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## Introduction

“We never know them well, do we?”

“Who?”

“Real people.”

“What do you mean, ‘real people’?”

“As opposed to people in books,” Paola explained. “They’re the only ones we ever really know well, or know truly. . . . Maybe that’s because they’re the only ones about whom we get reliable information. . . . Narrators never lie.” – Donna Leon, *A Sea of Troubles*

### 1. Background

*Fictional Minds* is about “people in books.” In particular, it is about the amount, range, variety, and reliability of the information on the fictional minds of people in books that we are able to obtain from those books.

A little personal history may be helpful here in order to explain the purpose of this book. I began studying fictional minds in 1995. I did this by looking at the Box Hill chapter in Jane Austen’s *Emma* and the Waterloo ball chapter in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* to see how the minds of the characters in those chapters were constructed. I chose those two texts because I thought that it would be interesting to examine the consciousnesses of characters interacting in groups. At that time, I am ashamed to say now, I was not even aware of the existence of narrative theory, or narratology, although as it happened this direct approach to primary texts turned out to be an absolutely inspired idea. Then once I had discovered that there was such a thing as narrative theory, I thought that it would be interesting to find out what it said about my chosen area of study. After all what could be more central to the theoretical analysis of fiction than the workings of characters’ minds? My first encounter with narrative theory was with what I will call the *speech category approach*, and I was immediately struck by the fact that it did not provide a convincing explanation or even description of how the whole minds of characters in action were constructed. It seemed to

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me that there was a good deal that was going on in the Austen and Thackeray chapters that had not been captured by classification of the specific examples of direct access to fictional minds into the various speech categories. I felt as though I had stumbled into a large, fascinating field that I very much wanted to explore further. A small corner of it had been tended and retended with, perhaps, obsessive care, while the rest of it appeared to me at that time to be neglected.

I read more widely within narrative theory and soon discovered the concept of *focalization* or what used to be called *point of view*. So another small corner of the field had been cultivated. Focalization was informative, but it was still only a small part of the story. The third corner turned out to be *story analysis*—the structuralist study of the basic elements of plot structures. Next I came across *characterization* and, in particular, how the reader brings to the text preexisting cultural and literary stereotypes in order to construct satisfying patterns of behavior and convincing fictional personalities. Finally, and inexcusably late in the day, I encountered *possible-worlds theory*. This has proved very helpful indeed, although I soon found out that in certain ways it is not that well suited to the study of fictional minds. (You may have noticed that there are five corners—it is an irregularly shaped field.)

So, the corners of the field are well tended, but in the middle there remains a very large and apparently unexplored patch of land that still looks just as interesting to me today as it did at the beginning. But the oddest thing of all, as I continued my search within narrative theory for a comprehensive treatment of the whole of my area of interest, was that I found very little recognition of the fact that there *was* an area of interest at all. The various corners adjoin other fields and appear to be viewed primarily as adjuncts to those other fields: the analysis of spoken speech in the case of the speech categories; various aspects of discourse analysis in the case of focalization; intertextuality in the case of characterization; classical structuralism in the case of story analysis; and modal logic in the case of possible-worlds theory. This seemed strange to me then, and it still does now. In fact, it is this continued sense of strangeness that drives this book. Even now, I still think, Why don't other people ask themselves what aspect of literary theory could be more important than fictional minds? This study is an attempt to mark out the boundaries of the field as a well-defined subject area in its own right by linking together the previously well-trodden parts of it and by tending a few new patches of my own. I decided on the title *Fictional Minds*, instead of other possibilities such as *The Presentation of Consciousness*

*in the Novel*, because it sounds to me as much the name of a new subject area within narrative theory as it does the title of a single study.

