). The distinction is immensely important.

Representation or presentation?

Representation is a vexed term in other ways as well. Those who favor Aristotelian distinctions sometimes use the word *presentation* for stories that are acted and representation (re-presentation) for stories that are told or written. The difference highlights the idea that in theater we experience the story as immediately present while we do not when it is conveyed through a narrator. My own view is that both forms of narrative are mediated stories and therefore involved in re-presentation, conveying a story that at least *seems* to pre-exist the vehicle of conveyance. A good counter-argument to my position asks: Where is this story before it is realized in words or on stage? The answer, so the argument goes, is: Nowhere. If that is the case, then all renderings of stories, on the stage or on the page, are *presentations* not representations. The extent to which stories are at the mercy of the way they are rendered is an important issue, and I will return to it in this chapter and later in this book. But for my definition, I will stick to the term “representation.” I do this in part because the word is so commonly used in the way I am using it and in part because it describes at least the feeling that we often have that the story somehow pre-exists the narrative, even though this may be an illusion.

Story and narrative discourse

The difference between story and narrative discourse is, to begin with, a difference between two kinds of time and two kinds of order. It gives rise to what Seymour Chatman has called the “*chrono-logic*” of narrative:

What makes narrative unique among text-types is its “*chrono-logic*,” its doubly temporal logic. Narrative entails movement through time not only “*externally*” (the duration of the presentation of the novel, film, play) but also “*internally*” (the duration of the sequence of events that constitute the plot). The first operates in that dimension of narrative called Discourse . . . , the second in that called Story. . . .

Non-narrative text-types do not have an internal time sequence, even though, obviously, they take time to read, view, or hear. Their underlying structures are static or atemporal.⁴

In other words, when we read a “*non-narrative text-type*” like an essay, the only time involved is the time it takes to read, and the only order is that of the structure of the essay. But when we read a narrative, we are aware of, on the one hand, the time of reading and the order in which things are read, and, on the other hand, the time the story events are supposed to take and the order in which they are supposed to occur. When you think about it, it is remarkable that we have this gift that allows us to hear or say things in one way and to understand them in another. We can squeeze a day’s worth of events into one sentence:

When I woke up, I packed two loaded guns and a ski mask, drove to the bank, robbed it, and was back in time for dinner.

Perhaps even more interestingly we can tell the same story backwards and still convey both the timing and the chronological sequence of events:

I was back in time for dinner, having robbed the bank to which I had driven with a ski mask and two loaded guns just after my nap.

We can also make many other changes in the narrative discourse and still deal with the same story. We can, for example, change the point of view (from first to third person) and expand the narrative discourse to dwell on a moment in the middle of this series of actions and still communicate with fidelity the same order of events:

He loved that old familiar, yet always strangely new, sensation of being someone else inside his ski mask, a pistol in each hand, watching the frightened teller count out a cool million. Nothing like it to wake a guy up. Nothing like it to give him a good appetite.

As we noted in Chapter One, narrative discourse is infinitely malleable. It can expand and contract, leap backward and forward, but as we take in information from the discourse we sort it out in our minds, reconstructing an order of events that we call the story. The story can take a day, a minute, a lifetime, or eons. It can be true or false, historical or fictional. But insofar as it is a story, it has its own length of time and an order of events that proceeds chronologically from the earliest to the latest. The order of events and the length of time they are understood to take in the story are often quite different from the time and order of events in the narrative discourse.

Can a story go backward?

In 1991, Martin Amis published a novel, *Time's Arrow*, in which everything goes backwards:

First I stack the clean plates in the dishwasher. . . . So far so good. Then you select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short wait. Various items get gulped up into my mouth, and after skillful massage with tongue and teeth I transfer them to the plate for additional sculpture with knife and fork and spoon. . . . Next you face the laborious business of cooling, of reassembly, of storage, before the return of these foodstuffs to the Superette, where, admittedly, I am promptly and generously reimbursed for my pains. Then you tool down the aisles, with trolley or basket, returning each can and packet to its rightful place.⁵

