The Rhetoric of Fictionality

Narrative Theory and the
Idea of Fiction

Richard Walsh
To Jacques Berthoud
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My attempts to write this book began long, long ago, when I was still the Keasbey Research Fellow at Selwyn College, Cambridge. It’s been a slow process, but not a painful one thanks in large part to the interest and support of the many people who have become involved, in one way or another, along the way. The first I’d like to mention, from those early days, is Manuela Tecușan, whose enthusiasm always made me smile. Soon afterwards my colleagues at the University of York became important, both for their contributions to the supportive research environment in which I’ve worked ever since, and for their indulgence of my occasional contributions to it. In particular, I’m grateful to Jacques Berthoud, without whom this work would probably have never seen the light of day. I am hugely indebted to him for his belief in the merit of my work and his instrumental support of my career (in fact, his creation of the possibility of my career). I’d also like to thank Stephen Minta and Derek Attridge, both of whom have provided invaluable advice and encouragement.

My experience of my fellow narrative theorists, both on and off the page, has been overwhelmingly positive, and the few people I can mention by name must also stand in part as representatives of a scholarly community I think is notable for its intellectual generosity. I owe special thanks to those who took an early interest in my work, and indeed sought me out because of it: notably Meir Sternberg, Monika Fludernik, and Emma Kafalenos. Among the many more who have contributed to the work in progress via questions, conversations, or correspondence, I’d like to mention Gerald Prince, Brian Richardson, Jan Baetens, Jonathan Culler, Alan Palmer, David Herman, Ruth Page, and Frederick Aldama. The three people whose influence has been greatest on the final form of the book,
though, are James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz, and Brian McHale: their detailed comments and suggestions in response to the draft manuscript were a crucial aid at the point when my own sense of it was numbed by proximity. Jim and Peter, in fact, have been formative influences upon my thinking at several prior stages, as editors of the Blackwell *Companion to Narrative Theory* and (in Jim’s case) as editor of *Narrative*, in which some of my earliest work appeared. As editors of the Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series they have engaged with the detail of my argument and its articulation with far greater care than an author has a right to expect, and I would have produced a lesser book without them. The production of the book is also indebted, of course, to the efforts of the staff at The Ohio State University Press, and among these I’d like to give particular thanks to Sandy Crooms and Maggie Diehl for their very helpful and solicitous approach.

I’ve already alluded to some of the intermediate stages in the realization of this project, and there are several institutional acknowledgments due in relation to that process. Two British Academy Overseas Conference Grants, in 2003 and 2005, allowed me to air preliminary versions of arguments included here. Many of those arguments have also appeared in print in earlier or shorter form, as follows: part of chapter one in the Blackwell *Companion to Narrative Theory* (2005); chapter two as “Fictionality and Mimesis: Between Narrativity and Fictional Worlds,” *Narrative* 11.1 (2003); chapter three in *Style* 35.4 (2001); chapter four as “Who Is the Narrator?” *Poetics Today* 18.4 (1997); half of chapter six as “The Narrative Imagination across Media,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006); chapter seven as “The Novelist as Medium,” *Neophilologus* 84.3 (2000); and chapter eight as “Why We Wept for Little Nell: Character and Emotional Involvement,” *Narrative* 5.3 (1997).

My last and most personal thanks, though, go to Duncan, Frances, Alex, Ryan, and Marcia, for making the whole thing that much harder.
In the course of writing this book, I have found occasion to challenge many of the core concepts of narrative theory. Every chapter exhibits, to a greater or lesser extent, an attitude of sceptical reconsideration towards some prevalent theoretical view: the most prominent targets of this critique are fictional worlds theory (chapters one, two, four, and eight); speech act approaches to fiction (chapters one and four); the logical priority of fabula over sujet, or story over discourse (chapter three); the concepts of the narrator and implied author (chapter four); the metaphor of voice in narrative mediacy (chapter five); the notion of narrative’s medium independence (chapter six); the communication model of narrative authorship (chapter seven); and mimetic and formalist approaches to character (chapter eight). The same revisionist stance also manifests itself in a number of attempts to vindicate rather old-fashioned ideas in new terms, such as the discussions of mimesis (chapter two), the novelist’s inspiration (chapter seven), and emotional involvement with fictions (chapter eight). In all these instances my arguments have a dissenting air, and viewed in this light, the book as a whole might appear to be an extended provocation to fellow narrative theorists. Well, I hope it is that in part, but its real purpose is rather different and has a more positive character.

These wide-ranging re-evaluations are all straightforward consequences of the approach I have taken to my topic, narrative fictionality. The distinctiveness of fiction is usually taken to be a quality of the discursive product (a fictional representation) or a quality of the discursive act (a nonserious or otherwise framed assertion), whereas I conceive of fictionality as a distinctive rhetorical resource, functioning directly as part of the pragmatics of serious communication. I argue the possibility of such a view of fiction
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in chapter one, drawing upon, and extrapolating from, the pragmatic theory of relevance advanced by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. What follows in the rest of the book is an inquiry into the manifold implications of this view for narrative theory. Each chapter is an exploration of the way such a perspective upon fictionality cuts across core theoretical issues in the field, not primarily for the sake of what it does to received narratological opinion on those issues, but for the sake of the light it sheds on the idea of a rhetorical concept of fictionality. The overarching perspective I advocate and assume throughout these explorations is thrown into relief by the critique of familiar concepts that it enables. This process of theoretical refiguring also generates a number of suggestive specific claims, such as the view of fiction as a kind of exercise of narrative understanding in chapter two; the discrimination between instance, idiom and interpella
tion in chapter five; the conception of narrative as a cognitive faculty, and dreams as protofictions, in chapter six; the notion of narrative “rightness” as the benchmark of the fictive imagination in chapter seven; or the discursive model of affective engagement in chapter eight.

The perspective on fictionality adopted here is in part a response to the changing scope and purpose of narrative theoretical inquiry. Narrative theory has always had grandly expansionist ambitions, but in recent years the pace of that expansion has tended to outstrip the range and adaptability of the available theoretical paradigms. Literary narrative, and literary fiction in particular, has been the test bed for most of the conceptual apparatus of narrative theory, but many of the basic assumptions entailed by that heritage, about both the nature of its object of inquiry and the appropriate disciplinary methodologies and objectives, look increasingly inappropriate and parochial. The burden of interest in narrative has shifted significantly towards other media, towards nonfictional forms, and towards disciplines beyond the English department, or indeed the humanities and social sciences. Narrative theory now finds itself addressing an object of study that may be as relevant to legal studies, medicine, computer science, artificial intelligence, or psychology as it is to literature. Theoretical discussion in any particular context (and my own bias in this book is avowedly literary) is always at risk of overgeneralization from its particulars, and consequently under a certain pressure of abstraction in order to accommodate the sheer range of narrative. Similarly, the scope of fictionality, and hence the nature of theoretical inquiry about it, has come to seem greater than it once did, and further removed from the particulars of any corpus of fic
tions. So although for me the question of fictionality arises in a literary context, it is necessarily implicated in ideas about much more inclusive
frames of reference: about communication in general, about cognition, about the faculty of imagination. The point of theorizing fictionality is not, for me, primarily to inform or enable the interpretation of fictional texts, or to refine the apparatus of literary study (though I think it does do both of these things); it is a more abstract inquiry into the conditions of significance that make these activities conceivable and worthwhile.

My perspective on fictionality is both grounded in the pragmatics of discursive process and pragmatist in its theoretical orientation, and this is a fundamental respect in which it cuts across the received model of narrative theory as a field of inquiry, at least insofar as this still bears the mark of its structuralist origins. Structuralism was the theoretical paradigm that made possible the elaboration of narrative theory as we know it today, and I feel as intellectually indebted to it, I’m sure, as most people working in the field. Of course, a great deal of the most important work on narrative over the last twenty years has sought to qualify, reconfigure, hybridize, or otherwise move beyond classical structuralist narratology, but in some fundamental respects this effort can be understood, in the main, as convergent with the paradigm established in that classical phase. Structuralism was about nothing if not the hegemony of systems as the precondition for any meaning, or meaningful action, whatsoever; the scientific mind-set of structuralist theory is very much about the project of exhaustive description and refinement such a view of a system invites, along with the demonstration of its explanatory power across the range of instances within the system’s compass; that is to say, the project of filling out the paradigm. There is much in a pragmatist view that sits uncomfortably with such a model of the field of inquiry: it tends to introduce elements of irreducible contingency, an awareness of analytical horizons, and scepticism towards the possibility (or utility) of exactly the kind of synoptic, systematic mastery that is the prime directive of structuralist-inspired narratology. My arguments in this book will often seem unhelpful, contrary, and counterproductive in just this kind of way if they are taken as straightforward been, and still is, for many scholars. But to retain the model of scientific inquiry, and to invoke Thomas Kuhn for a moment (without, I hope, too much of either presumption or irony), I would suggest that the perspective adopted in this book is symptomatic of a growing sense of paradigm shift in the air.

One way to clarify my own take on this state of affairs, and hence the sense of theoretical purpose driving the discussions in this book, is to draw attention to a move that features, in different ways, in several of the arguments I put forward. In essence, this move involves granting partial
or provisional legitimacy to a concept that I also claim is theoretically unsound. Some such double perspective informs my comments on fabula or story, narrative voice, character, fictional world, and Genette’s typology of narration, for example—as well as some more glancing observations on concepts such as representation and event. The inference from these various accommodations would seem to be that I am trading off analytical rigour against practical utility: these terms are just too well embedded in critical discourse to be jettisoned. But such an approach would be something of a slight to theory, which is not at all my intention; I’m a theorist, after all, and I spend far more time in these chapters tracing the complex web of assumptions behind these concepts and distinctions than I do affirming their critical value. This would be odd if my objective in doing so were the pursuit of a purer, more coherent, yet less useful theoretical nomenclature. In fact, the reader of this book need not fear a barrage of new terminology (narrative theory has more than enough already), because my method throughout is not based upon an assumed tension between theoretical rigour and practical exigency in the analysis of narrative, but on their necessary and complementary coexistence. This is a consequence of an approach to narrative theory grounded in pragmatism as a methodological and philosophical orientation, as distinct from a more directly pragmatic approach to narrative interpretation. Pragmatism assumes that every conceptual framework is provisional and to be valued according to its outcomes, and reciprocally, that the value of any particular interpretation is contingent upon the legitimizing authority of some conceptual framework. So, narrative theory must be accountable to the general experience of narrative and the creative and interpretative processes it entails, but at the same time such experience cannot be considered theoretically Edenic: it is informed and shaped by the very language in which it is articulated. Every narrative theoretical concept is caught in this double bind to precisely the extent that it has currency. For me, the response this situation demands is a double one: to begin and end with the terms in which the experience of narrative is articulated (within whatever historical or demagogic frame of reference), but also to pursue the theoretical logic of those terms, according to their own premises, with analytical rigour. The focus of interest is always how these reciprocal poles bear on the idea of the narrative encounter in process, with its horizons and its tendentiousness, rather than a systemic overview of the permutations of narrative phenomena in and of themselves. The ultimate objective is not, of course—cannot be—to instate a superior model of an object of study (narrative), but to characterize the parameters of the communicative process of narrative creation and reception, or more particularly the fictive aspect of it.
My title inevitably calls to mind a seminal work in narrative theory, Wayne Booth’s classic study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, first published in 1961, and there are two premises of Booth’s argument to which this book connects, even if it dissents from much in his own elaboration of those premises. One of them is at stake in the term “rhetoric,” the other in “fiction”—or for me, “fictionality”—so that the titular echo is sufficiently accounted for by the two of them together. A rhetorical perspective implies a concern with communicative acts, which in Booth’s terms meant the “glorious meeting” of authors and readers in texts (403). This translated into a critical project which was centrally concerned with, among other things, issues of authorial intention (under the banner of the “implied author”) and of the moral dimension of fiction—the values implicated in or invoked by such acts of communication. The contemporary critical environment provides fertile ground for a rhetorical mode of criticism in which the values being negotiated by that rhetoric are of primary concern, and my own allegiance to rhetoric begins here; it leads me back to the author (not merely the implied author) and the authorial communicative act, and if the terms in which it does so are different from Booth’s, I nonetheless think it worth registering the affinity underlying the differences. Among these would be that my emphasis, in talking of the act of fiction, falls on contextuality rather than intention; that I assume the act to be marked by the specificity of its occasion; and that my sense of the authorial role is somewhat refigured. But the authorial communicative act, for me, is a vital focus for the interpretation of fiction, and though I profess a view of authorship as less heroic, of the encounter between author and reader as less glorious, than Booth would have it, I do not mean to diminish their importance.