I will describe my exploration of the field with the use, I am afraid, of another and final agricultural metaphor. Somewhere (I have been unable to find the exact reference) the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that there are two ways of exploring a piece of land such as a hill. One way is to attempt to define it by establishing its boundaries with precision. In this way once you have drawn an exact line around the land in question, you can say with confidence that the hill consists of all the land within the border created by the line and whatever lies outside the boundary is something else. The other way to do it is to explore the hill by criss-crossing it from various directions. That way you get to know it intimately, and you have a fairly clear idea about what is the hill and what is not, even though you do not ever draw a precise line around it. Each method has its own kind of value, and of course they are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps he had in mind a comparison between the early working method of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the later, very different approach of the *Philosophical Investigations*. I would say that the modus operandi of *Fictional Minds* is the criss-crossing of the field, rather than the strict delineation of its exact borders, although I hope that it will become clear that the boundaries of the fictional mind in discourse extend much further than have previously been recognized.

During my studies, I discovered reader response theory, which proved to be of great value. I will pick out one specific issue here: the sheer scale of the input required from readers in constructing minds from novels. Have you ever, while rereading a novel containing a scene or a character that had a profound effect on you when you first read it, been surprised at how little there actually was to that scene or character and how few words were used to describe them? You think, Does that scene really last for only a page? Or, Does that character really only appear in only those scenes? (A particularly good example of this phenomenon is Orson Welles's Harry Lime character in the film *The Third Man*. Lime does not appear until after the best part of an hour and says almost nothing apart from the famous cuckoo-clock scene.) On rereading a scene of this sort, you find yourself surprised that your imagination, as it then was, contributed so much to flesh out the words in the text, and it can sometimes happen that your current imaginative state does not do the same. It is almost as though the text is simply the scaffolding on which you build the vivid psychological processes that stay with you for so long afterward. I recently felt this sort of disappointment

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while rereading Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*, which is ironic since he is a leading reader response theorist! It can also happen with historical narrative, as it did for me with Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*. I find that the same sensation can also occur when someone recommends that I read an episode in a novel or see a scene in a film. I think, I am not really sure that there is enough here for me to feel that it justified the build-up that it got. There is a good deal that has been brought to this scene by the other person, and I am not sure what it is. All this is an illustration of what the narratologist Monika Fludernik refers to in the vivid phrase the "human urge to create significance" (1993, 457). What I am describing is one of those rare occasions when you are acutely aware of the creative nature of the reading process in general and the strangeness of character construction in particular. Any theory that attempts to explain this process, or a part of it, has to recognize the intense power of reader response to fictional minds.

I decided at an early stage that it would be rewarding to illuminate the study of fictional minds by making use of the insights of some of the disciplines relating to real minds. For example, I noticed right at the beginning that during my analyses of the *Emma* and *Vanity Fair* passages I was finding it difficult in a number of cases to separate out presentations of consciousness from descriptions of action, and I was aware that an illuminating perspective on this issue could be derived from the philosophy of action. (By the way, this point is a perfect illustration of the benefits of theorizing about novels before reading literary theory: the theory that I read later appeared to assume that dividing the two was entirely unproblematical, while the naïve reader that I then was could spot immediately that this was not the case.) In addition to philosophy such as the philosophy of mind as well as the philosophy of action, this book also makes use of other real-mind disciplines such as cognitive science, psychology, and psycholinguistics. I hope that the result is a rich, flexible, sensitive, and inclusive paradigm of the fictional mind that is well suited to capturing as much information as possible from fictional texts. *Fictional Minds* is an interdisciplinary project that is in a sense designed to be a source book for non-specialists of some of the ideas about the mind that are current in the various real-mind discourses. However, it is worth pointing out right from the start that a good deal of humility is required when theorizing about the mind. The relationship between knowledge and its representation in the brain was characterized by the psychologist William James (brother of the novelist Henry James) in 1890 as "the most mysterious thing in the world" (1981, 216). And for every mystery that has been dispelled since James's time, three more seem to arise to take its place.

One particular aspect of my approach is worth emphasizing here. The entry by Colwyn Trevarthen in *The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences* (1999) (from now on referred to as *MITECS*) on the topic of intersubjectivity describes two different perspectives on the mind: the *subjective first* and the *intersubjective first*.

The Western philosophical tradition (as exemplified by René Descartes and Immanuel Kant) generally assumes that human minds are inherently separate in their purposes and experiences, seeking rational clarity, autonomous skills, and self-betterment. . . . [People] construct an awareness of the self in society but remain single subjectivities. . . . We will call this view of intelligent and civilized cooperation as an artificial acquisition the . . . “subjective first” position. . . .

