

Narrative in the Anthropocene by ERIN JAMES. (Theory and Interpretation of Narrative)
Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 2022. ix+207 pp. \$79.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1507-4.

Narrative in the Anthropocene is a work of narrative theory that argues, at its core, that narrative and the Anthropocene are in a reciprocal relationship such that ‘we better understand narrative by placing it in the context of the Anthropocene’ (p. 5) and, in turn, must recognise that the Anthropocene intimately shapes narrative. At stake in this project is the question of whether narrative has the power to shape ideas about - and actions towards - the environment. In the stalemate that is produced between optimistic scholars that see narrative, and specifically the novel, as positively linked to real world action, on the one hand, and those that see it as ‘incompatible with a responsible environmental ethos’ (p. 13) due to its forms, conventions and underlying assumptions, on the other; James advocates for a ‘third approach’ (p. 4). She argues for the necessary contribution of narrative theorists to this debate in order to further probe ‘the evolution of narrative, the link between narrative structure and ideology, and the real-world effects of narrative interpretation’ (p. 13), both potentially positive and negative, and well beyond the scope of the traditional form of the novel. Indeed, texts as diverse as virtual reality apps, micro stories, graphic novels and scientific reports can fit under James’s definition of ‘narrative’ as ‘worldbuilding for some purpose’ and provide case studies for the subsequent chapters (p. 19).

In Chapter 1, ‘Worlds’, influenced by Edward Said’s methodology of *contrapuntual reading* - and unlike many studies in the eco-narratological space - James argues for the need to pay attention to the narratives that do not explicitly deal with anthropogenic climate change at the level of content, as much as those that do. She finds the former to be a ‘valuable source for studying the assumptions of human superiority that have helped to produce the Anthropocene and the textual mechanism and cognitive processes by which they circulate’

(p. 52). Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Ian McEwan's *Solar* provide examples of similar anthropocentric structures used problematically, in the case of Austen, with location/environment as a mere backdrop to characterization; and as a means of successful critique of apathy towards climate change in *Solar*.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 all deal with different representational challenges for authors writing in/about the Anthropocene. Chapter 2, 'Material', is concerned with the way in which the internet is shaping cognition and patterns of reading, precipitating a rise in more bite-size forms of literature such as 'flash fiction'. Returning, however, to longer forms in Chapter 3, 'Time', James proposes two concepts: the 'pseudo-singular' and the 'effect-event' (p. 97) to describe units of narrative time, in particular those that demand of the reader the double function of appreciating an event as singular whilst it pertains to a (geological) time frame that is hard to grasp in its enormity. Another representational challenge associated with narrating the uncertain futures of the Anthropocene, is the presence of 'unstable, mutating, and unknowable' (p. 143) spatial cues, for which James proposes the need for 'despatialization' in Chapter 4. This addresses the fact that traditional narrative theory tends to see space as a fixed backdrop to plot-led action, but in narratives concerned with climate change the 'background' can become the biggest source of tension and indeed the narrative site of plural future possibilities, which have to be apprehended simultaneously.

In Chapter 5 James turns to 'Narration', exploring 'inconsistent we-narration' and the 'fictional *you*' as forms of narrative resource that 'aid the project of worldbuilding for environmental purposes' (p. 150). These narrative modes are compared by James to the world-building arrogance of the traditional omniscient narrator that typically stands apart from the action as if unaffected by it, implicitly foreclosing a collective perspective or action. In the final Coda entitled 'Narrative and Climate Science', James addresses the potential benefits of climate scientists developing their understanding of narrative storytelling as a tool

for writing and, in turn, paying more attention to qualitative testimonies regarding climate change. It is thus an appreciation of narrative that can enable scientists to see subjective narrative *as data*. Furthermore, an improved understanding of storytelling techniques could enable climate scientists to more effectively shape the future when communicating their own work.

The strong point of this work is precisely in widening the definition of what constitutes 'narrative' and consequently discovering common interests between scientists, artists and scholars. James then provides a toolkit for the evaluation of our own work - and others' - that addresses some of the challenges that all of us face when 'worldbuilding for some purpose' in the Anthropocene.

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