Almost the first gesture of Booth’s 1983 afterword to the second edition of his book was one of repentance for the hubris of calling it “The Rhetoric of Fiction”: the subject is huge, and even such a wide-ranging and substantial volume as his could hardly claim to be definitive. I contemplated using the indefinite article in the title of this book, or even no article at all, thereby transforming “rhetoric” from a count noun to a mass noun (“some” rhetoric, if you will). But in fact what is needed is a distinction between two possible interpretations of my title (and Booth’s), one of which I want to disown. *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* might be a book about the rhetorical function of fictionality, or it might be a treatise on, or taxonomy of, the body of rules, principles, or devices that constitute fictionality: that is, either fictionality’s rhetoric, or my *Rhetoric*. Needless to add, I intend the former sense: the book is about the rhetoric of fictionality, it does not constitute it.
As far as the term “fiction” is concerned, a crucial implication of a rhetorical approach to fiction in particular is, for my purposes in this book, that it requires a renegotiation of the complex relations between narration (whether authorial or not) and fictional representation. Booth’s study was largely driven by an argument with the tendency of contemporary novel criticism to neglect the “telling” in favour of the “told,” in the name of a realist aesthetic he saw hardening into dogma. The bias of criticism in the decades that followed was, if anything, on the opposite side: narrative theory elaborated on questions of narration with enthusiasm, while more general antireferential and textualist critical orientations tended to eclipse the representational assumptions with which Booth had worked. In fact, in the retrospective light of his afterword, he found it more necessary to defend the opposite flank: “I would still differ strongly from those analysts who see fiction as made of language; they are made (at least for our purposes here) of characters-in-action, told about in language” (409). The nature and logic of that duality remains a live issue in narrative theory—it is worth noting that Booth’s commitment to studying the rhetoric of fiction as the art of “imposing fictional worlds” upon readers (419) has since gained considerable theoretical sophistication in the work of critics interested in issues of fictional reference. My concern is to establish the importance of a larger rhetorical perspective by insisting on the centrality of the idea of “fictionality,” as something akin to a master-trope of fictional narrative, and to demonstrate the capacity of such a perspective to account for the effects of representation which dominate the experience of reading fiction. My premise is that a properly rhetorical account of fiction ought to be answerable to the nature of such reading experiences, but that it should at the same time resist the temptation to lapse from explaining the rhetoric of fictionality into a kind of critical collaboration with it. “The rhetoric of fiction,” in Booth’s usage, encompassed two senses of the relation between its terms: he distinguished between the rhetoric in fiction (as overt appeal, most notably in the form of authorial commentary), and fiction as rhetoric (the whole art of storytelling as an act of communication). Both senses, however, are bounded by the occasion of storytelling, dedicated to that goal of imposing fictional worlds, and eliciting the reader’s moral engagement with them. I am interested in the attempt to see fiction from outside that frame, to understand the principles of its relation to the contexts within which it is produced. While Booth’s two senses both placed rhetoric at the service of representation, I would like to invert that hierarchy by proposing a third rhetorical perspective in which fiction is understood as a particular way of meaning, a particular kind of contribution to cultural discourse at large, the distinguishing features of which are grounded in
the rhetorical potential generated by its fictionality as such. The rhetoric of fiction in this sense constitutes a bridge between extrinsic and intrinsic criticism, between ideology and formalism, or between the text as symptom and the text as oracle.

Booth rightly objected in his afterword to the tendency of some critics to treat all narratives as fictional (although his motives, which relate to Peter Rabinowitz’s distinction between “authorial” and “narrative” audiences, are not mine); there remains much to be said, under the general auspices of narrative theory, about the specific rhetoric of fictionality. Fictionality (as a rhetorical rather than ontological quality) is almost inherently narrative, but it is not coextensive with narrativity, and still less with textuality in general. Not that fictionality should be equated simply with “fiction,” as a category or genre of narrative: it is a communicative strategy, and as such it is apparent on some scale within many nonfictional narratives, in forms ranging from something like an ironic aside, through various forms of conjecture or imaginative supplementation, to full-blown counterfactual narrative examples. Conversely, much fiction serves communicative functions, of both non-narrative (essayistic) and narrative (documentary) kinds, which do not exclusively belong to the rhetoric of fictionality: think of the generalizing moral commentary of George Eliot, or the historical contextualizations of Scott. But the generic marker of all fictional narrative, literary or cinematic, is that the rhetoric of fictionality is the dominant framework for the communicative gesture being made, and therefore defines the terms in which it solicits interpretation.

To reiterate, then, the approach I adopt in the following chapters is to re-examine fundamental questions in narrative theory through the prism of a new conception of the rhetorical nature of fictionality, both to throw into relief the implications of that conception and to demonstrate its salience and value in negotiation with currently prevalent assumptions. The case for the cogency of such a view of fictionality is made in chapter one. The chapters that follow adopt that view and confront the major issues that arise at the point of intersection between narrative theory and fictionality, progressing from the abstract to the concrete. That is to say, while the earlier chapters (chapters two to five) wrestle directly with core concepts of narrative theory in their own terms, the later chapters (chapters six to eight) negotiate with theory through more extensive examples to give a fuller sense of the bearing of fictionality, as I conceive it, upon instantiated questions.

Chapter one begins by posing the question of fictionality and suggesting that the range of theoretical responses to date share a tendency to displace the issue rather than resolve it. I propose that fictionality should
not be viewed as a problem of truth, but of relevance, and I show how relevance is a crucial concept in two distinct theoretical domains: fictional worlds theory and speech act theory. By teasing out the function of relevance within each of these conceptual frameworks in turn, I demonstrate that neither does enough to pursue the full implications of the concept for communication in general, or for fictive discourse in particular. For a better understanding of the importance of relevance, I turn to the context within which it has been given the fullest treatment, which is relevance theory. My exposition of this model of communication shows its crucial intervention in speech act theory, and the work of H. P. Grice in particular, and how it provides a theoretical perspective within which the criterion of relevance ceases to be subordinate to truth. I then show how the implications of such a perspective for our understanding of fictionality have not yet been recognized, and I put forward my own view of what these implications are, and the pragmatic rhetoric of fictionality that I think emerges. To illustrate the argument, I offer a detailed analysis of how a relevance theory perspective can explain the communicative efficacy of fiction in relation to the opening sentence of The Trial, before outlining the merits of a pragmatic model of fictionality and its significance for narrative theory.

In chapter two I situate fictionality in relation to the interdisciplinary ambitions of narrative theory, which have tended to conflate fictionality with nonfictional narrativity, and in relation to fictional worlds theory, which has disarmed fictionality by literalizing fictional reference. I argue that our understanding of fictionality as a rhetorical resource is equally impoverished by both approaches, and I locate the crux of the problem in their treatment of mimesis, which is either redeployed to cover the whole domain of narrative representation or disappears entirely. The difficulty in reserving mimesis for fictional narrative is already apparent in the work of both the preeminent twentieth-century champions of mimesis, Georg Lukács and Erich Auerbach, for whom it ultimately transcends any opposition between fiction and history. This is also the case with Paul Ricoeur’s work, in which mimesis is closely related to poststructuralist narrativity. But Ricoeur introduces a new emphasis on mimesis as a process, “configuration,” and in this respect the fictional and nonfictional instances are not symmetrical: in fiction, mimesis has no data on which to act except what it proposes to itself, and so it lacks the direct purpose of nonfictional narrative understanding. I suggest that the required element of indirectness is best articulated by the term “exercise,” which means both “use” and “development” and is both playful and purposeful. Fiction is, in this sense, the exercise of our narrative understanding, and fictionality is the regime that provides its cultural rationale.
In chapter three I take a rhetorical view of the concept of fabula and defend its pragmatic value, and its particular relevance to fiction, once it has been extricated from the various misconceptions to which it is peculiarly subject. The concept has long been a staple of narrative theory, and some of the problems attending it go back quite directly to its Russian Formalist roots, though others have arisen through its structuralist mediation, in the guise of distinctions between such terms as “story” and “discourse.” I demonstrate the inadequacies of these models by pursuing the argument through fabula’s relationship to event, chronology, temporality, causality, perspective, medium, and the genesis of narrative. The sense in which the concept remains valuable, I suggest, is in respect to its role in the process of interpretation, especially in the case of fictional narrative. The significant point, however, is that the rhetorical basis of this view of fabula and its relation to sujet effectively overturns the logical hierarchy of previous representational models.

Chapter four exposes the way in which the concept of the narrator as a distinct and inherent agent of fictional narrative has served to frame and contain the issue of fictionality. I address myself to Gérard Genette’s typology of narrators, and I show that all homodiegetic and intradiegetic narrators are equally represented and therefore characters. I then confront the extradiegetic heterodiegetic case, examining the implications of omnisience and external focalization, and dismissing the claim that distinct narrators are needed in such cases so that the fictional information may be presented as known rather than as imagined. This argument leads to a discussion of the author’s accountability for fictional statements with reference to speech act theory, in which I show why the conventional pretense model of fiction is unsatisfactory. Some possible objections to my position are then considered: the implications of unreliability, ideas about local and covert narrators, and the issue of the implied author are all taken into account. I then draw out the argument’s consequences for an understanding of fiction in rhetorical rather than representational terms.

