

Narrative Theory / Narrative Fiction

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1. Introduction

This paper outlines the way in which I have used recent narrative theory to inform an advanced undergraduate creative writing unit in narrative fiction, one I have taught for the past few years at Curtin University of Technology. The curriculum includes Theresa de Lauretis on desire and narrative, Paul Ricoeur on time and narrative and Cathy Caruth on trauma and narrative, amongst others, and aims to give students an understanding of the productive links that can be made between recent narrative theory and the practice of writing narrative fiction. In this article I will discuss the teaching approach I have taken and showcase some of the interesting and dynamic ways students have responded to this curriculum.

2. Embedding Narrative Theory in Narrative Praxis

Earlier this year in a feature article for the *London Review of Books*, Frank Kermode began with the sly comment that the word “narratology” had never made into the Oxford English Dictionary. I was amused to find a brief letter from a fellow Australian – James Grieve at the Australian National University – in the letters section of the following edition. Grieve noted that whilst “narratology” mightn’t appear in the print edition of the OED, it was certainly there in the updated OED online. The effect, of course, was to make Kermode look rather out of date.

Chris Baldick’s *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines narratology as “a term used since 1969 to denote the branch of literary study devoted to the analysis of narratives, and more specifically of forms of narration and varieties of narrator” (166). Baldick also mentions the tendency of the term to be associated with structuralism although, he notes, “older studies of narrative forms and devices, as far back as Aristotle’s *Poetics* (4th century BCE) can also be regarded as narratological works.” (166)

I am using the terms “narrative theory” and “narratology” somewhat interchangeably in this article to denote critical work that is broadly devoted to the analysis of narratives. Some of the critical texts I make use of in the curriculum I am about to discuss clearly belong to the structuralist canon, but others do not. Whilst my use of the term narratology is not intended to refer exclusively to the structuralist banner, there is an acknowledgement that needs to be made to the work of structuralists like Propp, Greimas, Todorov and Genette, for their focus on, and interest in, explaining *how* narratives come to mean what they mean. This kind of work remains highly relevant to writers of narrative fiction, although one needs to acknowledge that the formal “grammar” of narrative proposed by the structuralists seems a bit clunky and unnecessarily scientific by today’s standards; much of this approach has been superseded to some extent by the poststructuralism.

When I returned to my teaching position at Curtin University at the beginning of 2002, after two years of leave, I took over the teaching of the third-year undergraduate fiction units unit that for many years had been taught by Elizabeth Jolley. Having been somewhat immersed in literary and narrative theory during my leave, I was keen to develop a curriculum for final-year narrative fiction students that set out quite deliberately to make connections between critical and creative work. I had in mind a creative writing curriculum that used critical work on narrative as both a source of inspiration and a lens through which to begin or transform a student writer’s narrative fiction.

Rather than encouraging students to work in ficto-criticism, or in overtly non-linear or anti-narrative fiction, as is more often done when bringing contemporary theory into the creative writing classroom, I was keen to encourage my students to get better at writing stories that actually demonstrated some understanding of those aspects of narrative fiction that coerce a reader to read on. What drives narrative? What makes reading compelling? How do good stories seduce us? And finally, and most importantly, how can you, or how *do* you, apply what you know about how narrative works when it comes to the construction of your own narrative fiction? As we all know, it is one thing to know something intellectually and another thing to be able to apply that knowledge successfully in practice. This is one reason why there are so many would-be writers in the world, and yet so few who can actually produce the goods.