A different conception of human consciousness . . . perceives interpersonal awareness, cooperative action in society, and cultural learning as manifestations of innate motives for sympathy in purposes, interests, and feelings—that is, that a human mind is equipped with needs for dialogue [and] intermental engagement with other similar minds. . . . We will call this view of how human cooperation arises the . . . “intersubjective first” position. (1999, 417)

Mine is very much an intersubjective first approach to fictional minds, but not because I deny the importance of the subjective first approach. It is important to stress that both perspectives are equally valid, informative, and, indeed, necessary. The reason why this study favors the intersubjective first approach is that the subjective first position has become the dominant paradigm for the study of consciousness within narrative theory, and the bias contained in this book is intended to redress the balance a little. For a contrasting and very subjective first approach to the relationship between the novel, narrative theory, and cognitive science, see *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002) by the narrative theorist and novelist David Lodge.

It is probably the case that anyone working in the field of narrative theory has a working definition of narrative that they may make explicit or that may remain implicit. To make things easier for you, I will now make mine explicit. My thesis is a fundamental one: narrative fiction is, in essence, the presentation of fictional mental functioning. I state my thesis here in this bald, stark manner for purposes of clarity. The full implications of it will emerge later on. If I am right, then it follows that the study of the novel is the study of fictional mental functioning and also that the task of theorists is to make explicit the various means by which this phenomenon is studied and analyzed. This is another way

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of making the point made earlier that the study of fictional minds should be established as a clearly defined and discrete subject area within literary theory.

I do not know how many narrative theorists will agree or disagree with my claim regarding the centrality of fictional minds to any informative definition of fictionality, although I refer to some potential skepticism in the next section. I hope that it will strike some as obviously true, even though I am aware that the world is full of people who have advanced theories that they thought were obviously true but then found to their astonishment that they were bitterly contested. But, true or not, and obvious or not, I am not aware that it has been explicitly formulated before, with the possible exception of Monika Fludernik's emphasis on her notion of *experientiality* in *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* (1996). My thesis has always been implicit in discussions of fictionality, and should be made explicit. As the narratologist Dorrit Cohn points out, in narratology, "as elsewhere, norms have a way of remaining uninteresting, often even invisible, until and unless we find that they have been broken—or want to show that they have not been broken" (1999, 43). The description of fictional mental functioning has been regarded as an uninteresting and even invisible norm within narratology, and it would be of benefit to the discipline if it were given the central place within the conceptual framework of the subject that it deserves.

Some scholars in other disciplines tend to regard literary theory as arid, willfully obscure, solipsistic, dreary, stultifying, and literature-hating. The list is discouragingly long. Whether or not this view is true of literary theory generally, as a picture specifically of narrative theory, it is completely misguided. It takes no account of the very large body of thorough, illuminating, and exciting work that is simply the result of systematic and rigorous analyses of narrative texts. However, all literary theorists, including narrative theorists, have a responsibility to reach out to the rest of the academic world by making literary theory as reader-friendly as possible. Literary theory should speak to, and be shared with, other scholars. Although this study is aimed primarily at specialists in literary theory in general and narrative theory in particular, it also tries to be genuinely helpful to scholars in other fields, for example, researchers into and teachers and students of English and other literatures. I believe that the interdisciplinary reconceptualization that is explored here will be of real value not only to research in fields that involve the practical criticism of fictional texts but also to the teaching of practical criticism. Such criticism depends on the ability to use the available evidence to pronounce with confidence on characters' thought processes. My work is concerned with examining precisely how this ability is

made possible. The sort of questioning that I have in mind could occur not only in courses on literary theory but also within sessions of practical criticism. In this way, I suggest, theory and practice could genuinely interpenetrate and synergistically enrich one another. I am aware that this approach does not appear to fit easily within current literary-studies approaches, but is it such a bad thing for a discipline to question some of the foundations on which it is based? Surely literature studies would gain new insights from a perspective that is both radically innovative and also directly relevant to all other perspectives on the novel.

