

Sebastian Beckmann

Psychological Aspects of Unreliable Narration

A Literary Analysis and Didactic Application

Vera Nünning, Ansgar Nünning (Hg.)

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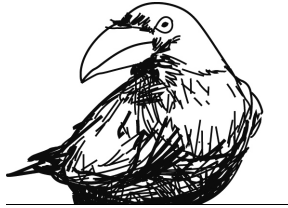
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The Raven

“Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.”

(Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*)



“Raven is our version of what you call Coyote in the Southwest. Raven stirs things up and makes change happen. He catalyzes different interactions to occur. Whether you like it or not, Raven makes the people grow and change.

[...]

Maybe that’s how change starts – with someone getting angry enough to upset the apple cart, to initiate revolt, to cause trouble, like Raven did.”

(indigenous story, quoted from Lewis Mehl-Madrona,
Narrative Medicine: The Use of History and Story in the Healing Process.
Rochester/Vermont: Bear & Company, 2007, pp. 60-61)

Sowohl die traditionelle Narratologie als auch die interdisziplinäre Erzählforschung haben in den letzten Dekaden einen anhaltenden Boom erlebt, der zur Entwicklung zahlreicher neuer Ansätze in einer zunehmend transgenerisch, intermedial und interdisziplinär orientierten Erzähltheorie geführt hat.

Die neue Buchreihe RABE/RAVEN trägt diesen Entwicklungen nicht nur Rechnung, sondern stellt ein Forum dar für Monographien und konzeptorientierte Sammelbände, die

- sich mit Erscheinungsformen des Narrativen in lange als ‚nicht-narrativ‘ eingestuften Gattungen (z.B. Drama und Lyrik) oder in vernachlässigten Phänomenen und Texttypen (z.B. Rituale, Nachrichten, Alltagserzählungen) beschäftigen,
- Formen des Narrativen in anderen Medien (z.B. Cartoons, graphic novels, Film, bildende Kunst, Musik, Hyperfiktion, Erzählen in den neuen Medien) oder multimodales bzw. transmediales Erzählen untersuchen,
- narratologische Kategorien rekonzeptualisieren, neue narrative Formen untersuchen oder die Konzepte, Modelle und Methoden der klassischen und postklassischen Narratologie erweitern,
- Ansätze, Erkenntnisse und Methoden aus der Erzählforschung anderer Disziplinen (z.B. Geschichtswissenschaft, Linguistik, narrativer Medizin, Psychologie, Kognitionswissenschaft, Sozialwissenschaften) einbeziehen,
- Formen des langsamen Wandels (z.B. Altern, Evolution, Klimawandel, der durch digitale Technologien ausgelöste Geisteswandel, Krankheit, Artensterben) und andere Phänomene (z.B. Performances, Rituale, komplexe Systeme) erforschen, die auf nicht-narrativen Logiken basieren, sich einer narratologischen Analyse widersetzen und mit zentralen Kategorien der Narratologie nicht recht zu erfassen sind (z.B. Geschichten ohne Akteure, Ereignisse, Handlungen, Plot).

Darüber hinaus versteht sich die Reihe als ein Forum für innovative Publikationen und alternative Beiträge zur Erzählforschung, die die Grenzen der Narratologie ausleuchten und der Erzählforschung neue Gegenstände, Konzepte, Methoden und Horizonte erschließen. Sie ist auch ein Forum für Bände, die Definitionen des ‚Narrativen‘ im Sinne eines kognitiven Schemas, einer (Repräsentations-)Form oder eines semiotischen Artefakts weiterentwickeln, das Narrative von anderen Modi/Strategien der Sinnerzeugung abgrenzen oder es in seinem Verhältnis zum ‚Fiktionalen‘ bestimmen. In der Reihe erscheinen Bände in deutscher und englischer Sprache. Die Bände werden von den Herausgebern und/oder Mitgliedern des internationalen Beirats begutachtet.

Both traditional narratology and interdisciplinary narrative research have witnessed an ongoing boom during recent decades which has resulted in the development of a host of new approaches in an increasingly transgeneric, intermedial and interdisciplinary narrative theory.

The new book series RABE/RAVEN does not only reflect these developments, but offers a forum for monographs and concept oriented collective volumes which

- deal with forms of narrative in genres traditionally regarded as ‘non-narrative’ (e.g. drama and poetry) or with relatively neglected phenomena and text types (e.g. rituals, the news, narration in everyday contexts),
- explore forms of narrative in other media (e.g. cartoons, graphic novels, film, art, music, hyperfiction, storytelling in new media), and multimodal or transmedial storytelling,
- reconceptualise narratological categories, explore innovative narrative forms, or extend the range of concepts, models and methods of classical and postclassical narratology,
- take into consideration approaches, insights, and methods developed by narrative researchers working in other disciplines (e.g. history, linguistics, narrative medicine, psychology, cognitive science, the social sciences),
- examine forms of slow change (e.g. ageing, evolution, climate change, mind change as a result of the impact of digital technologies, illness, extinction of species) and other phenomena (e.g. performances, rituals, complex systems) that are based on non-narrative logics, and that challenge or defy narratological analysis and its key concepts (e.g. stories without actors, events, actions, and plot).

The series offers a forum for innovative publications and alternative varieties of explorations in narrative which gauge the limits of narratology and which open up new objects, concepts, methods and horizons for research in narrative studies. It is also a forum for volumes which advance definitions of narrative as a cognitive schema, as form or as semiotic artefact, which conceptualise narrative in contradistinction to other modes/strategies of meaning-making, or which probe into the relationship of narrative and fiction. The series publishes books in German and English. All volumes are peer reviewed by the editors and/or members of the international advisory board.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the elderly people in my life. Without them, the world would be a much darker place.