But even here, I would argue that the backward representation of events is an extreme version of Chatman's "chrono-logic," or a kind of deranged narrative discourse (indeed, it baffles even the *first-person* narrator of this novel). Notice how, in reading, your mind automatically sorts out the forward motion of the story. In fact, much of the curious appeal of this writing depends on this automatic reconstruction. And this reconstruction of the story is required, too, for the overall effect of this novel. As we go further along in our reading – that is, further backward in the life of the central figure – we become aware of early events and actions that cast a devastating moral light on his later opinions and behavior. I won't give away what we learn, but the point is that the novel depends for its full effect on our reconstructing the true temporal order of events. So, the answer to the question Can a story go backward? is No. All stories, like all action (except possibly at a subatomic level), go in one direction only – forward in time. Narrative discourse, by contrast, can go in any temporal direction its creator chooses.

Where story time and the time of the narrative discourse coincide most frequently is in the separate scenes of a play, where the time and order of events in the story are often the same as the actions and dialogue of actors in "real"

time. Aristotle saw this “unity” of time as a virtue in theatrical work (though even in classical drama scene breaks could allow leaps of story time, assisted by the chorus). In the renaissance, when his unities were revived and codified, dramatists like Corneille and Racine often adhered strictly to this “rule.” More recently, filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, John Cassavetes, and Andy Warhol, in their very different ways, have capitalized on film’s capacity to document the moment-by-moment flow of life. But even with the difference between action time and viewing time eliminated, we are almost always called upon to sort out a story from the narrative discourse. This is because people on stage or in films talk, and as they talk we learn about events in which they are involved and which extend way beyond the boundaries of what we see on stage. In *Oedipus the King*, for example, a play that adheres strictly to Aristotle’s rule, Oedipus must reconstruct his entire life. And the audience joins him in his effort, slowly piecing together a long, terrible story in which Oedipus, without knowing it, has been the central player.

Problems for English speakers: story, discourse, plot, fabula, and sjuzet

Most speakers of English grow up using **story** to mean what we are referring to here as **narrative**. When in casual conversation, English speakers say they’ve heard a “good story,” they usually aren’t thinking of the story as separate from the telling of it. When a child wants you to read her favorite story, she often means by that every word on every page. Leave a word out and you are not reading the whole story. But as I hope will become clear as we go on, the distinction between story and narrative discourse is vital for an understanding of how narrative works.

There is a parallel problem with the term **narrative discourse**, especially if we take narrative to mean all modes of conveying stories. It is a little awkward in English to apply the term “discourse” to elements like montage or camera work in films, or design in painting. And yet it is true that these things are a kind of language or discourse that we understand and can read, and out of which we can reconstruct a story.

A number of scholars prefer to use the distinction **fabula** and **sjuzet**, rather than story and narrative discourse. But as it usually refers to the way events are ordered in the narrative, sjuzet is a less inclusive term than narrative discourse. Other words for sjuzet are Aristotle’s **muthos** or **mythos** as well as the familiar **plot**. Unfortunately, plot is used in several other conflicting ways. In common English usage, it refers not to the order of events in the narrative but to its opposite, story. More narrowly, it has been used to mean the shaping principle or dynamic that is revealed in the way the story is held together (Ricoeur, Brooks, Richardson; see also Phelan’s “narrative progression”). Finally, it can be used to mean a type of story (as in “the revenge plot”). I will be drawing on this last

meaning of plot in Chapter Four, when I introduce the concept of the *masterplot*. But the point of this brief discussion is to let you know that there are alternative terms, should you want to use them. My own position is that the distinction of “story” and “narrative discourse” is now widely enough used in the discussion of narrative to serve us well.

So far we have established three distinctions: **narrative** is the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*; **story** is an *event* or sequence of events (the *action*); and **narrative discourse** is those events as represented. Can we break this down any further? Are there other identifiable parts of narrative that recur in *all narrative situations*? There have been efforts to subdivide narrative discourse into: 1) the order in which events are recounted (*plot* or *sjuzet*) and 2) “style” or “discourse,” but I find that these distinctions tend to blend into each other. Nor can I think of other elements that are necessary to, or defining qualities of, narrative discourse. This is especially the case given the breadth of our approach to this dimension of narrative. Stories, in other words, can be conveyed in a variety of media, with a variety of devices, none of which, including the device of a narrator, will *necessarily* be present in any particular narrative.