In chapter five I begin to address the implications of a communicative model of fictionality as a rhetoric of representation capable of semiotic articulation in various media, by considering one of the most linguistically marked concepts of narrative theory—voice—from a transmedia perspective. I distribute the senses of “voice” under three headings, in which the term is considered as “instance,” as “idiom,” and as “interpellation.” These categories correspond to applications of the concept in which the emphasis falls, respectively, on the representational act, an object of representation, and a representational subject position. Represented narrative idiom, on this view, is confined to second-degree narrative representation: I contrast
the order of mimesis, or second-degree narration, as an object of representation, and hence rhetorical effect, with that of diegesis (first-degree narration) as a rhetorical means. I go on to distinguish between the inference of a subject and of a subject position, in relation to free indirect discourse and internal focalization, and explore analogues for such effects in non-linguistic media. In the final section, I advance a view of focalization as a form of (voice as) interpellation, in which the rhetorical effect is one of alignment with a subject position rather than objectification of a representational subject. This discussion touches on second-person address as a strategy of focalization, and it concludes by pursuing the issue of voice beyond discourse, and perspective, to ideology, to show how usage of the term in such contexts as Bakhtinian dialogics and feminist narratology may be incorporated within this conceptual framework.

Chapter six continues the focus on issues of media by contesting the strong presumption that narrative, capable as it is of expression in several different media, is constituted by a medium-independent content, and advocating instead a rhetorical model of its medium-contingency. I begin by considering the nature of the medium in narrative, as a vehicle of transmission or a means of articulation, and unpack the relation between narrative media and the foundational narrative concept of the event, which figures (misleadingly) in most definitions of minimal narrative, to arrive at a view of narrative as a cognitive faculty. The chapter addresses two examples, one from the medium of comics and one from early film. My comics example, Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman*, relates this cognitive sense of media to the narrative quality of dreams. I examine the place of self-consciousness and homodiegesis in dreams, and confront the question they pose about the ambiguity between narrative and experience at a cognitive level. I address this issue in terms of the relation between representation and illusion in film, in the context of the long history of parables of mimetic illusion. My second example, *The Countryman and the Cinematograph*, is an early cinematic version of such a parable, and it provides for reflection on several key aspects of the semiotic understanding of (moving) images, all of which is mediated by the self-reflexive fictionality of the film’s representation of the institution, machinery, and reception of early cinema. I unfold the implications of the film in relation to scale, perspective, and framing, which I present as three increasingly inclusive ways of conceiving the rhetorical articulation of the moving image and the semiotic role of the medium. This discussion allows me to return to the subject of dreams and advance a view of the narrative dream as a protofiction, in which fictionality is a specific “direction-of-fit” rhetoric, and the dream is a paradigm for a rhetoric-driven (rather than reference-driven) model of narrative.
Chapter seven considers fictive communication in terms of the metaphor of the novelist as medium (in the transmissive sense discarded in chapter six). I suggest that this metaphor avoids treating narrative creativity as the symbolic articulation of authorial intentions, without reducing novelistic discourse to the communication of fictional narrative as literal information. The chapter examines certain kinds of experience, common among novelists, in which creativity is equated with a loss of narrative control. I elaborate on the senses in which such narrative obligations situate the novelist as a “medium” negotiating between the narrative and its readers. The argument centres on novelists’ own accounts of their experiences of creativity, with particular reference to Alice Walker, Charlotte Brontë, Sir Walter Scott, Anthony Trollope, Elizabeth Bowen, Henry James, and Donald Barthelme. I establish the common features of novelistic mediation, and I distinguish between accounts that invoke obligations to higher discursive authorities and those that appeal to representational imperatives. The latter are pursued in more detail, first in relation to the ubiquitous notion of novelists’ deference to the demands of their characters, and then in relation to the autonomy of story itself. Throughout, I trace the recurrence, in these novelists’ reflections, of an association between the nebulous issue of creativity and practical considerations about their professional authority and accountability to a readership, and ultimately I situate these concerns within a view of the narrative imagination’s deference to rhetorical imperatives.

In chapter eight, I turn to the reception of fiction and consider the extremes of response to the notorious death of Little Nell (the intense emotional involvement she elicited on first publication, and her subsequent decline into an icon of vulgar sentimentality). I use this problematic case to argue that emotional involvement is the recognition of values inherent in the discursive information given by a narrative, rather than in the actuality of the characters this information generates. Whereas the mimetic model of character is founded on the assumed priority of objective fact to evaluative response, my approach regards discursive information as already value laden, and hence rhetorically charged in the offering; fictional being does not precede, but follows from, the evaluative, emotional dynamics of fictional narrative. My example serves to historicize both the theoretical issues involved and certain underlying assumptions about readers’ literary competence. I go on to show how a rhetorical perspective allows a more sympathetic response to Dickens’s achievement in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

My perspective on the rhetoric of fictionality, then, offers a vantage point from which many of the core issues of narrative theory look rather
different. This book pursues that difference, from its conceptual premises to its tangible implications, in a sequence that runs from the abstract to the (relatively) concrete. The trajectory of my argument situates the rhetoric of fictionality first in relation to current views about its discursive and ontological distinctiveness (chapter two), then to the consensus models of narrative structure (chapter three) and narrative transmission (chapter four). The balance between abstract and instantiated issues begins to shift in chapter five, where I apply the logic of my approach to the several aspects of voice and narrative mediacy, from which point I go on to address its implications for fictions across media and for narrative cognition (chapter six), for narrative creativity (chapter seven), and for the reception of fictions (chapter eight). Throughout, the argument looks both ways: if you hypothesize a rhetorical model of fictionality, these are the consequences; if these consequences make sense, it makes sense to speak of the rhetoric of fictionality. I think it does, obviously.
Josef K., the protagonist of Kafka’s *The Trial*, finds himself in a situation in which his efforts to establish his innocence, to explain himself, have no focus and no boundaries: he can only envisage a plea in the form of a narrative of his entire life. Our own efforts to make sense of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding K.’s envisaged narrative act are crucially related to a distinctive fact about Kafka’s: while K. contemplates autobiography, Kafka engages in fiction. Fiction is usually understood to have a second-order relation to the real world, via the mimetic logic of fictional representation: it represents events, or imitates discourses, that we assimilate through nonfictional modes of narrative understanding. So even where (as here) the fiction is in some respects unrealistic, it is comprehensible in terms of its relation to familiar types of narrative: not only the accused person’s effort of self-justification and the discourse of moral autobiography, but also psychological narratives of guilt and the several kinds of legal narrative that inform the global frame of reference of *The Trial*.

On the other hand, the place of narrative in nonfictional contexts such as legal studies has itself attracted a lot of attention in recent years. H. Porter Abbott’s *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* devotes a whole chapter to “narrative contestation,” for which his paradigm case is the competing narrative efforts of the prosecution and defence in the notorious 1893 trial of Lizzie Borden, accused (and acquitted) of murdering her father and
stepmother (138–55). Abbott emphasizes the way in which the prosecution and defence, in this as in all trials, strive to establish narrative credibility by aligning their representation of events with rhetorically advantageous “masterplots,” by which he means familiar skeletal narratives with an established cultural authority. So Lizzie Borden’s apparent “lack of affect” in the face of the murders is narrativized by one side as the shock of a virtuous daughter, by the other as the cold-blooded viciousness of a Lady Macbeth (147–49). In a legal context, the issue of narrative truth is especially pointed (Lizzie Borden, after all, stood in jeopardy of the death penalty). Yet the explanatory power of narrative here depends less on its relation to fact than its relation to other narratives, and it is in these terms that both sides make their case. Indeed, they can do no other, even in those self-reflexive moments when they accuse each other of doing so.

The general point here is that all narrative, fictional and nonfictional, is artifice. Narratives are constructs, and their meanings are internal to the system of narrative. For some theorists, this general quality of narrativity subsumes the concept of fictionality entirely: if all narratives derive their meaning from their relation to other narratives, rather than any direct purchase on reality, then it no longer makes sense to use this second-order kind of relation specifically to characterize fiction. Yet the awkward fact remains that the narratives elaborated by prosecution and defence in the Lizzie Borden trial made truth claims that Kafka’s novel does not make, and accordingly these two cultural modes of narrative invoke quite different interpretative assumptions. In this respect the rise of the general concept of narrativity, far from superseding the issue of fictionality, has actually exposed it as a theoretical problem. If the logic of narrative representation does not provide for a defensible distinction between fiction and nonfiction, then the focus of theoretical attention is necessarily displaced from the substance of fictional narrative to the act of fictive narration, from the product to the production of fiction. How are we to understand fictive narration as a referential act, or as an act of communication? It is in this context that I want to advocate a pragmatic approach to the issue of fictionality, one that draws on philosophical and linguistic fields of inquiry into the communicative use of language, and in particular invokes the conceptual framework of relevance theory.

Modern accounts of fictionality generally turn on one or more of a small repertoire of theoretical gambits, which can be collectively understood as gestures of disavowal, achieved through several kinds of displacement. That is to say, these accounts variously respond to the problem of fictionality as a problem of truthfulness and resolve it by detaching the
A fictive act from the domain of truth, that is, language. The kinds of theoretical move I have in mind are: the institution of a narrator as the source of the fictive discourse; the redescriptions of fictional artifacts as props in a game of make-believe; the notion of pretended speech acts; and the recuperation of fictional reference as actual reference to fictional worlds. The first two moves place the language of fiction itself within the fictional frame; the third move disqualifies it, as nonserious language, from communicative accountability; and the fourth move allows the language of fiction to be literal and serious but not exactly fictive (that is, to the extent that fictive language does not make referential commitments), since fictionality has been redefined as a matter of ontological modality. The nub of fictionality always turns out to be elsewhere; it is as if fictionality were not a problem except in relation to language. This is odd, given that language, I take it, is what makes fiction possible—and by a language here I mean broadly any codified system of representation (fictions in any medium are equally dependent upon a language, a representational code, and not merely upon cognitive illusion).

Fictionality, I want to suggest, functions within a communicative framework: it resides in a way of using a language, and its distinctiveness consists in the recognizably distinct rhetorical set invoked by that use. I assume that narrative fictionality is worth distinguishing from narrativity in general. That is to say, I want to grant full force to the claim that all narrative is artifice, and in that very restricted sense fictive, but I maintain nonetheless that fictional narrative has a coherently distinct cultural role, and that a distinct concept of fictionality is required to account for this role. It is best explained in functional and rhetorical terms, rather than in formal terms: true, there are formal qualities strongly associated with fiction, but they do not supply necessary or sufficient conditions of fictionality. To say instead that fictionality is a functional attribute is to say that it is a use of language; to say that it is rhetorical is to say that this use is distinguished by the kind of appeal it makes to the reader’s (or the audience’s) interpretative attention. No model that treats fictive discourse as framed by formal, intentional, or ontological disavowal can meet these criteria for a concept of fictionality. If fictionality consists in a distinct way of using language, it is not explained by attaching its distinctiveness to some quarantine mechanism conceived precisely to maintain its conformity with nonfictional usage, at the cost of detaching it, in one way or another, from its actual communicative context. The rhetorical distinctiveness of fiction, then, is consistent with a communicative continuity between fictional and nonfictional uses of language. Fictionality is a
rhetorical resource integral to the direct and serious use of language within a real-world communicative framework.