Opa Ernst and Frau Spiegel – Thank you for always being there when needed.

Oma Hilde, Opa Heinz, Oma Luisa, and Onkel – You would be proud to see this book published.

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Kaiserslautern, Germany and Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, August 2020

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I. INTRODUCTION

Art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex.
Vladimir Nabokov¹

Throughout history, great literature has explored love, friendship, trust, integrity, and deviated minds as well as the intricacy of ideas and emotions attached to each of these themes. How authors succeed in conveying their ideas of these themes varies, depending on the techniques they employ to achieve their desired effects. While certain techniques are fairly simplistic in implementation, others are quite sophisticated. The goal of this book is to examine one of the most deceitful, compelling, and complex techniques: the unreliable narrator.

Unreliable narration is a writing device or technique which can at least be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century – and some might rightly argue that it was used even earlier.² However, this mode of writing has only been critically studied in academia for the last 60 years. Detecting unreliable narration and thereby judging someone as reliable or not is not only relevant in the study of literature. First and foremost it is a social skill, and as such, a core competence of all social interaction and construction: “From little children to leading politicians, unreliable narrators can be found everywhere.”³ In literature, readers can enjoy the author’s artistic ability when they encounter unreliable narration, and identifying this technique becomes an exciting challenge. The reader learns to read more critically, a skill which is sure to be of great importance in real life.

In real life, however, being deceived by an unreliable narrator might have far more drastic consequences.⁴ Therefore, the social skill of detecting unreliable narration needs

¹ Quoted from Gavriel Shapiro. *The Tender Friendship and the Charm of Perfect Accord. Nabokov and his Father*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press. 2014. 108.

² See Christoph Bode. *Der Roman*. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag. 2011. 276, for example. See also Irena Avsenik Nabergoj. *Reality and Truth in Literature. From Ancient to Modern Literary and Critical Discourse*. Göttingen: V&R unipress. 2013. Nadja Kimmerle. *Lucan und der Prinzipat. Inkonsistenz und unzuverlässiges Erzählen im Bellum Civile*. Berlin/New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter. 2015 applies the concept of unreliable to Lucan’s historical poem *Bellum Civile*.

³ Vera Nünning. “Conceptualising (Un)reliable Narration and (Un)trustworthiness.” In: Vera Nünning (ed.). *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness: Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Berlin/New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter. 2015. 1. See also Dan Sperber. “An Evolutionary Perspective on Testimony and Argumentation.” *Philosophical Topics* 29.1/2 (2001): 401-413, who argues convincingly that manipulation and deception are equally important in human interaction as trust and reliability. Daniel S. Gilbert. “How Mental Systems Believe.” *American Psychologist* 46.2 (1991): 107-119 provides insights into mental processes with regard to believing.

⁴ See Per Krogh Hansen. “When Fact Becomes Fiction. On Extra-Textual Unreliable Narration.” In: Lars-Åke Skalin (ed.). *Fact and Fiction in Narrative: An Interdisciplinary Ap-*

to be honed. Studying unreliable narration should not be confined to university classrooms and lecture halls, it should also be expanded into our schools. Literature in general – and works which feature unreliable narrators in particular – have the power to impart a sense of reality in a postfactual world in which simple attributions of meaning and simple antagonisms – such as right/wrong, good/bad, healthy/sick – have become increasingly questionable.⁵ As these boundaries get increasingly blurry, literature and the study of literature need to counteract the habit and current absurdity of limiting statements about reality to 280 characters, with no context and hardly any content. As Nabokov remind us, “[a]rt at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex”.⁶ However, his statement is not only true for art when it is at its greatest. In an ever-growing global society with seemingly endless means of communication, the world itself is more complex than ever and young adults need to be equipped with appropriate tools in order to face this complexity.

The argument this book makes is also important and relevant because the increasing complexity of today’s world is accompanied by a decreasing capability for empathy. It appears that being non-empathetic has become socially acceptable nowadays. According to Grit Hein, a German professor of psychology at the University of Würzburg, society today does not facilitate the capability for empathy in an environment in which facilitation is of vital importance.⁷ Hein’s stance is supported and emphasized by several scholars across various academic disciplines, most notably Jean M. Twenge, who characterizes young adults as ‘Generation Me’.⁸

My argument is based on the firm belief that literature and the study of literature in school can make a difference, can make someone change beliefs, can promote empathy, and can help readers foster critical thinking skills. Over the course of this book, I demonstrate that the novels which make up the text corpus – works which feature unreliable narrators who suffer from mental illnesses – are extraordinarily successful in fulfilling

proach. Örebro: Örebro University. 2005. 283-307 for an account of the reporting on 09/11/2001 and the connection with unreliable narration. See Vera Nünning’s extensive collective volume *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness: Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Berlin/New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter. 2015 for an overview of other fields of studies which are concerned with unreliable narration, such as journalism, film studies, politics, law, history, and medicine, to name a few. Moreover, sociology, economic psychology, online marketing, and philosophy are also fields of study which discuss the concept of unreliability.

⁵ See James Phelan. *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press. 2007. 1ff. for a very graphic example of how making ethical judgments changes over the course of our life in regard to literature.

⁶ Quoted from Shapiro. *Tender Friendship*. 108.

⁷ Cf. Christiane Kaess. “Hass ist einfach salonfähig geworden.” *Deutschlandfunk Online*. 2019. https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/empathie-hass-ist-einfach-salonfaehig-geworden.694.de.html?dram:article_id=466626, last retrieved: February 24, 2020.

⁸ Chapter 6 provides a detailed definition of the term.