But the concept of story can be further subdivided at least once. There are two components to every story: the *events* and the *entities* (sometimes referred to as “existents”) involved in the events. Indeed, without entities, there would be no events. What are events but the actions or reactions of entities? (Note that the reverse is not true, since there can be entities without events.) As a term, “entity” seems cold and abstract, especially when applied to *characters* (entities that act and react more or less like human beings). Most stories do involve characters. Even when the stories are about animals or extraterrestrial creatures or animated objects (Ronald the light bulb), “character” seems the appropriate term. The capability of characters to act with *intention* is so fundamentally important to our own lives as human beings that there are theorists (Bał, Doležel, Palmer) who would draw the line here, limiting the definition of narrative to the representation of events involving one or more characters. Here again my definition is broader. When scientists give accounts of the behavior of an atom or the interaction of chemical elements or the history of shifting land-masses or the evolution of planetary systems it would be misleading to speak of them as involving characters yet these scientists are nonetheless deploying our narrative gift, that is, telling stories about the physical world. So, for better or worse, we’ll stick with “entities” as the necessary element in all stories and “characters” as those entities with human qualities.

One other possible defining ingredient of story is *setting*. Though I think it is still a useful term, setting has fallen from favor because it suggests a kind of container in which the entities are found and the events take place. When you look closely at narratives, it is often difficult to disentangle setting from what's going on and who's doing it. A number of scholars have preferred instead to speak of a *narrative world* or *storyworld* that accumulates, growing larger and more complex as we absorb the narrative. Alan Palmer has gone so far as to argue that storyworld should be considered a third defining feature of narrative along with story and narrative discourse. We'll take up the way narrative makes worlds in Chapter Twelve, but by the definition I am using, neither a setting nor even a world is essential. "I fell down" tells a story with no setting and not much of a world either. Yet it is a perfectly valid narrative.

The mediation (construction) of story

One important point that the distinction between story and discourse brings out is that we never see a story directly, but instead always pick it up *through* the narrative discourse. The story is always mediated – by a voice, a style of writing, camera angles, actors' interpretations – so that what we call the story is really something that we construct. We put it together from what we read or see, often by inference.

But wait a minute: what really comes first, the story or the discourse?

It may look like there is a story out there that pre-exists the narrative discourse and therefore is "mediated" by it. But isn't this an illusion? After all, as we noticed above, the story only comes to life when it is narrativized. For Jonathan Culler, there is at bottom an ambiguity here which will never be resolved. He calls it the "double logic" of narrative, since at one and the same time story appears both to precede *and* to come after narrative discourse. On the one hand, a story does seem to have a separate existence, lying out in some virtual realm while the narrative discourse endeavors to communicate it. This effect is especially powerful in stories that are narrated in the past tense, since the narration seems to start at a point after the completion of the story. On the other hand, before the narrative discourse is expressed, there is no story.⁶ Tolstoy, for example, recounted that, when he was writing *Anna Karenina*, he found that, after Vronsky and Anna had finally made love and Vronsky had returned to his lodging, he, Tolstoy, discovered to his amazement that Vronsky was preparing to commit suicide. He wrote on, always in the past tense, but faster and faster, to see how the story would turn out.⁷ In other words, without first creating the narrative discourse, he would never know the story.

One thing that strengthens the sense that stories are always mediated is that they can be adapted. Cinderella, for example, or the Faust story are not bound by any particular discourse but can travel from one set of actors or film or prose rendition to another, and yet still remain recognizably the same story. As Claude Bremond puts it, a story is “neither words, nor images, nor gestures, but the events, situations, and behaviors signified by the words, images, and gestures.”⁸