I want to reformulate the age-old problem of fiction’s claim upon our attention, the challenge that has prompted various defences of poesy, or expulsions from republics, down through the centuries, as the problem of reconciling fictionality with relevance. The concept of relevance appears, in several quite specific senses, within two distinct, well-demarcated theoretical domains that have been important to recent discussions of fictionality: one is fictional worlds theory, which focuses on the referential act; the other is speech act theory, especially those accounts that engage with Gricean “conversational implicature” (Grice 1989), where the focus is on the communicative act. Relevance theory itself is a related approach to communication from the perspective of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, and although this field of research has not included any detailed consideration of fictionality, I shall argue that it provides an invaluable conceptual basis for a pragmatic theory of fiction founded upon the principle of relevance rather than truth.

Relevance and Fictional Worlds

The issue of relevance arises in fictional worlds theories in two respects: the first and narrowest is internal to a given fictional world and relates to the problem of incompleteness, and the second is external and concerns the global pertinence of fictional worlds to the reader. Incompleteness is a problem for fictional worlds theory because the text of a fiction cannot be expected to fully specify a world, nor even provide a sufficient basis for a comprehensive inferential process. There are always going to be gaps and indeterminacies in the interpretative construction of fictional worlds, which is a significant divergence from the philosophical model of possible worlds upon which fictional worlds theory is based, since it is axiomatic that possible worlds are logically complete. The theoretical response has been to invoke two complementary recuperative strategies. The first, proposed by Marie-Laure Ryan, is to bring fictional worlds into line with the logical framework of possible worlds theory by assuming a “principle of minimal departure.” The principle of minimal departure dictates that the world of the text is to be understood as complete and identical to the actual world, except for the respects in which it deviates from that model, either explicitly or implicitly, both in its own right and by virtue of any genre conventions it invokes (1991: 51). In this case, then, the fictional world
I want to distinguish between two functions of Ryan’s principle, only one of which really concerns me here. In one sense, it has an integral role in the interpretation of fiction, as when she says, “minimal departure explains the very possibility of making truth-functional statements about fiction” (56). This statement seems to invoke an indispensable premise for understanding fiction: we cannot begin to evaluate even the most explicit and literal level of fictional discourse without assuming that the world we know is its context, however much that assumption may be qualified in certain particulars. In another sense, it is a kind of supplement, to address the problem of incompleteness. She says, “It is by virtue of the principle of minimal departure that readers are able to form reasonably comprehensive representations of the foreign worlds created through discourse, even though the verbal representation of these worlds is always incomplete” (52). This is the sense I find problematic. If the problem really is logical incompleteness, the principle of minimal departure cannot help. There are indeterminacies in relation to the narrative particulars of any fiction for which the model of the actual world offers no decisive guidance (exactly how many times did K. consider the idea of preparing a short account of his life?). On the other hand, if the principle of minimal departure is assumed just to provide for a “reasonably comprehensive” world, it raises a question: how far does the reader pursue the gap-filling process it licences? What criterion limits that interpretative pursuit? However we may choose to define the goals of interpretation, the criterion required is one of relevance to those goals.

Ryan’s answer to the problem of incompleteness in fictional worlds is cited by Thomas Pavel, whose alternative solution is to conceive them as worlds of various sizes, determined by the texts from which they are constructed and open to extratextual information provided for by the principle of minimal departure, without being “maximal” (1986: 107–8). So, we might just conceivably infer that K. has an appendix, in the absence of any textual information to the contrary, but neglect to infer that his maternal great-grandfather had an appendix—although the latter inference would be better founded, on the basis of minimal departure, since an appendectomy would not then have been available. Pavel asks, “Should we distinguish between what is ‘in fact’ part of a fictional world and the parts of it that are of interest to the reader? Or should we rather assume that fictional worlds, as internal models, must limit themselves to what is of concern to the reader? Obviously, if the latter course is chosen, we do
not want fictional worlds to be maximal, since we are not interested in what lurks behind a limited circle of light and the penumbra surrounding it” (95). His response introduces the crucial notion of relevance: “Some form of gradual opacity to inference, some increasing resistance to maximal structures, must be at work in most fictional worlds, keeping them from expanding indefinitely along irrelevant lines” (95). Once the idea of relevance is admitted, however, it entirely supersedes that of completeness. It makes no practical difference whether the “facts” of a fictional world are understood maximally, independent of textual interpretation, or contingently, on the basis of what it is possible to infer from the text, because in either case the scope of inference is, in principle, non-finite. The horizon of the reader’s encounter with a fiction is determined not by what it is possible to infer, but by what is worth inferring. The reader will not pursue inferential reasoning beyond the point at which it ceases to seem relevant to the particulars of the narrative, in a specific context of interpretation. This is a pragmatic limit, but only such a limit can provide for the fact that fictional representations do not merely exist (in whatever qualified sense) but are communicated.

Such considerations invoke the other sense in which the notion of relevance arises in fictional worlds theory. Pavel declares a “principle of relevance” as one of only two fundamental principles of fictional reference (145), but the kind of relevance he has in mind here is quite distinct from the internal relevance presupposed by the discussion so far. Instead, it articulates an external, global relation, the sense, as he says, that “literary artifacts often are not projected into fictional distance just to be neutrally beheld but that they vividly bear upon the beholder’s world” (145). Pavel allows that the relation between worlds may take different forms, from the illustration of logical conclusions or moral generalizations to the mimetic report of information on unfamiliar periods or cultures, as well as a modern kind of ironized relevance consisting in the pointed refusal of any easy conclusions, moral or otherwise (146). What is striking is that all these manifestations of relevance are contingent upon the reader’s realization of the fictional world. Yet as we have already seen, that realization itself must be contingent upon relevance criteria of a quite different order, if it is not to be an endless project. This relation between worlds, then, is a strangely cumbersome reprise of the reader’s supposed original effort of world construction, which (under the rubric of “minimal departure”) was to be pursued precisely in terms of difference. Are these two kinds of relevance, internal and external, ultimately distinct? Or do they, under closer scrutiny, collapse into each other, in the process extinguishing the
Even if the kind of relevance I have been pursuing is understood as internal to the frame of fiction, it nonetheless necessarily implies an interpretative focus other than the construction of the referential world of the fiction per se. For Ryan, this something is narrative point, within which she distinguishes two broad categories, internal and external, just as Pavel distinguishes between two kinds of relevance. That is to say, the point of a narrative may be understood globally and externally, as a unitary communicative purpose, or it may be understood locally and internally, as an innate quality of certain narrative events. Narrative point, for Ryan, is understood to mean any quality that meets the relevance criterion of tellability, and tellability itself is understood in opposition to a concept of performance, which is to say that it concerns potential narrative appeal, which may or may not be realized in a particular telling. And from this description it is clear, as Ryan notes, that the relation between tellability and performance is derived from the opposition between story and discourse (1991: 149).

I shall argue in chapter three that this concept of story cannot be understood in referential terms: it is an irreducibly interpretative concept, which makes sense only as a way of identifying the salience of discourse. Ryan treats the story/discourse opposition unproblematically throughout the main body of her book, but she addresses it directly in her conclusion, where she arrives at a view broadly comparable with the interpretative emphasis I have just described, thus: “the concept variably labeled story, plot, fabula, or narrative structure becomes a mental representation functioning . . . as a ‘form of human comprehension.’ As such it is distinct from both the material signs that communicate it, and the world it is supposed to represent. In this perspective, plot is . . . an interpretive model built by the mind as it tries to understand events—whether real or imaginary” (264). Ryan’s re-evaluation of story is an important step towards understanding fictional narrative in communicative terms, but her last clause ultimately subordinates that possibility once more to a referential model, by assuming that fictional events in some sense exist independently of their narrative representation, just as real events do. While I would argue that the concept of story is evaluative in relation to discourse, Ryan sees it as evaluative in relation to events and so removes those events from their dependence upon the communicative act. In Ryan’s version, story (and therefore tellability; and therefore relevance) remains contingent upon an a priori referential world, whereas my argument has been that criteria of...
relevance necessarily inform the definition of that world. Tellability, on this view, is never intrinsic to a “configuration of facts,” as Ryan allows (148), because it is an aspect of narrative communication: it is the basis upon which those facts are thus configured. Ryan emphasizes the sense of potential implicit in the “-ability” suffix of tellability, but this has to be understood as a communicative consideration, an anticipation of the interpreter’s interests, rather than as an objective baseline for the teller’s performance. Tellability implies accessibility to interpretation rather than any innate, prediscursive suitability for narration.

In fictional worlds theory, the concept of relevance is bounded by two assumptions that I want to resist: one is that the “facts” of fiction are meaningfully independent of considerations of relevance; the other is the idea that relevance can be internal to the fictional world, that it can ever mean something independently of the communicative act. My counterclaim is that the reader’s interpretative agenda cannot be understood within the bounds of a fictional world, or indeed in relation to its fictional existence rather than its actual communication, and that relevance, even when it is described internally as relevance to story, is always, reciprocally, relevance to the reader.

Relevance and Speech Acts

The issue of communication, of course, is central to the relation between fictionality and speech act theory. The standard speech act account of literary discourse, as first elaborated by Richard Ohmann (1971) and John Searle (“Logical Status” 1975), is the imitation speech act model, in which the authorial speech act is not seriously made, but pretended, which effectively suspends the appropriateness conditions (or felicity conditions) normally attaching to the performance of that speech act. But the imitative model is undermined by the fact that third-person novels routinely deviate from the norms of any nonfictional, real-world speech act, for instance in such ordinary narrative strategies as omniscient narration. The pretended speech act frame does not account for fictionality, because the rhetoric of fictionality often inhabits the narration itself. The first sentence of my quote from The Trial, for example, resists recuperation as a pretended nonfictional speech act in both content (access to the thoughts of another) and form (the dual temporal perspective of internal focalization, manifested in the otherwise anomalous “now”).

