

Kim Antonia Bühle

# It-Narratives in Anglophone Contemporary Literature

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

ELCH

Studies in English Literary and Cultural History

ELK

Studien zur Englischen Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft

Band 92

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in Anglophone Contemporary Literature

 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

**Bührle, Kim Antonia:** It-Narratives in Anglophone  
Contemporary Literature / Kim Antonia Bührle. -  
Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2026  
(ELCH ; Band 92)  
(Zugl.: Dissertation, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 2024)  
ISBN 978-3-98940-103-7

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

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ISBN 978-3-98940-103-7

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier  
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier  
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier  
Tel.: (0651) 41503  
Internet: [www.wvttrier.de](http://www.wvttrier.de)  
E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)  
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present book originated as a doctoral thesis, which I defended under the same title at the University of Heidelberg in the summer of 2025. In summer 2019, a chance discovery in the Mannheim University Library gave rise to the initial idea that I might write a doctoral dissertation on contemporary it-narratives; in September 2024, I was able to submit the completed thesis, followed by the defence in June 2025. More than six years is a long time – and now, at the beginning of 2026, as I hold the printed book of my thesis in my hands, the moment has come to thank all those who accompanied me on this long journey.

First and foremost, my warmest thanks go to Prof. Vera Nünning for her excellent supervision, her expertise, support, and valuable feedback, which enabled me to write this thesis. I would also like to thank Prof. Peter Paul Schnierer for acting as the second reviewer.

My sincere thanks also go to Prof. Vera Nünning, Prof. Ansgar Nünning, Dr. Erwin Otto, and the entire team at Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier (WVT) for publishing my dissertation as part of the ELCH series.

I am furthermore indebted to all participants of Prof. Nünning's Oberseminar. I greatly enjoyed the atmosphere and the academic discussions, and I received extremely valuable feedback and important impulses for my research project.

I would also like to thank all my friends for their years of support. Listing all of you by name would go beyond the scope of this acknowledgement. However, I would like to extend my special thanks to Katha, Michelle, Désirée, Selin, Robin, Marwa, and Nina, who took time out of their busy schedules to proofread my analysis chapters and who provided me with extremely helpful feedback. Many thanks to Laura and Charlie for your moral support over the years, the wonderful gifts, and for celebrating my academic milestones with me.

To Martina: thank you for being my PhD buddy all these years and for navigating the highs and lows of doctoral life with me. Thank you for your support, your open ear, and your valuable feedback on my work (writing an introduction is hard ...).

Many thanks also to my roommate Sandi for your interest in my academic work and your willingness to listen when I complained in the kitchen about everything and everyone. Thank you as well for assembling our kitchen table, hanging my ceiling lamp, and gluing my glasses back together with superglue.

At this point, I would also like to thank my employer, Netfira GmbH. The flexibility of my part-time position and later my full-time position allowed me to concentrate on my doctoral dissertation while simultaneously beginning a career in marketing.

I'm deeply grateful to my twin sister, Dr. Annika Bührle. I am incredibly fortunate to have a sister who has also completed a doctorate and understands this peculiar life one leads during those years. Thank you for your helpful advice and for sharing your experiences. Many thanks for your moral support during the stressful preparation for my defence and for taking time every day to make a video call with me to listen to my presentation. Thank you also for your lifelong supply of free legal advice.

My greatest thanks go to my entire family. In particular, I would like to thank my parents and grandparents for their tireless support.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION: OBJECTS IN LITERATURE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: A NEW GENERATION OF IT-NARRATIVES

Objects have always been carried, sold, bartered, stolen, retrieved and lost. People have always given gifts. It is how you tell their stories that matters. (de Waal 2011: 348)