In 1981, when reviewing Dorrit Cohn's brilliant work on thought representation *Transparent Minds* (1978), the narratologist Brian McHale commented that the "history of our poetics of prose is essentially a history of successive differentiations of types of discourse from the undifferentiated 'block' of narrative prose." He then added that "there is still a sizeable block of undifferentiated prose left" (1981, 185). In my view, no one has yet responded to McHale's challenge, and a good deal more work is required before the "sizeable block of undifferentiated prose" that is related to characters' minds is reduced any further. As far as I know, Cohn's is still the only full-length study devoted solely to this topic. All the other full-length studies of which I am aware refer to speech as well as thought or are concerned with narratology generally. It is now a long time since Cohn wrote her pioneering work and since McHale wrote his wholly justified praise of it, and yet there has been no successor in the sense that there has been no other book wholly devoted to her subject. Given the obvious importance of this issue for any formal study of the novel, this seems extraordinary. The purpose of *Fictional Minds* is to begin the attempt to theorize a part of the block of prose that remains undifferentiated: the aspect of narrative fiction that is concerned with the whole of the social mind in action.

This enterprise is intended to fit comfortably within the perspective on narrative that is offered by the *Frontiers of Narrative* series. The editor of the series, the narrative theorist David Herman, in advocating an approach that he calls *postclassical narratology*, contends that we have recently witnessed "a small but unmistakable explosion of activity in the field of narrative studies; signs of this minor narratological renaissance include the publication of a spate of articles, special issues, and books that rethink and recontextualize classical models for narratological research" (1999a, 1). He also remarks that postclassical narratology is "marked by a profusion of new methodologies and research hypotheses; the result is a host of new perspectives on the forms and functions of narrative itself" (1999a, 2–3). The narratologist Gerald Prince agrees with Herman that

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“the very domain of narratology is (and has been) in flux” and “the discipline keeps on changing as its boundaries are (re)drawn” (1996, 160). Herman also makes the heady claim that recent work in narrative theory has “displaced and transformed the assumptions, methods, and goals of structuralist narratology” (1999a, 2) and that this research has “highlighted aspects of narrative discourse that classical narratology either failed or chose not to explore” (1999a, 2). This is precisely what *Fictional Minds* attempts to do. It does so by using concepts and ideas drawn from a variety of different disciplines because, as Herman says, postclassical narratology is an “inherently interdisciplinary project” (1999a, 20).

My argument lays great stress on the need to examine how fictional minds work within the contexts of the storyworlds to which they belong. Postclassical narratology’s attempt to break free from the structuralist purity of classical narratology is also concerned with the question of context. For example, Gerald Prince, in considering the role of gender in narratology, maintains that narrative poetics “ought to be more sensitive to the role of context . . . in the production of narrative meaning” (1996, 163). Prince has in mind the various real-world, sociocultural contexts in which narratives are produced. However, I will use the notion of context in a more narrow sense to focus on both the context of the whole fictional mind during the analysis of a particular part of that mind and also on the social and physical context of the storyworld within which that mind functions.

The following passage illustrates the kind of fictional mental functioning that I am interested in. In it a policeman is confronting a suspect:

Brunetti watched as Murino absorbed this information, then waited as the other man began to consider what his visible response should be. All of this took only seconds, but Brunetti had been observing the process for decades and was familiar with it. The people to whom he presented himself had a drawer of responses which they thought appropriate, and part of his job was to watch them as they sifted through them one at a time, seeking the right fit. Surprise? Fear? Innocence? Curiosity? He watched Murino flip through them, studied his face as he considered, then discarded various possibilities. He decided, apparently, on the last.

“Yes? And what would you like to know, Commissario?” (Leon 1996, 199)

At this point, I will simply say that, for the reasons set out in chapters 2 and 3, current narratological approaches do not do a great deal to bring out the full significance of this passage. I will refer to it again at the end of chapter 7, by which time I hope that, when you read it there in the light of chapters 4

to 7, much more of its significance will have been revealed. Of course, there is nothing to stop you going straight there now except possibly the feeling that you might have missed some interesting stuff along the way!