A more promising alternative, advanced by Mary Louise Pratt (1977),
looks instead to H. P. Grice’s model of conversational implicature. Grice argued that the appropriateness conditions applicable to speech acts were best understood not as attaching to the semantics of specific sentences, but in relation to a few general maxims. These maxims together constitute a Cooperative Principle, which is the foundation of successful communication. The crucial ones for my purposes are the Maxim of Relation, “be relevant,” and the first Maxim of Quality, “do not say what you believe to be false” (1989: 27). Grice’s approach allows a great deal of flexibility in the interpretation of speech acts, because what is actually said may be supplemented by inferences, or implicatures, to maintain the shared assumption that the Cooperative Principle is in place. Pratt proposes that one way in which speech acts may be relevant is by being “tellable,” by which she means of intrinsic interest or worthy of display. A tellable speech act constitutes an invitation to contemplate, to interpret, to evaluate. She argues that the appropriateness conditions for tellability may apply to discourses many sentences long, rather than just to individual sentences: this move allows her to propose a distinct category of speech act called “narrative display text,” which embraces both fictional narratives and the nonfictional “natural narratives” she cites from the sociolinguistic studies of William Labov (132–36). These texts can be classed along with single-sentence exclamations as speech acts that adhere to Grice’s Maxim of Relation, and fulfill the appropriateness conditions of relevance, not by being informative, but by being exhibitive—by being tellable.

Pratt, however, stops short of addressing the issue of fictionality itself and does not inquire into the hierarchical relation between Grice’s maxims of Quality and Relation, truthfulness and relevance. To accommodate fiction, Pratt ultimately falls back upon the standard speech-act account she had originally rejected and concedes that fictive discourse is, on the author’s part, an imitation display text, attributed to a narrator within the frame of fiction (173, 207–8). Pratt’s relevance criterion of tellability is suggestive, but because in her account it is ultimately subordinated to the pretence model, it collapses back within the frame of fiction and forgives any explanatory force it may have in relation to fictionality. This is equally the case with an alternative approach, offered by Michael Kearns (1999, 2001), which uses Pratt’s concept of narrative display text in conjunction with a general model of narrativity, in which fictionality is not categorically differentiated. Such a move would make it possible to dispense with the framed, imitation speech act model of fiction, but at the price of having nothing to say about the specificity of the fictional case. Kearns is notable, however, for having recognized that in the development
of this position, a rhetorical account of narrative, if not of fiction, may have much to gain from relevance theory.

One other suggestive lead arising from the context of Gricean implicature comes from Gérard Genette, who proposes to supplement the pretence model of fiction with an appeal to the notion of indirect speech acts. His aim is to synthesize the standard speech act model with a fictional worlds perspective, and the indirect speech acts he has in mind belong in the category of “declarative illocutions with an institutive function,” in this case the function of establishing the existence of the fictional world (“Pragmatic Status” 64). This invocation of indirect speech acts is important in a broader context, though, because it highlights the fact that the literal sense of an utterance may flout Grice’s maxims—it may be conspicuously false, it may be conspicuously irrelevant—and yet the utterance may remain felicitous because these flagrant violations draw our interpretative attention to appropriate implicatures. Genette gets no further for two reasons. One is that his reliance on the pretence model actually forestalls any possibility of indirect speech acts. If the fictive speech act is nonserious, then its appropriateness conditions, and Grice’s maxims, are suspended, and therefore cannot be flouted, in which case there is no occasion to generate implicatures and derive an indirect speech act. The second reason is that the indirect speech acts envisaged by Genette, declarative acts instituting the fictional world, contribute nothing more to the external relevance of fictive discourse and indeed leave their own status (inside or outside the fictional frame) radically ambiguous. The fictional worlds model itself admits of two different approaches to the status of the narrative discourse. Ryan accommodates the imitation speech act model by attributing fictional narrative to an intrafictional narrator. For her it is axiomatic that “the implied speaker of the text is always located in TRW [the textual reference world]” (1991: 25). Pavel, on the other hand, is much more resistant to the dissociating frame of imitation speech acts, preferring to embrace a modal ontology that provides for the possibility that real world discourse may directly refer to fictional worlds. Genette’s proposal equivocates between the two, in that imitation speech acts imply an intrafictional narrator, yet a narrator within the fictional world cannot be said to institute it (I shall have more to say about the relation between Genette’s proposal and the concept of the narrator in chapter four).

Both Pratt and Genette might have offered accounts of fictive discourse independent of the pretence model. An indirect speech act approach would actually need a serious authorial speech act in order to be operative at all; but Genette doesn’t consider the possible value of indirect relevance
to an account of the authorial speech act in fiction, because he is more concerned to provide for referential truth within the fictional frame. Pratt does have a plausible basis for the relevance of the authorial speech act in the notion of tellability, and in the process of distinguishing between this and informative relevance, with its consequent dependence on the maxims of quality, she comes very close to seeing tellability as sufficient for a felicitous authorial speech act irrespective of truth criteria. In short, both make progress with the aspects of the Gricean model that emphasize relevance but are blocked by their assumption that the issue of relevance is ultimately secondary to that of truthfulness, which precludes any direct authorial model of fictive discourse. This assumption is fully justified by Grice’s own subordination of the contextual, pragmatic, and inferential mechanisms of implicature to a gold standard of literal, propositional truth. Grice’s view is apparent in the privileged status that he accorded to the first maxim of Quality, “do not say what you believe to be false,” which he hesitated to place alongside the others in the general class of maxims: “it might be felt that the importance of at least the first maxim of Quality is such that it should not be included in a scheme of the kind I am constructing; other maxims come into operation only on the assumption that this maxim of Quality is satisfied” (27). The latent hierarchy in Grice’s view of the maxims was consolidated by the way his model was absorbed into the general framework of speech act theory: whereas for Grice the role of inference was fundamental to communication, in speech act theory generally it was subordinated to literal meaning. The notion of indirect speech acts is itself an example: implicature is incorporated within a code model of communication, so that its function is reduced to that of a mechanism for translating the literal locution of problematic speech acts into a felicitous propositional form.

Relevance Theory

This impasse leads me to relevance theory, which I want to introduce in relation to Grice. Grice’s model of “conversational implicature” was developed in recognition of the fact that the code model of language was often not sufficient to account for communication and needed to be supplemented by an inferential model. The innovation of relevance theory, as expounded by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, is to argue that inference is not a supplementary component of communication, but its core. They argue for a general model of human communication as “ostensive-
inferential communication," that is, ostensive from the point of view of the communicator, and inferential from the point of view of the audience (1995: 54). “Ostension,” or “ostensive behaviour,” means behaviour that “makes manifest an intention to make something manifest” (49). Something is manifest if it is available to perception or inference (39), and the set of facts or assumptions manifest to an individual at a given time constitutes that individual’s cognitive environment (39). For communication to be possible, the communicator and the audience must have some shared cognitive environment, and the fact that this environment is shared must itself be manifest. In other words, every manifest assumption in the shared cognitive environment is understood to be “mutually manifest” (41–42).

Sperber and Wilson define ostensive-inferential communication, then, as a process whereby “the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions \{I\}” (63). Communication, in this model, is a layered process providing for the recognition both of certain information and of a certain intent to inform; or, as formulated by Sperber and Wilson, communication involves an informative intention, “to inform the audience of something,” and a communicative intention, “to inform the audience of one’s informative intention” (29). The communicative intention is fulfilled once the informative intention is recognized as such.

Up to this point, the relevance theory model of communication depends entirely on inferential processes, rather than decoding processes; the code model of language has not been invoked at all. Sperber and Wilson do not dispense with the code model of language entirely, but they do insist that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication. Grice’s model of conversational implicature was developed in recognition of the fact that the code model was often not sufficient, but he retained the assumption that the role of implicature was supplemental and served only to redeem, where necessary, the functional limitations of explicit language, or “what is said,” and so maintain the Cooperative Principle. In the ostensive-inferential model, however, communication does not bear directly upon the thoughts of the audience, but upon their cognitive environment, and therefore it embraces a continuum of cases from “showing” to “saying that” (53). Cases of “showing” may be communicative without benefit of any coded element at all; and even at the furthest limit of “saying,” explicit language is not categorically privileged; nor, in fact, is it categorically distinct. Sperber and Wilson argue that the distinction between the explicit and implicit “content” of an utterance, conventionally understood as a
distinction between decoded assumptions and inferred assumptions, actually has an irreducibly relative aspect. Their claim is “that no assumption is simply decoded, and that the recovery of any assumption requires an element of inference” (182). Accordingly, their distinction between explication and implicature cuts across the conventional distinction between the explicit and the implicit: “a communicated assumption is either an explication or an implicature, but an explication is explicit to a greater or lesser degree” (182).

Inference, then, is not just confined to the derivation of implicatures: it is irreducibly part of explication, not just in disambiguating the linguistic code through reference resolution, but also, in a much broader sense, enriching and fine-tuning the coded meaning by evaluating such relative qualities as the looseness of word use, or the scope of comparative terms. Such a view has important consequences for the concept of relevance, because under these circumstances it is not possible to comprehend relevance under a conventional maxim, as in Grice’s model. For Grice, an utterance may adhere to the Maxim of Relation by being literally relevant, or it may flout the maxim in order to generate implicatures. Relevance can have no such double role when inference is an integral part of all utterance comprehension, nor can relevance be encapsulated in a maxim or conventional norm that communicator and audience must know in order to communicate effectively. According to Sperber and Wilson, the principle of relevance operates at a much more automatic and fundamental level than our commonsense notion of a relevant utterance might suggest: “Communicators and audience need no more know the principle of relevance to communicate than they need to know the principle of genetics to reproduce. Communicators do not ‘follow’ the principle of relevance; and they could not violate it even if they wanted to. The principle of relevance applies without exception” (162).

The principle of relevance—or more strictly, the second (communicative) principle of relevance—is defined as follows: “Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance” (158). The degree of relevance is presumed to be optimal in the sense that it achieves the best possible balance between the communicator’s interests and the audience’s interests: this granted, the audience’s interests will be to maximize the relevance of the information being processed. On the basis of this view of relevance, Sperber and Wilson argue that the order of events in the conventional understanding of comprehension should be reversed: “It is not that first the context is determined, and then relevance is assessed. On the contrary, people hope that the assumption being
processed is relevant (or else they would not bother to process it at all), and they try to select a context which will justify that hope: a context which will maximize relevance” (142). To clarify some of this slightly technical terminology, a context, here, is a set of assumptions adopted by an individual, a subset of the individual’s cognitive environment, which in turn consists of all the assumptions manifest—available to perception or inference—at a given time (15, 39). An assumption is a thought (a conceptual representation) treated by the individual as true of the actual world (2). The relevance of a new assumption to an individual is maximized when its processing achieves an optimal balance between the effort involved and the contextual effects (or more strictly, the positive cognitive effects) derived (144, 265). A contextual effect is a modification of the context arising from the interaction between old assumptions and new assumptions; it is a positive cognitive effect if it benefits an individual’s cognitive functions or goals (109, 265). To illustrate, albeit simplistically, consider a situation in which Dan tells Deirdre that the kettle is on. Deirdre’s cognitive environment at the time includes all the perceptible physical phenomena of the office in which she is writing an article, the knowledge of relevance theory that she is bringing to bear upon the article, the understanding she has gleaned from past experience about the uses of kettles, her evaluation of Dan’s friendly disposition and his knowledge of her beverage preferences, and so on, as well as the new assumptions made manifest by the words he has just spoken (that he is talking to her, that he is informing her that he has put the kettle on, and so forth). She draws upon a subset of her old assumptions (kettles are used to make tea; Dan knows she likes tea, milk but no sugar, etc.) as a context within which to process the implications of these new assumptions (Dan is making tea for her; he expects her to join him in the kitchen, etc.). To maximize the relevance of these new assumptions, she strikes a balance between the effort required to draw those implications (and retrieve old assumptions) and the cognitive benefits of doing so. She may not bother to draw some inferences (Dan is within earshot, Dan speaks English) even though they are strongly manifest, and so easily available, because they have little or no cognitive effect (she already knew this). On the other hand, she may find it a worthwhile effort to draw some weakly manifest inferences (Dan is belittling her intellectual staying power) because the cognitive effects are large (he is not so friendly after all). She remains tapping away at her keyboard.