But then what exactly is this story that travels? If we never know it except as it is mediated in one way or another, how can we say for sure that a story is a particular story and not some other story? We’ve all seen the Cinderella story in many different versions. A diligent scholar in the nineteenth century dug up roughly 1100 versions of Cinderella (and that was long before Disney’s 1950 animated feature film). Leaving a film, I might say: “That was a Cinderella story,” and people might agree. But what if they disagree? How would we settle the dispute? Leaving a production of *King Lear*, I might say: “That was a Cinderella story,” and find that some people strenuously disagree. I would then point out how it features a beautiful, honest, virtuous sister (Cordelia) who, because of her wicked, selfish, dishonest sisters (Goneril and Regan), is neglected and cut off from the family fortune. My opponents, though, would point out quite rightly all the differences: that Cordelia is not forced to work as a scullery maid, that there is no fairy godmother, no coach, no ball, no glass slipper, and for that matter no happy ending. Moreover, most of our attention is devoted to events involving other people, like Lear and Gloucester. I would probably lose the argument, but in the process we would have raised an interesting question. What is necessary for the story of Cinderella to be the story of Cinderella? Between the traditional fairy tale and *King Lear*, when does the story of Cinderella stop being Cinderella and start being something else? Is a magical transformation of Cinderella necessary? Is the ball necessary? Is the Prince’s search for Cinderella necessary? Is the happy ending necessary?

This is a question that can never be answered with precision, in part because each of us reads differently. But for that reason, the pursuit of the issue can still be interesting, if only to explore these differences. In the dispute above, it may be that the Cordelia story dominates my perceptions of *Lear*, and for that reason I am more inclined to see the framework of a Cinderella variant in this tragedy than others. And this perceptual bias of mine might be interesting (at least for people who are interested in me or the kind of people I might represent). But what permits these differences in reading to begin with is the condition we observed at the outset of this section: *story is always mediated (constructed) by narrative discourse*. We are always called upon to be active participants in narrative, because receiving the story depends on how we in

turn construct it from the discourse. Are stories, then, at the mercy of the reader and how diligently he or she reads? To a certain degree this is true. But most stories, if they succeed – that is, if they enjoy an audience or readership – do so because they have to some extent successfully controlled the process of story construction. Where differences between readings become fraught with significance is in the area of interpretation. My tendency to feature the Cinderella elements in *King Lear* colors the way I interpret the play.

Can stories be real?

The constructed nature of stories led Jean-Paul Sartre famously to announce that there are no true stories. In this view, all of our nonfictional understandings, from the smallest anecdote to histories, biographies, cosmologies, even stories told by science, do not refer to the “real world,” which is utterly disorganized or at least utterly unknowable. On this raw flux, we impose the stories that give our lives meaning. Variations on this idea have gained wide currency since Sartre’s 1938 novel, *Nausea*. But opponents point out that there is something very like a story in the cycles of life and death, since these have the beginnings, middles, and ends that stories usually have. They also point out that our lives depend on the stories scientists tell us about the way our bodies work. Once you start thinking along this line, more examples come to mind. In other words, though stories are always constructed and always involve our willing collaboration for their completion, that does not mean that they are necessarily false. But the healthy side of this suspicion of stories is the way it has allowed us to see how easily and in how many ways stories that have very little truth can pass for the truth. Whatever your view of this philosophical issue, it is surely the case that we live much of our lives in and among stories. This is one way in which stories are quite real and it makes the subject of narrative well worth trying to understand. We’ll return to this issue in Chapter Eleven.

Constituent and supplementary events

The question concerning when retellings of a story like Cinderella can no longer claim the name of Cinderella leads us to another, broader issue: that of the relative importance of the events in a story. Both Roland Barthes and Seymour Chatman argue for a distinction between constituent and supplementary events. Barthes uses the terms “nuclei” (*noyaux*) and “catalyzers” (*catalyses*) for this distinction, and Chatman uses the terms “kernels” and “satellites.”⁹ In this analysis, the *constituent events* (“nuclei,” “kernels”) are necessary for the story to be the story it is. They are the turning points, the events that drive the story forward and that lead to other events. The *supplementary events*

(“catalyzers,” “satellites”) are not necessary for the story. They don’t lead anywhere. They can be removed and the story will still be recognizably the story that it is.

On the face of it, this distinction would appear to create a hierarchy in which constituent events are rated more highly than supplementary events. But here we need to be careful. Constituent events are only necessarily more important than supplementary events *insofar as we are concerned with the sequence of events that constitute the story itself*. But supplementary events can be very important for the meaning and overall impact of the narrative. Barthes puts this well: “A nucleus [constituent event] cannot be deleted without altering the story, but neither can a catalyzer [supplementary event] without altering the discourse.”¹⁰ In short, there is more to narrative than story. And in that “more” can be much that gives a work its power and significance.