## 2. Summary

This summary of the argument of the book is placed here to assist readers who wish to read the rest of the book and who will find it helpful to see from the beginning the purpose of the theoretical groundwork that is laid in later chapters, readers who are not yet sure whether or not they wish to read the rest of the book and may find a summary of the argument helpful in deciding, and readers who are sure that they will not read the rest of the book but who will want to know what they are missing.

What do we mean when we talk about the presentation of consciousness in fiction? It is clear what Dorrit Cohn has in mind when she refers to her “predilection for novels with thoughtful characters and scenes of self-communion” (1978, v) and her interest in “moments of lonely self-communion minutely tracing spiritual and emotional conflicts” (1999, 84). And, as I will suggest in chapter 3, her liking for private and heavily introspective thinking is shared by other narrative theorists. Self-communicings lend themselves to the highly verbalized, self-conscious form of thought that is known as *inner speech*, and the theoretical predilection for fictional introspection is accompanied by a decided preference for this form of thought. As the eminent narratologist Gerard Genette has argued in *Narrative Discourse* (1980), the “novelistic convention, perhaps truthful in this case, is that thoughts and feelings are no different from speech, except when the narrator undertakes to condense them into events and to relate them as such” (1980, 171). Examples of self-communicating characters who are popular with narrative theorists include Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*; Isobel Archer in Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady*; Stephen Dedalus, Leopold Bloom, and Molly Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*; and Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.

This emphasis on the privacy of thought explains why it is customary in studies of this sort to refer to the basic reality of our lives that we do not have direct access to the thoughts of others. R. D. Laing put the point memorably: “*your experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you. I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience. We are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another*” (1967, 16, quoted in Iser 1978, 165). In contrast, the vast majority of novels present directly to readers their main characters’ thoughts, and we have learned to accept this as

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perfectly natural. One of the pleasures of reading novels is the enjoyment of being told what a variety of fictional people are thinking. As Paola explains in the epigraph for this chapter, we get “reliable information.” This is a relief from the business of real life, much of which requires the ability to decode accurately the behavior of others. It is worth dwelling on the strangeness of this activity for a moment. In one sense to read “she felt happy” is the most natural thing in the world: we know what it is to feel happy. In another sense, it is the oddest: we do not know and can never know what it is to experience directly how another person can feel happy. The literary critic Georges Poulet captures the peculiar quality of reading about the thoughts of others in this way: “Because of the strange invasion of my person by the thoughts of another, I am a self who is granted the experience of thinking thoughts foreign to him. I am the subject of thoughts other than my own. My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another” (1969, 56).

But how does this intensely private, individualistic view of the mind account for the following scene in the sit-com *Friends*? One friend, Phoebe, lets slip to another, Rachel, that all the other friends think that she, Rachel, is still in love with Ross. Rachel protests that this is not true and that she is over him, but then eventually agrees that yes, all right, she *is* still in love with him. “But why didn’t you tell me?” Rachel demands to know. “Because we thought you knew!” exclaims Phoebe. What this exchange appears to show is that Rachel’s feelings about Ross were more accessible to the other friends than they were to her. They all knew that she was still in love with Ross even though she herself did not know. On the other hand, we should not go too far in this direction because the conversation also shows that the knowledge that people have of the inner states of others can be patchy. Rachel did not know that the other friends knew, and the others did not know that Rachel did not know! In a sense, the humor in this scene is a new take on the familiar, clichéd old joke about the two psychiatrists (or the two behaviorists, depending on your prejudice) who say to each other when meeting, “You’re fine, how am I?” However, the *Friends* scene is more interesting, it seems to me, for two reasons: it acknowledges that all of us, not just specialists in the study of the mind, have some sort of access to the thinking of others; and it also acknowledges that thought can be private and inaccessible as well as public and shared.

So, what would happen to the narratological study of private and introspective fictional minds if we applied to it some of the various discourses on real minds? Well, the philosopher Gilbert Ryle suggests that to “talk of a person’s mind is . . . to talk of the person’s abilities, liabilities, and inclinations to do and