The most important consequence of relevance theory, for my purposes, is the new relation it proposes between the functions of relevance and truthfulness in communication. Wilson and Sperber have articulated this
with direct reference to Grice, declaring, “One of our aims is to show that the function Grice attributes to the Quality maxims—ensuring the quality of the speaker’s overall contribution—can be more effectively achieved in a framework with no maxim of truthfulness at all” (Wilson and Sperber 2002: 585–86). Relevance theory advances the idea that, for the purposes of communication, the propositional criterion of truth is a subordinate consideration to the contextual, pragmatic criterion of relevance. This is not to say that the truth or falsehood of assumptions is a matter of indifference, or even that there are circumstances where it is a matter of indifference (as one might be tempted to say, precipitously, is the case with fiction): rather, it is decisively to detach those criteria with regard to assumptions from any necessary direct relation with the encoded form of an utterance. So, when Grice reiterates, in the retrospective epilogue to *Studies in the Way of Words* (1989), his view of the privileged status of the Maxim of Quality, it meets with this reply from Wilson and Sperber: “We agree with Grice that ‘false information is not an inferior kind of information; it just is not information.’ So, yes, hearers expect to be provided with true information. But there is an infinite supply of true information which is not worth attending to. Actual expectations are of relevant information, which (because it is information) is also true. However, we have argued that there just is no expectation that the true information communicated by an utterance should be literally or conventionally expressed, as opposed to being explicated or implicated in the sense we have discussed” (627–28). For relevance theory, then, literalness is not a norm but a limit case; the notion of literal meaning is detached from any presumption of literalness in communication (1990: 143). An utterance, as an interpretative expression of a speaker’s thought, is defined as literal if it has the same propositional form as that thought; but “there is no reason to think that the optimally relevant interpretive expression of a thought is always the most literal one. The speaker is presumed to aim at optimal relevance, not at literal truth” (1995: 233). An assumption, to be an assumption at all, must be taken as true. But all assumptions are, to a greater or lesser extent, the products of inference, which is a pragmatic, relevance-driven process, and the truth of an assumption need not depend upon the truth of the encoded form of an utterance, or its literal meaning. Sperber and Wilson offer an extended account of metaphor and irony, which shares with speech act accounts the assumption that successful communication in such instances is dependent upon an inferential search for contextual relevance. It does not, however, present this search as a process resulting in a dichotomy between the literal sense of “what is said,” which is false, and a recovered implicit meaning,
which is true (242). From a relevance theory perspective, the comprehension of figurative language (as all language) is understood as an inferential process of filling out the linguistic code until maximal relevance is achieved (that is, up to the point at which the cost in processing effort exceeds the benefit in contextual effect, for the reader concerned). Criteria of truth enter into this process only to the extent that truthfulness is a condition of the particular contextual effects involved, and they apply only in relation to the assumptions producing those effects, which need not include the literal utterance, or any translation of it, as a proposition.

Sperber and Wilson understand comprehension in general to be a process of identifying the communicator’s informative intention, which bears upon the mutual cognitive environment of the parties to the communication. Accordingly, as they say, “linguistic decoding is not so much a part of the comprehension process as something that precedes the real work of understanding, something that merely provides an input to the main part of the comprehension process” (177). Truth criteria are applicable to successful communication only in the sense that the output of the inferential process, its cognitive effects, must qualify as information. Relevance to an individual is, definitionally, a measure of cognitive benefit, which Sperber and Wilson generally interpret as an “improvement in knowledge” (Wilson and Sperber 2002: 601), although they do expressly want to leave open the possibility of taking into account other kinds of benefit to cognitive functioning: they instance the reorganization of existing knowledge, and the elaboration of rational desires (1995: 266). Even within the compass of improvement in knowledge, though, they include various possible kinds of benefit (improvements in memory, or in imagination, for example), which they see as, in themselves, indirect improvements in knowledge.

In a more specific way, too, the notion of “improvement in knowledge” can embrace a wide range of cognitive effects. For instance, Sperber and Wilson explain the possibility of communicating an impression, by describing this kind of effect as “a noticeable change in one’s cognitive environment, a change resulting from relatively small alterations in the manifestness of many assumptions, rather than from the fact that a single assumption or a few new assumptions have all of a sudden become very manifest” (59). They describe the general category of cognitive changes of this kind as “poetic effects.” The label is slightly misleading from a literary point of view, but its explanation greatly increases the subtlety of the relevance theory model. An utterance has poetic effects, in their sense, if it achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures (222). Poetic effects do not affect the mutual cognitive environment of
communicator and audience by adding new, strongly manifest assumptions. Rather, “they marginally increase the manifestness of a great many weakly manifest assumptions. In other words, poetic effects create common impressions rather than common knowledge. Utterances with poetic effects can be used precisely to create this sense of apparently affective rather than cognitive mutuality. What we are suggesting is that, if you look at these affective effects through the microscope of relevance theory, you see a wide array of minute cognitive effects” (224). So, the improvement in knowledge required for a positive cognitive effect, and therefore relevance, may be the cumulative product of many minute cognitive effects, many weakly manifest assumptions, all of which are outcomes of the process of comprehension, and none of which is necessarily dependent upon the propositional truth of the input to that process.

The Relevance of Fictions

Turning now to the question of fictionality, let me first of all quote Sperber and Wilson on the subject. Their most elaborated account of fiction, as far as I am aware, is the following: “When you hear a parable, or read War and Peace, you may gain insight, through some form of analogical thinking, into yourself, your life, and the world as they are. If only true inputs were relevant, we would have to say that such fictions were irrelevant. If truth of the output is what matters, then fictions can be relevant after all” (265). The main thrust of this remark is to reinforce the claim that relevance depends only upon the truth status of outputs of the communicative process. However, it appears to treat the fictional text globally, as a single input to cognitive processing. In this respect it doesn’t add a great deal to fictional worlds approaches to the relevance of fictions. The story as a whole is channeled through the rather vague notion of “some form of analogical thinking,” and so translated, en bloc, into the cognitive benefit of an increase in understanding.

The limited terms of engagement with fictionality here are at least partly confirmed by another reference to fiction from a quite different context, which goes like this: “some stimuli are of little intrinsic relevance but, by being presented at the right time, increase the relevance of subsequent stimuli so that a greater degree of overall relevance is achieved with them than without them. This is generally true of the first sentence in a novel: though of limited relevance in itself, it helps create a context in which subsequent sentences will be more relevant. It is thus relevant
enough to be worth the reader’s attention” (160–61). One interpretation of this remark is quite unproblematic: narrative, after all, is built upon such principles of delayed resolution, so it is appropriate for stories to be processed in the expectation of a substantial overall or ultimate relevance. But this is a quality of narrative rather than fiction. The more particular consequence of fictionality here seems to emerge in the assumption that fictional sentences are of “little intrinsic relevance,” in other words, that virtually the whole burden of relevance is transferred to an overall interpretative procedure along the lines of the “analogical thinking” of the previous quote. If this were all that relevance theory could bring to the issue of fictionality, it would hardly have been worth the effort of processing the protracted exposition to which I have just subjected you. Fictional sentences are just not very relevant because they are not very informative, except in relation to the narrative or world they produce, which may itself ultimately prove to have some indirect global relevance.

I want to suggest that relevance theory has more to offer than this. Most fundamentally, it allows me to say that the problem of fictionality is not, after all, a problem of truthfulness, but a problem of relevance. It is the presumption of relevance, not any expectation of literal truthfulness, that drives the reader’s search for an appropriate interpretative context. Relevance theory allows for inference, and the generation of implicatures, to proceed from an utterance that is clearly false in the same direct way as for one that is taken as true: evaluations of truth only come into play in consequence of that process. So the fictionality of a narrative only compromises the relevance of those assumptions that are contingent upon its literal truth. The relevance theory model allows for a view of fiction in which fictionality is not a frame separating fictive discourse from ordinary or “serious” communication, but a contextual assumption: that is to say, in the comprehension of a fictive utterance, the assumption that it is fictive is itself manifest. The main contextual effect of this assumption is to subordinate implicatures that depend upon literal truthfulness to those that achieve relevance in more diffuse and cumulative ways. Fiction does not achieve relevance globally, at one remove, through some form of analogical thinking, but incrementally, through the implication of various cognitive interests or values that are not contingent upon accepting the propositional truth of the utterance itself and upon the deployment, investment, and working through of those interests in narrative form.

There is, certainly, a global, retrospective sense in which narrative can be understood as the suspension of relevance along the line of action, and in which narrative closure figures less as the resolution of plot in itself
(though it is an effect usually achieved in terms of plot), than as the resolution of suspended evaluations of relevance. In this straightforward sense, irrespective of questions of fictionality, narrative form in itself responds to certain expectations of relevance. K.’s death at the end of The Trial is not just a very emphatic terminal plot event, but also the “answer” to several kinds of questions raised by the narrative, and in that respect it occasions a range of possible overall assessments of relevance from the reader (relating, for example, to K.’s moral desserts and models of justice, whether legal, cosmic, or poetic; to the balance of power between state and individual, or between structure and agency; to the psychological mechanisms of guilt, and the authority of the superego; and so on). Such global, thematic relevance is by no means the only kind offered by narratives, nor is it necessarily the most important; though in fiction, such interpretative logic is likely to dominate over the kind of factual enrichment of the reader’s cognitive environment for which nonfictional narratives are better suited. Still, the investment of interpretative effort in the process of reading a fiction requires an ongoing sense of relevance. There are limits to everyone’s tolerance of delayed gratification, and no ultimate resolution alone could plausibly justify the effort of reading Proust’s Recherche, or War and Peace, or Clarissa. The narrative force of fiction depends upon assumptions carried forward, enriched, modified, reappraised, overturned in the process of reading; even in fiction, narrative development is only possible on the basis of an established sense of relevance.