3. The Curriculum: an Overview

In preparing the curriculum for the advanced prose fiction workshop, I was keen to avoid the approach to fiction which had already been taken in the intermediate second-year level units in our department and mirrored in so many of the textbooks of creative writing teachers, including Janet Burroway's very useful "how-to" – *Writing Fiction* – and others by Kate Grenville and so forth. The usual approach is a solid but very old-fashioned "elements of fiction" approach that walks students through the tools and techniques of writing fiction: character, point-of-view, dialogue, structure or plot and so forth. It is a useful but rather introverted approach, one that forms a good curriculum at an intermediate or second-year level, but which I felt the students needed to move beyond in their final year. It is also limited in that it assumes a certain kind of fiction to be the intended outcome. Following on from this approach in the first-semester second-year fiction unit at Curtin, the students spend a semester focussing on genre in short fiction. The Advanced Prose Workshop unit that is the focus of this paper follows on from that genre unit, becoming the first-semester third-year unit for students who have followed prose fiction through the course of their degree. My aim in extensively re-inventing this advanced-level curriculum was to open out the discussion of narrative fiction to engage quite deliberately with that body of work we might loosely call narrative theory or narratology. In fact, the students completing the Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Cultural Studies at Curtin have been engaging aspects of narrative theory and critical theory since the beginning of their degree, via core units we call Cultures, Identities and Texts. So while Advanced Prose Workshop is part of a staged curriculum within the Creative Writing major, it is also an attempt to compliment and parallel work going in the cultural studies component of the degree.

The unit outcomes aim to equip students to be able to explain the connections between narrative theory and practice, to be able to use narratology to explain the ways in which contemporary writers are working with narrative fiction and, of course, to be able to initiate, develop, revise and re-work their own narrative fiction projects in a manner that is informed by critical practice. The curriculum has been developed using a student-centred approach. It runs as a three hour seminar once a week for twelve weeks, with up to twenty-five students in the seminar and students are expected to be directly involved in the discussion of set readings each week and in writing during the seminar. Aside from this, particular weeks are set aside solely for critiquing work-in-progress.

During the course of the twelve-week semester, weekly topics include Finding the Story, The Narrator and Narrative Modes, Time and Narrative, Desire and Narrative, Trauma and Narrative and Narrative Contestation. The curriculum's set text is an anthology of contemporary international short stories – Daniel Halpern's *The Art of the Story* – along with a variety of articles that the students access electronically via the Curtin Library and Information service's electronic reserve system. During any given Key Topic week, the three hour seminar is divided into two halves: in the first half of the seminar we discuss the set critical reading in relation to two short stories from the Halpern anthology and a list of set focus questions; in the second half we write and the writing exercises are directly linked to the focus of the first half of the seminar. This synergy between thinking critically about a given aspect of narratology and the writing itself, carried out in the same three hour session, is, I believe, the most crucial aspect of this curriculum's success. The fresh shadow of the discussion of key critical ideas falls across the writer's page.

4. A Sample Key Topic: Time and Narrative

I would like to focus on an example of a Key Topic to demonstrate the connections being made between narrative theory and the practice of writing narrative fiction in this unit. The key topic I've chosen as an example is Time and Narrative.

The students prepare for the seminar by reading, in this case two short stories (Hanif Kureishi's "Intimacy" and Richard Ford's "The Optimists") and a chapter from Jago Morrison's *Contemporary Fiction*, "Time and Narrative." In the first year I ran the unit, I had the students read excerpts from Gerard Prince and Paul Ricoeur but many found these readings too dense. I've more recently switched to Jago Morrison, who paraphrases some of what was in the earlier articles and also discusses, quite usefully, Einsteinian concepts of time. His chapter walks the students through examples of the way in which the work of critical theorists working on concepts of time, including Paul Ricoeur, has fed through to fiction to affect both subject matter and narrative technique used by contemporary writers such as Martin Amis with his novel *Time's Arrow*. Morrison also puts up a good argument for movement in the other direction, explaining how fiction by Jorge Luis Borges has pre-empted much critical work on time and narrative including work by Paul Ricoeur. I also refer students to a very useful website put together by Tony Thwaites and several honours students at the University of Queensland. This site, titled

“Reading Time” begins with two wonderful quotes, one from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* – “I have often thought since on looking back over that strange time that it was that small act, trivial in itself, that striking of that match, that determined the whole aftercourse of both our lives,” and one from Groucho Marx – “Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read,” asking, in this latter case, what does the second sentence do to the first?

The focus questions we discuss in the seminar, which are meant to be starting points for the tutorial discussion begin with broad questions like:

- What is the relationship between time and narration?;
- How might it be useful for a writer of narrative fiction to consider this relationship, rather than take it for granted?