Not only humans but also objects play a significant role in countless works of fiction and, through this, literary works offer a space of reflection for illustrating and debating the subject-object relationship. Among the several aspects that relate to the relationship between subjects and objects, three stand out in particular, highlighted in quotes from Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. The first aspect is the sensual materiality of objects with a conspicuous focus placed on being perceived by human senses, particularly touch: "Take one of these lacquer boxes in your hand – so light, so soft to the touch, on which the artist has represented apple trees in blossom" (de Waal 2011: 53). The second aspect is their ability to establish and stand for relationships between two or more people:

Japanese things – lacquers, netsuke, prints – conjure a picture of a place where sensations are always new, where art pours out of daily life, where everything exists in a dream of endless beautiful flow. [...] In talking of their collections of these strangely rich objects he [Charles] quietly brings himself and Louise together. [...] The collection records their love-affair, their own secret history of touch. (de Waal 2011: 53f)

The third aspect is the notion that the relationship between humans and things is permeated by stories and the telling of stories: "For Charles, this lacquer has a quality of embedded poetry: not just rich and strange, but latent with stories of desire" (de Waal 2011: 52). These three facets of the subject-object relationship will be central to this study.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in particular, a certain genre gained popularity in Britain in which objects take centre stage in the narrative and the nature of the subject-object relationship is brought to the fore and debated: it-narratives. It-narratives are a type of prose fiction in which

inanimate objects (coins, waistcoats, pins, corkscrews, coaches) or animals (dogs, fleas, cats, ponies) serve as the central characters. Sometimes these characters enjoy a consciousness—and thus a perspective—of their own; sometimes they are merely narrative hubs around which other people's stories accumulate, like the stick around which cotton candy winds. (Blackwell 2007: 10)

These inanimate things or animals "narrate their own life stories, but their biographies always comprise a crazy quilt of others' tales – namely, the adventures of

the various [human] possessors through whose hands these circulating objects pass” (Blackwell 2004: 1).

There are different terms to refer to it-narratives. In this study, these terms will be used interchangeably. General synonyms for it-narratives are object tales, it-fiction or spy novels (Blackwell 2007: 10). The term *speaking object narratives* focuses on objects or animals assuming the role of the narrator as the defining element of it-narratives (Bellamy 2007: 117). The term *novel of circulation* stresses the “mechanism of distribution of the narrator/protagonist” (Bellamy 2007: 118) as the genre’s definitive characteristic, because these works of fiction focus on the way an object or animal “passes through a diverse range of hands” (Bellamy 2007: 118).<sup>1</sup>

Although there are many it-narratives which were highly successful and popular at the time of their publication, such as Francis Coventry’s *The History of Pompey the Little: or, The Life and Adventures of a Lap-Dog* (1751) and Charles Johnstone’s *Chrysal, or, The Adventures of a Guinea* (1760–65), the genre was largely ignored in an academic context for a long time. It was not until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that a growing body of scholarly work on these classic it-narratives was published. According to Mark Blackwell, interest in the it-narrative of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is being revived, which is expressed by discussing it “in the context of broader literary, cultural, and social questions about late eighteenth-century England” (2004: 2). The current research trends about it-narratives of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – which are considered the genre’s heyday – are based on the genre’s exploration of questions about “where human personhood ends and alienable property begins” (Blackwell 2004: 3), making it an important resource for “understanding the complex relationships people have with their possessions at exactly the time when a surprisingly modern consumer culture is emerging in England” (Blackwell 2004: 3). Notable research trends include, for example, investigating the emergence of sympathetic and anthropomorphising animal stories. Other scholars have focussed on the link between object tales and the print trade, while others read it-narratives as a broader

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1 Liz Bellamy points out that there are also a number of works which portray the stories of static objects. Some of these focus on buildings, such as *The Life and Adventures of the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street* (1832), an economic tract that recounts the story of the Bank of England. Others deal with natural objects, particularly trees, like *The Adventures of a Cotton-Tree* (1836). The main difference is that in these narratives the diverse individuals whose stories are told come to the narrating object, instead of the narrating object coming to them. As a result, there is circulation, but of the human characters rather than the object narrator (2007: 119). This study will focus on mobile objects only.