Relevant information, in fiction, is supplied by assumptions with the capacity to inform a cognitive environment that includes the assumption of fictionality itself, as well as a set of general assumptions that might be collectively labelled “narrative understanding” (which would include logical, evaluative, and affective subsets), and more specific assumptions relating to, for instance, generic expectations of the text in hand and the particulars of its subject matter. In this cognitive environment, the contextual effects that constitute relevance may be produced by new assumptions informing the project of narrative understanding in general (and the further kinds of understanding this may facilitate), or by assumptions enabling further inferences from the narrative particulars, which will themselves contribute to an ongoing, cumulative experience of relevance (such cumulative effects being analogous to those that Sperber and Wilson term “poetic effects” in their discussion of how impressions may be communicated). So, a reader of The Trial may find relevance in constructing some of the subtle hypotheses about psychological motivation needed to comprehend K.’s behaviour; or such comprehension may contribute to an emotional investment of
interest, for which K. becomes the vehicle. In either case, the narrative coherence that provides for these effects rests upon more manifest assumptions, of a sort that relates to the familiar idea of what is “true in the fiction.” Such assumptions have the status of information irrespective of the literal truth value of the utterance, because their validity, their “aboutness,” is contextual, not referential (though this is not to exclude the possibility that some of the assumptions made available by fictive discourse may indeed be referential: as, for instance, in the case of a roman à clef, or a historical novel, or the many modern forms of documentary fiction).

The notion of truth “in the fiction” does not imply an ontological frame, but a contextual qualification: assumptions of this kind provide information relative to a context of prior assumptions. We do not generally attempt to resolve the reference of fictive utterances because we know in advance that, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, their literal truth value will probably be of too little relevance to be worth determining. But this does not compromise the narrative coherence of fictions, because successful reference resolution is not necessary for co-reference to occur (think of algebra: we do not need to know the value of \( x \) to know that, in \( x^2 = 2ry \), each \( x \) refers to the same value, which is also twice the value of \( y \)). The communicative efficacy of multiple references to fictional characters, places, and events is a pragmatic matter, not a semantic one. As a fictional narrative progresses, further assumptions become manifest not because earlier assumptions have projected a fictional world within which the fictional truth of new assumptions can be established, but because the achieved relevance of the earlier assumptions itself becomes a contextual basis for maximizing the relevance of subsequent related assumptions.

A relevance-driven, pragmatic account of inference in fiction does not need to proceed by way of a referential world beyond the discourse, or a denotative, “de re” semantics beyond the attributive, “de dicto” relations between referring expressions. Everything we can explain by conceiving of fictions as referential constructs projecting fictional worlds, we can explain as well, without cumbersome detour, restrictive norms, paradox, or redundancy, by understanding fiction as the serious use of a language’s representational capacity for fictive—imaginary, not literally assertive—purposes (and it goes without saying that relevance theory’s inclusive model of communication as ostensive behaviour provides a way to embrace fictions in nonlinguistic media without difficulty). The communicative criterion of relevance is primary rather than deferred or indirect, and unitary rather than internal or external to a fictional frame. We need to think in terms of the pragmatics rather than the semantics of fictionality.
The First Sentence of *The Trial*

A more developed example from Kafka’s novel might help to clarify the view of fictionality I am proposing. In what follows, however, I am not advancing a critical methodology, only illustrating a theoretical model. Relevance theory can help explain the principles underlying the experience of fictive communication, but it doesn’t lend itself to the eloquent articulation of sophisticated instances of such experience, and still less to the production of striking new interpretations. In my Penguin Classics edition, the first sentence of *The Trial* is translated as follows: “Someone must have made a false accusation against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong” (1994: 1). In elaborating the inferential processes invited by this sentence, I shall deal only with possible assumptions relating to K., who is clearly its focus, if not its subject. Without any pretension to analytic precision or completeness, then, these four possible assumptions immediately present themselves:

1. Josef K. existed
2. Josef K. was arrested
3. Josef K. had not done anything wrong
4. Someone had made a false accusation against him

The contextual assumption of fictionality also informs the processing of this sentence (because we found the book in the fiction section of the bookshop, or we are reading it for a course on the modern novel, or we have a prior general knowledge of Kafka). How does that affect our processing of these assumptions?

Firstly, it diminishes the relevance of assumption (1). This is an existential assumption, contingent upon the possibility of resolving the reference of “Josef K.” in the real world. The assumption of fictionality doesn’t rule this out, but it does create a presumption that it is of negligible relevance, and therefore, within the economy of effort and effect that drives the process of comprehension, it is not worth processing. Note that this is a quite different matter from that of K.’s “existence” in his world, which is either a fictional worlds concept, or (in its more general, looser usage) a form of participatory collaboration between critical discourse and fictive discourse. An existential assumption adds nothing to the latter perspective, because (following Kant) existence is not a predicate: it is not in itself a quality of any concept (here, the concept “K.”). There are other kinds of characters, of course, for whom the existential assumption would indeed be relevant:
it would be an impoverished reading of *War and Peace* that failed to recognize any reference to a historical figure in the character of Napoleon. Assumptions (2) to (4) fare differently, because they provide information about K. presupposing rather than asserting the proposition in assumption (1); their coherence is provided for by co-reference, not reference resolution, and so they are not in direct conflict with the assumption of fictionality. Clearly, though, they cannot achieve relevance merely as information about K.; but they can help to flesh out several possible narrative schemata, each of which is a potential explanatory framework for information of this kind. Processing these assumptions in accordance with our assessments of their relative strength, and in relation to such schemata, involves the testing and development of our narrative understanding; in those terms alone it offers a degree of relevance that we may well find worth the effort involved.

This prospect is enhanced by another effect of the assumption of fictionality, which is to license imaginary extensions of the scope of knowledge—specifically, here, in the form of internal focalization. The representation of another’s mental perspective is not in itself a categorical indicator of fictionality, but it is certainly a possibility that the assumption of fictionality makes much more readily available to interpretation. So here, “somebody must have . . .” is, in a fiction, unnecessarily conjectural unless it reflects K.’s perspective (or it is the voice of a represented narrator—but no other evidence emerges to support that inference). This is enough to make manifest the further assumptions

(5) Josef K. thought that someone had made a false accusation against him

And, on the same basis,

(6) Josef K. did not think he had done anything wrong.

The interpretative basis for assumption (6) is more explicit in the original German than in this translation, but it is available here nonetheless (and there is further confirmation of internal focalization in the following sentence, in which the cook who normally brought K. his breakfast did not come “this time”—the deictic focus conveying K.’s experiential perspective rather than that of the narration).

These assumptions qualify the manifestness of assumptions (3) and (4) and introduce a fundamental ambiguity. Internal focalization belongs
within the class of utterances that Sperber and Wilson term “echoic,” utterances that interpret another person’s thought or speech (this class also includes direct speech and first-person narration). They achieve relevance not only by providing information about what that thought was, as in assumptions (5) and (6), but also by taking an attitude towards it (1995: 238). But what attitude? Internal focalization embraces many shades of irony and sympathy, and under different interpretations, this particular echoic utterance may allow either of the following assumptions to be inferred:

(7) Josef K. was the victim of an injustice
(8) Josef K. was ignorant of the law to which he was subject

And of course, further assumptions become manifest in the light of the reader’s evaluation of these two: that K. had been framed, or was a paranoid victim (7); or that he had been justly reported, or was a paranoid and ignorant offender (8). The evaluative nature of these inferences involves an affective investment of some degree, ranging from judgmental detachment to sympathetic involvement, which will be informed by the reader’s emotional and ideological predispositions towards the relation between the individual, self, or subject and the law, with all its connotations. Given that the ambiguity of the case inhibits a decisive preference for any one subset of the available competing assumptions, the affective investment (in any nonreductive interpretation) will be complex. This, of course, is fundamental to the effect of the narrative to come, not least because K.’s own attitude towards his predicament is complex. In a wonderful passage a few pages later, Kafka has him “trying to see it from his own point of view” (7). There is a nice equilibrium between evaluative detachment and imaginative involvement here: the reader’s uncertainty in relation to the evaluative import of the internal focalization has an effect of detachment, yet its congruence with K.’s own anxiety about his standing before the law also invests it with the quality of affective involvement.

As the inaugural sentence of a fiction, this one achieves its effects within a relatively simple context. Nonetheless, the inferences available here already (necessarily) tend to extrapolate narratively from the utterance itself, and the subsequent narrative development will carry forward the investment of interpretative effort already made, along with the effects that secured a sense of relevance from the process, so that the context for subsequent utterances will furnish many more possible inferences of all kinds. The inferences actually drawn will vary from reading to reading,
according to cognitive environment and interpretative agenda, because these contextual factors will qualify the specific expectations of relevance in each case. But in all cases, the satisfaction of those expectations will require some prioritizing of lines of inference: the pragmatic nature of the process of comprehension dictates that it is hardly ever exhaustively logical. The goal of relevance does not require it, which is as well, not because it allows for the assumption of fictionality (that, indeed, secures the logic of fictive utterance), but because it renders inconsequential the many possible inferences from most fictional narratives that would throw their representational logic into disarray.

In contrast with extant accounts, a pragmatic theory of fictionality does not require any detachment of fictive discourse from its real-world context. There is no need for a principle of minimal departure to supply a background for the narrative particulars, because this role is filled by contextual assumptions. These are not part of a fictional world, but of the communicative situation. In this respect as in others, the point is that fictionality is best understood as a communicative resource, rather than as an ontological category. Fictionality is neither a boundary between worlds, nor a frame dissociating the author from the discourse, but a contextual assumption by the reader, prompted by the manifest information that the authorial discourse is offered as fiction. This contextual assumption is a preliminary move in the reader’s effort to maximize relevance. It amounts to a rhetorical orientation, an expectation that the relevance of the discourse will be most profitably pursued, not by deriving strongly informative implicatures that depend upon successful reference resolution, but by deriving a large array of weaker implicatures. These weaker implicatures cumulatively produce affective and evaluative effects, which are not vitiated by any degree of literal reference failure, but which do indeed, ultimately, constitute a cognitive benefit, and an improvement in knowledge. Nothing in this model excludes the possibility of gaining factual information from fiction: fictionality does not admit of degree as a rhetorical set, but fictions do as representations. This distinction, between mutually exclusive communicative intentions (the fictive and the assertive) and the relativity of informative intentions, can accommodate the range of borderline cases that vex definitions of fiction: historical novel, roman à clef, fictionalized memoir, historiographic metafiction, hoax. The knowledge offered by fiction, however, is not primarily specific knowledge of what is (or was), but of how human affairs work, or, more strictly, of how to make sense of them—logically, evaluatively, emotionally. It is knowledge of the ways in which such matters may be brought within the compass of the imagination, and in that sense understood. A pragmatic theory of
fictionality does not *confine* the value of fiction to an improvement in knowledge, even in the broadest senses I have suggested; but it claims that fictions do offer directly communicated cognitive benefits, foregrounded by the contextual assumption of fictionality itself.