I move on to questions directed at the set short stories. We read Hanif Kureishi’s “Intimacy” and I ask the students to think about the extent to which the ending of this particular story is contained in the beginning and the beginning contained in the end. To what extent is your reading (your own making sense) of Kureishi’s story linear or non-linear, I ask. Then, in relation to Richard Ford’s short story “Optimists”:

- How is the protagonist’s life structured in/by time? And why is it that Ford can write the sentence, “All that happened next is what you would expect to happen,” half way through the story and yet still compel us to read on? Is it what you expected to happen? Why?

In the second half of the seminar, the students work on one or two writing exercises. I adjust these each semester, depending on feedback from the students, but most recently they ran as follows:

1. (a) Write a story in less than 150 words. You can summarise/re-tell an existing story if you want to.
 - (b) Now reverse the sequence of events (i.e. tell it backwards)
 - (c) Is it still a narrative? Is it still a story? Does it work or doesn’t it? If not, why not?

OR

2. Write a short story or a sequence from a longer work in which you use one or more temporal loop.

OR

3. Write a short story or scene from a longer piece of work beginning with the phrase: "There was no time."

Work on assessment pieces begins in the writing time provided during seminar time but students take away these writings and develop and re-work them before bringing them back to the seminar group in the context of a seminar devoted entirely to peer critique of work-in-progress.

5. Student Responses

I want to take you now into an excerpt from a short story written by a third year undergraduate student from the Advanced Prose Workshop unit. The story is titled "The Letter" and its author is Mark Welker. Mark began this work in response to one of the writing exercises to do with time and narrative. This excerpt of the finished work is reproduced here with kind permission of the author:

This was not the Africa Will had dreamt of. The long stare of the salt flats bore down on him from every direction. It was no longer clear which way he had come, and in which he was going. All that was left to give bearing was the blackened corpse of a water buffalo lying behind him, a sagging tent of skin and bone. The sun sat heavy on his shoulders. Here he stood alone, forgotten, left to die by his troop. No, thought Will, this was not how it was supposed to be.

But Adina wasn't worried. She carried the weight of Will's departure like a well strung bodice. Four years and a letter each month. Will had always been like that. Punctual. Thoughtful. Though Adina herself was rarely either. She crouched on the floor of the drawing room scrubbing at a spot. Such a horrible stain, she thought. Black sauce on silk. I can be punctual, she pondered. Sometimes. Her mind often drifted like this when faced with menial housework. She spread the gown across the carpet, pressing out the wrinkles with her palm. From a window

behind her came the thwak thwak sound of rubber tires over the tram tracks, a policeman's whistle, the city breathing life into itself.

Somewhere far off the Prime Minister prepared his address to the nation. Prime Minister we are on in five minutes, he was being told. Five minutes? Is that enough, he asked. The Prime Minister pressed a hand to his chest and tried clearing his throat. Can I have a drink of water? He became aware of the weight of his tongue. Is it hot in here? Are all these lights necessary? Yes? A window then. Open a window. Surely there is a window. He watched on helplessly as the crew swung the camera around to face him. Wait wait, I'm not ready. I'm not ready, he wheezed.

There was a knock on the door. The maid, thought Adina. On a Tuesday? Unexpected knocks made her nervous. She got up, but couldn't decide in which direction to go. What was the time? It dawned on her that it might be the postman. A letter? For me? Was it bad news? Other wives she knew talked of letters, of bad news. Slowly, she retreated to the edge of the Chesterfield. She felt the buttons stitched into the leather. Will had bought it from the Camden markets. He was so pleased with it. It really was a magnificent couch, she thought. Very proud, the chinaman had said when he had agreed on a price. Very nice, perfect for gentlemen.

In the distance a set of hills rippled and sank into the sky. There was no place good to die in Africa, thought Will. The heat coming off the ground almost equalled that falling from the sky. He thought of the couch that Adina now sat on. Just sit, the director was saying. Prime Minister, it's just nerves. Now face me, but turn your body slightly to the right. Keep your eyes on me. This whole message, this whole speech, is to me. Do you understand? The Prime Minister scratched at a lump on his neck. It's definitely a lump, the doctor had said. We'll need to do further tests. A skeleton hung in the corner, and the Prime Minister tried to touch each rib with his eyes. Twenty four, the doctor interrupted. Twelve on each side.