In James Whale’s 1931 film adaptation of Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*, the events surrounding the creation of the monster are greatly elaborated beyond what Shelley gave us. In Shelley’s novel very little attention is paid to how the monster is put together, but in Whale’s version we are given a host of supplementary micro-events involving 1930s high-tech instrumentation. The thickening of narrative texture at this point expresses a shift in cultural attention toward the technology of production – a shift that had evolved during the 113 years since Mary Shelley first published her novel. With this particular enlargement of supplementary business, Whale could load up Shelley’s nineteenth-century story about the consequences of scientific over-reaching with twentieth-century anxieties about our relationship with technology.

To take another example, a key event of the story in Jean Renoir’s 1938 film classic, *Grand Illusion*, is the downing of a plane in World War I. The French officers Captain de Boeldieu and Lieutenant Maréchal are shot down behind the German lines and captured by troops under the command of General von Rauffenstein (played by Erich von Stroheim). Yet this major constituent event of the story is not shown in the film. At the outset, we see the French officers, preparing to depart. We then find ourselves in the German encampment, where shortly the two officers are brought in through the door. The only visual trace of the first major event of the story is the sling in which Lieutenant Maréchal’s arm gracefully reposes. What we are invited to dwell on during the long opening stretch of the narrative discourse is a series of micro-events – a round of dining and conversation in the German general’s headquarters – none of which is necessary for the *story*. But these events do a great deal to establish the ambiance of a world on the verge of extinction, marked by aristocratic courtesy and camaraderie among men of breeding, even though they may be at war.

Briefly, to review, **constituent events** are events that are necessary for the story, driving it forward. **Supplementary events** are events that do not drive the story forward and without which the story would still remain intact. Naturally, a great deal of the energy, moral significance and revelatory power of a story are released during its constituent events. Lear's division of his kingdom, Macbeth's murder of the king – these constituent events are moments when we see what the protagonist is made of. They are also the moments in which the future is determined. In these regards, the importance of constituent events should not be underrated. But as I have shown above, supplementary events invariably have their own impact and can carry a considerable amount of the narrative's burden of meaning. They also raise an interesting question that constituent events do not: Why were they included? Since they are not necessary to the story, why did the author feel compelled to put them into the narrative? Asking these questions is often a very profitable thing to do in the interpretation of narrative.

Just as a language always changes as long as it is alive, so stories are constantly changing in not only their constituent and supplementary events, but their characters, settings, and a whole range of finer and finer details of form and content. In the ancient German *Faustbuch*, in the two versions of Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* (1604 and 1616), in Goethe's long, barely performable two-part drama, *Faust* (1808 and 1831), in Thomas Mann's 1947 novel, *Doctor Faustus* – in all four of these immensely different works we recognize the bone structure of the same story about a man who made a pact with the devil for powers far beyond those of other mortals. We call it the Faust story. Yet almost everything in the story is open to revision, including the name of the central character, whether he falls in love, whether he has children, what craft he practices, whether he is punished for his sins, even whether he lives or dies. Almost all of the narratives of Shakespeare and Chaucer are patchworks of such revisions. The nature of art and culture seems to require this constancy of change. And yet, at the same time, we recognize the persistence of a story as it shows up in different literary incarnations. So if change is inevitable, so too is recurrence. Elements of the story persist even as they are subject to change.

Narrativity

There is one more topic, narrativity, that needs some mention in this chapter on the definition of narrative. From time to time so far, I have been using as examples tiny narratives like "I fell down" and "She drove the car to work" to

illustrate how narrative works. And you may have understood in the abstract how the terms “narrative” and “story” apply to these strings of words. But given the way we customarily use these terms, it somehow does not feel right to apply them in these cases. One way to put this is that these narratives lack “narrativity.” We don’t have the sense of someone “telling a story,” of a performance, of narrative “for its own sake.” Narrativity is a vexed issue, and as with many issues in the study of narrative there is no definitive test that can tell us to what degree narrativity is present. Do we, for example, need more than one event for there to be narrativity?

