

Dorina-Daniela Vasiloiu

Collaborative Storytelling and Joint Biographies  
in the Contemporary British Novel

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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## CONTENTS

PART I: A PRELIMINARY OUTLINE OF COLLABORATIVE NARRATIVE, WITH A GLIMPSE INTO CONTEMPORARY BRITISH MULTI-NARRATOR NOVELS	
1.	Introduction to Collaborative Storytelling ..... 1
1.1	Bridging the Concepts of Co-narration and Stance..... 3
1.2	Definitions, Potential Benefits of Key Concepts, and Research Questions ..... 9
1.3	Text Corpus and its Relevance to the Study .....12
1.4	Aims, Methods and Structure .....13
PART II: ESTABLISHING A THEORETICAL GUIDE TO CO-NARRATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR NARRATIVE AND THE NARRATIVE GROUP	
2.	Founding Principles of Collaborative Narrative .....20
2.1	A Socio-cognitive Approach to Co-narration .....22
2.1.1	Communicative Aspects in Collaborative Narrative .....27
2.1.2	Fictional Co-narration: Definition, Functions, and Representations.....32
2.2	The Concept of Stance: Definition(s) and Discursive Implications for Collaborative Narrative .....34
2.3	Taking Intersubjective Stances to Co-tell the Story.....39
2.4	An Analytical Toolkit to Explore Co-narrators' (Inter)Activity.....44
2.4.1	The 'Shared Reporting Space': Definition and Significance in the Analysis of Fictional Co-narration.....47
2.4.2	The Narratee as a 'Co-narrator-in-waiting' .....53
2.4.3	A Grading Scale for the Communicative Structure of Literary Co-narration .....56
PART III: EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF CO-NARRATION IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH NOVELS	
3.	The Low Dialogic Level: Andrea Levy's <i>Never Far From Nowhere</i> (1996) and <i>Small Island</i> (2004).....61
3.1	Andrea Levy's <i>Never Far From Nowhere</i> .....63
3.1.1	Olive and Vivien, a Conversational Duet to Co-tell Shared Story Events.....64
3.1.2	Co-constructing a 'Joint Biography' in (Dis)Agreement.....68

3.2	The Discursive Shaping of ‘Togetherness’ through the Four Co-narrators’ Stances in Andrea Levy’s <i>Small Island</i> .....	75
3.3	Concluding Remarks.....	82
4.	Moving up the Grading Scale of Narrative Communication Dynamics .....	84
4.1	A Co-constructivist View of the ‘Narrating Duet’ (and its Conceptual Benefits) in Andrew Greig’s <i>That Summer</i> .....	85
4.1.1	Narrative Duetting and the (Re)construction of Theories of Everyday Events.....	86
4.1.2	Stella and Leonard, a Story of Shared Affects: The Affective Stance .....	96
4.2	Four Co-narrating Protagonists on ‘A Long Way Down’ Together....	101
4.2.1	“We Three Became Four”, in Search of Meaningfulness in a Shared Socio-Communicative Context: The Epistemic Stance .....	104
4.2.2	Possible Benefits of Collaborative Storytelling to the Narrative Group and Co-participants.....	117
4.3	Concluding Remarks.....	124
5.	A Talk-in-interaction Approach to Fictional Collaborative Narrative.....	125
5.1	Goodwin’s Conception of ‘Narrative as Talk-in-interaction’ .....	126
5.2	Julian Barnes’ <i>Talking It Over</i> (1991) and <i>Love, etc.</i> (2000).....	129
5.2.1	Stuart, Oliver, and Gillian as Constant Co-narrators .....	135
5.2.2	Occasional Co-participants in the Narrative Trio’s Conversational Context: Roles and Contributions.....	140
5.3	“Sometimes Just Getting Them to Talk Helps”: Co-narration as an Opportunity for Group Therapy.....	149
5.4	‘You’ as a Co-narrator-in-waiting.....	153
5.5	Concluding Remarks.....	162
6.	Conclusions.....	163
6.1	An Overview of the Main Findings .....	163
6.2	Further Lines of Enquiry into Fictional Co-narration .....	168
	References.....	170
	Primary Literature.....	170
	Secondary Literature.....	170