It had happened before, thought Adina. The postman had delivered the wrong letter. Perhaps this was the same. Her mind moved back to that moment. She and Will had put the letter in the middle of the table trying to decide what should be done about it. Will wanted to return it to the post office, but Adina was strongly opposed. She felt a compulsion to deliver it herself. So stubborn, Will

thought as he knelt down, burning his knees on the sand. He felt some part of him weep out, spill to the ground. Adina had left, gone early, with the letter tucked in her blouse. The address took her to an empty block. She caught the bus home, fingering the edge of the envelope.

How long would she wait, thought Will. How long will I wait, thought Adina. Prime Minister? The director was waving a tissue in front of him. We haven't got much time, he said.

It is difficult, in this short snapshot-style article, to demonstrate in a fuller sense the way in which the theorists we have read and discussed via the curriculum have been manifested in this student's work. Mark Welker's short story is – paradoxically – a rather discontinuous narrative at the same time as it follows a very tight and coherent line of narrative inquiry. On the one hand, we are disorientated precisely by the unnatural attention paid to the concept of time as a narrative concept. We re-read the same moments over again, spanning three distinct and separate locations. But as the story develops, the distance between the three separate characters/locations collapses. In fact the whole narrative movement is toward a final moment in which Adina reads the single word printed on a letter: “Goodbye.” It is the same moment in which Will, the husband in Africa, breathes his last breath and the plug is pulled on the Prime Minister's “live” address to the nation.

This text certainly foregrounds time, but there are other aspects of the curriculum shadowed here too. In the finished assignments, which are worked on and re-worked over the course of the full twelve week semester, I can often see a number of ideas, exercises set in class, fragments of theory blending together in a single work. Students, in reflecting on the curriculum have commented that the critical readings were one of the most valuable aspects of the course: “I was able to think about the issues and try to apply them to my writing,” said one student on the anonymous open-ended comments sheets that form part of Curtin's teaching evaluation process. “Having to focus on narrative was a very useful process for me,” write another. “I've found that what I have learned about the importance of and the ways of constructing narrative have been and will be hugely important to me and my development as a writer.” So much of the writing produced in the unit has demonstrated narratology at work, either self-consciously or more subtly, in the minds of these students. But by far the most common feedback from students was on the nature of the writing exercises themselves, as motivating exercises (not so much because of the

nature of the directives, I think, but because of the way we arrived at these directives via the reading and discussion of both key critical concepts and other writer's narrative works). I was rapt to see the comment from one student, that the exercises were not only "varied and interesting," but that, importantly, they "broke from the usual creative writing model."

6. Conclusion

It's now a full decade since I first began teaching in creative writing in the tertiary sector. In preparing this article, I have not set out so much to provide a structured academic argument for this approach to teaching narrative fiction, but rather to provide a kind of window into a curriculum that I feel has really shifted, not just for me, but for my students, the way we teach/learn how to write narrative fiction at an advanced level. It's not that I believe the "skills" approach to writing fiction, exemplified in texts by Janet Burroway, Kate Grenville and so on, is not valid. On the contrary, I think that approach is a useful and crucial introduction for new and emerging writers. But where to from a skills-based approach? The best fiction, I think, is not isolated from the larger debates about narrative that are being carried out all the time in our culture. The Advance Prose Workshop at Curtin seeks to get students asking questions, not just of narratology and contemporary fiction in the broader sense, but of how narrative itself *works* in their own fiction, in the fiction of their peers. How is the question of time linked to the question of writing, for example? Perhaps what I am doing with this curriculum is not all that different to what other teachers of advanced narrative fiction are doing. I hope that, in setting this example up for discussion, I can find out whether or not this is the case, and perhaps at the same time, open up a larger discussion about how and why creative writing teachers do what we do with student writers who are ready to move beyond the basic "how to" approach to creating new works of narrative fiction.

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