She ate lunch. Then she drove the car to work.

In this instance, the additional event does not help a great deal. In other words, the increase in narrativity is fractional at best. Yet we don’t necessarily need to pile on elements like development, rising action, setting, or a recognizable narrative voice to shift this modest narrative into a higher register of narrativity. Narrativity is a matter of degree that does not correlate to the number of devices, qualities or, for that matter, words that are employed in the narrative.

Brooding, she ate lunch. Then she drove the car to work.

The addition of that one simple word, “brooding,” does much to augment narrativity – that is, the feeling that now we are reading a story. And this may simply be because the word itself is more common to narrative than it is to ordinary discourse. Or it may be because the word gives depth to the character (she has a mind and there is something troubling it).

Discussions of narrativity can quickly become a tangled web, with scholars putting stress on the importance of different narrative elements – a narrative thread (Richardson), a narrative dilemma (Sturges), a “play of suspense/curiosity/surprise” (Sternberg, 326), a sense of cause and effect (Branigan), an “ability to bring a world to life” (Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 111), “mediated experientiality” (Fludernik, 50). But most (though not all) would accept two propositions about narrativity: that it is, in Suzanne Keen’s succinct words, “the set of qualities marking narrative” (121) and that it is a matter of degree. Thus, where *Jane Eyre* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Return of the Jedi* abound in narrativity, those texts I mentioned at the start of this chapter are so short on narrativity that for many they don’t qualify as narratives at all – for many, but not necessarily all, which is to say that there will always be gray areas like these in a field like narrative that has so much to do with subjective human response. I’ll be producing more gray areas for you in the next chapter.

Selected secondary resources

Since the first edition of this book appeared, the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* has been published. This is an impeccably edited, truly comprehensive volume and should serve as a first reference for terms and distinctions for some time to come. For much more compact introductions, there are at least three good ones that focus primarily on narrative as a verbal form: Gerald Prince's enduringly useful *Dictionary of Narratology* (revised and updated in 2003) and two fine recent texts, Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* and Suzanne Keen's *Narrative Form*. A good overview of the specific issue of defining narrative can be found in the third chapter of Brian Richardson's *Unlikely Stories*. Richardson arrives at a position quite opposed to my own. Two very accessible texts that expand the scope of analysis to include film as well as prose fiction are Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* and his *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Before any of these texts, there was Roland Barthes's "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," which remains one of the best and most compact introductions to the functioning of narrative. For a searching inquiry into the story–discourse distinction, see the Conclusion to Marie-Laure Ryan's *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (especially 261–7). The ninth chapter of Jonathan Culler's *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* ("Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative") develops the apparent paradox of the "double-logic of narrative," whereby neither story nor narrative discourse can be seen as clearly preceding the other. For treatments of the concept of narrativity that go well beyond what I have presented here, see Philip J. M. Sturgess's *Narrativity: Theory and Practice* and Gerald Prince's review of more recent scholarship in his compact essay, "Revisiting Narrativity" in Grünzweig and Solbach's *Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context* (43–51).

Additional primary texts

Of narratives that put a strain on the relationship between narrative discourse and story, the most commonly cited is not an experimental twentieth-century novel but the extraordinarily enjoyable eighteenth-century comic novel *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) by Laurence Sterne. There are numerous examples of modernist novels that place considerable demands on the reader's quest for story, among them, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922), James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1940), Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1952), Alain Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth* (1959), William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959), Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970). As for narratives that go from end to beginning, few are so thoroughgoing at the molecular level in the manner of Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (mentioned above). One that comes close is the short story "Journey to the Source" (1944) by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier. Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) and Elizabeth Howard's novel *The Long View* (1995) move backward in time through a succession of forward-moving segments of narrative.

Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal* (1978) similarly moves backward scene by scene, and on November 20, 1997, the American sitcom *Seinfeld* screened its own version of Pinter's backward narration in an episode titled "The Betrayal" (coily underscoring the theft by naming Elaine's boyfriend "Pinter"). A fascinating final example is Christopher Nolan's "backward thriller" *Memento* (2001), a film premised on the neurological condition of "anterograde memory loss."