## PART I:

### A PRELIMINARY OUTLINE OF COLLABORATIVE NARRATIVE, WITH A GLIMPSE INTO CONTEMPORARY BRITISH MULTI-NARRATOR NOVELS

#### 1. Introduction to Collaborative Storytelling

The general consensus in human sciences is that individuals have a unique ability to interconnect with other subjectivities and share the social space of the community to which they belong. This is often mediated through storytelling.<sup>1</sup> Complex cognitive processes such as self-awareness and sense-making could not possibly occur in “the solitary world of the solipsist”, where there are no others with whom “one’s perspective can reciprocate or interchange” (Crossley 1996: 3). On the contrary, they stem from the constant interaction and negotiation of meanings through the dialogical exchanges in which humans routinely engage. This is part of their ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ in the social world they share with multiple others.<sup>2</sup>

Narrative, in its material form, story and discourse, enables the activation of a set of cognitive mechanisms that help individuals organise experiences of the world in the stories they tell alone or with others. In addition, the social bonds connecting them occasion their autonomy for private, personal experience and interpretation of the world, as well as their collaboration with the other co-participants in the communicative activity of story-

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1 Peter Harder, for example, argues that human beings owe their “special cognitive sophistication” to “a cultural context of shared meanings that are not directly embedded in the stream of experience, but in a membership of a community” (2010: 7f.).

2 Crossley bases his argument on Husserl’s philosophy to argue that it is the “reciprocity” and “interchangeability” of individual perspectives on the world that establish its objectivity (1996: 3). In his view, “intersubjectivity” is a “fabric of social becoming” due to the “never static” condition of the social world and “the multiple relationships therein” (ibid.: 173). Man orders and renders experience comprehensible to himself and others through narrative, which distinguishes humans as “story-telling animals” (Hutto 2007: 1).

telling.<sup>3</sup> In a ‘group setting’, stories represent more than “individuals’ recollections of past events”, they are “joint productions” (Aronsson/Cederborg 1994: 345). Storytelling thus becomes a collaborative enterprise, through which the tellers’ membership to a narrative group is ratified (see Norrick 2000).<sup>4</sup>

The socio-cognitive dimension of stories has been a top priority in literary scholarship for the past decades, but more specific forms such as collaborative storytelling and co-narration have received little scientific attention in narratology and literary-linguistic studies. The term has been a useful reference point in various other human science disciplines to explore the construction of social identity and cognition, group behaviour and dynamics, or social psychology. Co-narration appears to be a successful practice in group-support therapies, which make use of narrative to cope with and make sense of traumatic life experiences (see Rogers/Leydesdorff/Dawson 1999). More recently, the field of education has used it as a means of examining the social construction of knowledge, or the intersubjective constitution of collaboration within a learning community (see Rojas-Drummond/Albarrán/Littleton 2008; Ligorio/Talamo/Pontecorvo 2005). Furthermore, co-narration has been applied in the field of economics in team-building sessions. Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, for instance, describe it as “a useful

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- 3 Theodore Schatzki, for example, defines “sociality” as having a double meaning: “the condition of being social” and “the context-forming hanging-togetherness that constitutes human coexistence” (1996: 14f.). Numerous studies demonstrate that cognition and communication would not be possible in a solipsistic world. For an ampler discussion of the individual as socially interconnected with others, see, for example, Mead (1962), Habermas (1979), Crossley (1996), and RoCHAT (2009). Bruner (1990; 1991) places narrative at the core of human psychology due to the shared meanings and concepts that it brings to meaningfully organize our experiences of the world. David Herman (2002; 2007c; 2013) views stories as tools that pivot around interrelated phenomena such as reception, perception, language, memory, knowledge and the world. He states that “the construction of the story facilitates reasoning about one’s own and others’ mental states, in fictional as well as real-world scenarios, by allowing those states to be intermeshed with broader contexts for acting and interacting” (2011: 18).
- 4 My references to narrative group or community are not in relation to cultural aspects that a community entails, but strictly to the number of participants (inter)act together in narrative communication.