

Stephanie Frink

Emotion, Empathy, and Self-Narration
in British Novels since the 1990s

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PART I:
**CONCEPTUALIZING THE NEXUS BETWEEN NARRATIVE
AND EMOTION**

To understand who a person is, it is necessary to understand emotion.
(Denzin 2009 [1984]: 1)

[T]he study of emotional processes has revealed not only that emotional experiences are deeply related to the construction and organization of the self but, moreover, that the self has an intrinsically emotional foundation. (Boyns 2008: 254)

1. Introduction: Where Stories and Emotions Meet

Humans are essentially emotional beings: “Our sense of who and what we are is continually (re)shaped by how we *feel*.” (Davidson & Milligan 2004: 524)¹ Being moved doubtlessly belongs to our most central experiences; we cannot *not* feel. Emotions form a vital part of our existence and impact our experiences at all levels, endowing life with much of its significance. Hence, they have to be viewed at once as a basis for and manifestation of our identity. Affective events and memories are integral to the formation, maintenance, and modulation of our sense of self. Just as feelings are a key factor in shaping and organizing our mental landscapes, they are also inextricably connected to our relationships with others and with the world at large. Being able to create affective bonds with the people around us, to interpret and predict their emotional reactions, and to share their feelings forms a core component of social cognition, leading to a better understanding of the behavior and intentions of our conspecifics. It could even be argued that emotional engagement – particularly empathy – “is our primary mode of access to another person” (Krueger 2009: 676). ‘Emotional intelligence’ (Salovey & Mayer 1990), psychologist Daniel Goleman (1995: 34) suggests, “can be as powerful, and at times even more powerful, than IQ”.² Given that emotions permeate virtually all aspects of our lives, their significance cannot be overestimated; they are, in brief, the engine of our private and social lives. Especially in today’s globalized world, which is characterized above all by multiplicity and presents various challenges in terms of interpersonal communication and interaction, skills such as empathic awareness are indispensable.

1 Throughout this dissertation, all emphases in quotations are in the original unless otherwise noted.

2 For a definition of ‘EQ’ as the ability to recognize, assess, and manage our own and others’ emotions so as to foster emotional growth, see Mayer & Salovey (1997) or Salovey et al. (2008).

Emotions are, however, not just ubiquitous in everyday life. After a long time of marginalization, affective phenomena have re-entered the academic stage in the past few years and now occupy a privileged position in scientific discourse. Due to the more general emotionalization visible in various sectors of contemporary culture and society,³ many disciplines have shifted their attention to the emotions, emphasizing their significance in the construction and interpretation of the world. Whereas cognitive research dominated the second half of the 20th century, the study of emotion has significantly expanded since the turn of the millennium and is now one of the hot topics in academia. Both public and scholarly interest in the different forms and functions of emotions has reached a new peak. The appreciation and scientific proof of the pivotal role emotions play in all areas of human life has even led some scholars to proclaim an “affective revolution” (Scherer 2009a: 17). This recent vogue for emotions is evidenced by the wide array of studies and experiments, most notably in empirical fields. Extending the area of cognitive research in several significant ways, the rapidly evolving sub-discipline of affective science has considerably advanced our knowledge of the emotional brain, especially of the neural processes underlying empathy.⁴ Within the past decade, the need to devote more attention to emotion as an essential aspect of human experience and cognition has also been acknowledged by a growing number of other fields, including philosophy, sociology, anthropology, or media studies, to name but a few. There is indeed good reason to argue that emotion has lately emerged as a key research paradigm that uniquely brings together the humanities, social studies, and natural sciences. Necessarily a transdisciplinary endeavor, the study of emotion crosses the disciplinary boundaries of individual approaches and thus requires the integration of tools and findings from a variety of fields.⁵

Notably, academic interest is nowadays directed less at defining or interpreting specific emotions than at understanding how people experience, express, modify, and share emotions (cf. Michaels & Wulf 2012: 10). More important than categorizing feelings as such is the exploration of their workings and functions. Thus, special attention is paid to the ways in which selves construct, stage, perform, and calibrate their

3 Emotions’ prominence in popular culture is stressed in the 3D computer-animated film *Inside Out* (2015), which, set in a girl’s head, shows how joy, anger, disgust, fear, and sadness govern her life.

4 For an overview, see the *Handbook of Affective Sciences* by Davidson et al. (2003) and the *Oxford Companion to Emotion and the Affective Sciences* by Sander & Scherer (2009). A brief survey of different directions and methods in the field of affective science is provided by Coan & Allen (2007).

5 The large number of recent conferences, publications, research groups, and whole journals devoted to the interdisciplinary study of emotion speaks for itself. See, e.g., the studies conducted as part of the cluster ‘Languages of Emotion’ in Berlin, where researchers from various disciplines scrutinize the relation between emotions, culture, and society. There is also a growing number of online lectures, among them Yale University’s ‘Experts in Emotion Series’, which, including interviews with the world’s leading experts in the study of emotion, offers a useful overview of latest trends in the field.