There is room for dispute about the scope of the properly cognitive in our experience of fictions, but I am not seeking to characterize that experience, or its value, in wholly cognitive terms. Nor do I think that the cognitive view of communication here implies a restrictive view of authorial intention in fiction (the perspective upon authorial creativity I outline in chapter seven would readily accommodate a relevance theory account). My argument is specifically directed against the entrenched idea that fictive discourse entails a formal, intentional, or ontological frame. All current approaches to fictionality invoke some such frame, and literary criticism negotiates with the fact by a kind of equivocation, doublethink, or fudge: that is, even while its raison d’être is arguably to bridge the gulf between fiction and reality, it actually tends to oscillate between views from either side. It collaborates with, participates in, the fiction, or else it detaches itself, in the process often opening up a gap between the enlightened critic and the naïve, deluded reader. The first, inside view dominates in most close reading and representationally oriented criticism (by which I mean criticism focussed on the narrative particulars); the second, outside view is often apparent in formalist and reader-response critical orientations (at least insofar as they project stories of reading), and symptomatic modes of criticism that bring to bear (for example) Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytical, queer, or postcolonial perspectives upon the text. Although I do not think there is anything fundamentally wrong with either approach, neither actually explains what is going on in fictive discourse. The first takes it for granted that we are already familiar with fiction (which of course we are), and the second tends to bracket fictionality in pursuit of other interests for which the fictional text provides occasion. By refusing this inside/outside dualism, a pragmatic approach to fictionality identifies the issue it effaces. It does not, and should not, conflict with what we currently do as readers and critics, but it identifies something we are not doing that I suggest would be worthwhile. It challenges us to explain the force and effect of fictionality itself in our experience and understanding of fiction.
Chapter One

1. Note that the intentionality of this model need not be reductive. An informative intention is an intention to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions; but “to have a representation of a set of assumptions [in mind, as a precondition of this intention] it is not necessary to have a representation of each assumption in the set. Any individuating description may do” (58). This comment leads directly on to Sperber and Wilson’s discussion of “vague” forms of communication, exemplified by sharing an impression: narrative display would fit well into this class.

2. This is not always the case. There is the possibility with some characters, for instance, of assimilation to an existing framework of knowledge (e.g., Napoleon, as mentioned below); there are also nonliteral forms of mediation (e.g., in a psychobiographical reading of Kafka), and partial resolutions (e.g., in a roman à clef).

Chapter Two

1. See chapters one and seven of Cohn (1999).

2. Barbara Foley (1996) addresses several kinds of argument arising from just such borderline cases. See also Cohn (1999 ch. 2).

3. This is best explained in Jonathan Culler’s synoptic account (1975 ch. 7).


5. Ricoeur does effectively reintroduce correspondence when he comes to discriminate between fiction and history himself, which he does with reference to truth-claim criteria, but under the heading of transfiguration, not configuration (2:3).
Chapter Three

2. See the attempts to tabulate the various schemes by Cohn (1990: 777); and O’Neill (1994: 21).
4. Compare Barbara Herrnstein Smith on the Cinderella story (1980: 211–18). Her argument, however, seems to imply that “story” is indeed plot summary.
5. See Bakhtin/Medvedev on “The formalists’ basic tendency to see creativity as the recombination of ready-made elements” (1978: 140).

Chapter Four

1. The ubiquity of the narrator is a fundamental assumption for Gérard Genette (1980; 1988), Frank Stanzel (1984), Gerald Prince (1982), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983), and, despite having entertained ideas of non-narration in Story and Discourse (1978), Seymour Chatman (1990). Notable dissenters, on linguistic grounds, have been Käte Hamburger (1973 [1957]), Ann Banfield (1982), and S.-Y. Kuroda (1976). My own objections to the narrator are based upon representational rather than linguistic criteria; hence, I shall be arguing that certain “narrators” are outside representation, not that certain narratives function outside communication.
2. For a far more systematic analysis of unreliable narration, see Tamar Yacobi (1981; 1987), who places it in the context of alternative means of resolving interpretative incongruities. I am in broad sympathy with Yacobi’s account, which I do not consider to be seriously undermined by my dissent from its declared premise: “Insofar as fictionality characterizes the discourse as well as the world of literature, literary communication is always mediated” (1987: 335). On the criteria for unreliability, see also Marie-Laure Ryan (1984: 127–28).
3. According to Yacobi, “To become unreliable, [the narrator] must be exposed as such by some definite norm of congruity and to some definite effect. . . . In the absence of concrete grounds—or what appears to be so on the surface—even if the distinction between author and narrator still holds in theory, then for all practical reading purposes it gets blurred, almost to the point of disappearance” (1987: 346–47). This hedged dichotomy between the practical and the theoretical (which exercises Yacobi again on page 357) is obviated once it is admitted that the mediation of a narrator is not inherent in fiction.
4. The debate about the implied author rumbles on. A valuable overview is provided by James Phelan’s recent defence of the term (2005: 38–49). Phelan’s position, however, is closer to Genette than Chatman, or even Booth, and the remaining distance between his stance and my own can perhaps be suffi-
ciently accounted for by the view I present of the authorial relation to narrative in chapter seven.

Chapter Five

1. In this respect I am taking up the possibility of a transmedia model of narrative raised by Manfred Jahn (2001: 675–76) and Brian Richardson (“Voice and Narration” 691), though emphatically not by postulating the agency of a dramatic (or filmic) narrator, for the reasons set out in chapter four.

2. Susan Lanser discussed the relation between ideological and formal senses of “voice” (“interpellation” and “instance” in my scheme) in the introduction to Fictions of Authority (1992: 3–5), and I shall return to her below in my discussion of interpellation. Note however that Lanser frames her approach in terms of the “fruitful counterpoints” between two approaches to voice that she sees as being of “antithetical tendency: the one general, mimetic and political, the other specific, semiotic, and technical” (4), whereas I am proposing a synthetic view in which instance and interpellation are complementary concepts within a representational semiotics of narrative.

3. Contrast the position adopted by Jahn, for whom drama requires an extension of the literary framework of narrative voice, even if this usually defaults to “just a bodiless and voiceless show-er or arranger function indistinguishable from the author” (2001: 676).

4. Richardson mentions a number of canonical modern texts for which it is unhelpful to take this literalistic view of the extradiegetic narrative situation (“Inhuman Voices” 700–701); many more examples could be added.

5. These remarks on level and person may be too elliptical to carry conviction, but further elaboration of the matter would be a futile digression here. I can only note in passing that I think there are intractable logical inconsistencies between the two concepts, the full articulation of which must await another occasion.

6. Richardson’s discussion of memory plays (“Voice and Narration” 682–83) provides further support for this observation.

7. This is essentially David Bordwell’s point in Narration in the Fiction Film (1985), where he argues for a view of filmic narration as the set of cues from which the viewer constructs the fabula, but he denies that narration implies a narrator (62). His emphasis upon the viewer’s understanding of the representational product inevitably slights the communicative process, however, and arises from problems with the notion of fictionality that Bordwell does not explore, despite the prominence of “fiction” in his title. Edward Branigan does discuss communication in the context of fictionality, though preferring to “remain neutral” (1992: 107) on the merits of communication models he finds caught between, on the one hand, a sense of agency in narration— he himself speaks of “an implicit extra-fictional narration [ . . . ] the ‘voice’ of an ‘implied author’” (91)—and, on the other hand, the “anthropomorphic fiction” of a narrator (108–10).

8. Monika Fludernik, discussing the relation between voice and focalization,
argues for the theoretical redundancy of the latter (2001: 633–35). I find it helpful to retain it, however, as an aid to discriminating between the different senses of voice, which are often in play at the same time.

9. Note that this is a special case of focalization. Not all represented perspective can be adequately described as discursive in its manifestations. See the further discussion under interpellation.

10. The basis for this remark can be inferred from the satirical description of the heroine in Austen’s “Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters”: “Heroine a faultless Character herself—, perfectly good, with much tenderness & sentiment, & not the least Wit” (1954: 428).

11. The possibility of analogies for FID in other media raises interesting questions. Consider the way in which Hitchcock represents the experience of vertigo in the film of that name, in the famous tower shot combining a zoom out and track in to maintain a constant image size, or frame range, in a view down a (model) stairwell. The device is clearly mimetic of James Stewart’s disturbed cognitive struggle to make sense of his perceptions, but at the same time it is an overtly filmic technique—a simultaneous track and zoom—which situates it as part of the representational rhetoric of the diegetic narrative itself.

12. The mechanism of presupposition underlying the interpellation of subjects has been explored by John Frow in relation to genre and Vološinov’s concept of the literary enthymeme, or argument with an implied premise (1986: 77–78).

13. The need to discriminate between senses of voice is apparent in the conclusion to which Aczel is led by a consideration of this specific Bakhtinian context: “Narrative voice, like any other voice, is a fundamentally composite entity, a specific configuration of voices” (483). If every voice is a configuration of voices, the term is being made to work too hard.


15. See the criticism of Lanser’s project by Nilli Diengott (1988), and the subsequent defense by Gerald Prince (1996).

16. Other theorists who have taken up the issue of feminist narratology include Robyn Warhol (1989), Sally Robinson (1991), Alison Case (1999), and Joan Peters (2002).

Chapter Six

1. I have already argued against the view that fabula is independent of discourse in chapter three. That discussion also takes account of arguments about different versions of the “same” story, and the transposition of the “same” story into different media.

2. Peirce’s sense of semiosis as process went hand in hand with an idea of internal reflection as social: “Your self of one instant appeals to your deeper self for his assent” (1935–58: 6:388).

3. My point here clearly relates to Monika Fludernik’s in Towards a “Natural” Narratology (1996: 12–13), though her definitional emphasis upon human experientiality is representational rather than semiotic.

4. There is scope for disagreement about who is who in this image. Positive
identification is inhibited by the fact that both Chantal and Zelda are almost always represented as veiled, but it is arguably possible to infer from some images that Chantal is slightly taller than Zelda, which would count against my interpretation here.

5. Life to those Shadows (1990: 243). A little later he comments “the term ‘illusion of reality’ is a malapropism masking the existence of a rationally selective system of symbolic exchange” (246).

6. Also known as The Countryman’s First Sight of the Animated Pictures.

7. It is arguable that such a double response to the image is as necessary to the combination of shots as it is within the single shot, as R. Arnheim argued: “Film gives us simultaneously the effect of an actual happening and of a picture. A result of the ‘picturlessness’ of film is, then, that a sequence of scenes that are diverse in time and space is not felt as arbitrary” (quoted in Heath 1976: 87).

8. The same perspectival confusion is evident in a newspaper report from 1896, which corrects a previous exaggerated account of two fainting ladies who were seated in a box to the left of the screen, but goes on to suggest, nonetheless, that “the right-hand boxes are better for nervous folk” (see Bottomore 1999: 181, 194).

Chapter Seven

1. A valuable overview of the concept can be gained from the introduction to, and articles collected in, Seán Burke’s Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern (1995).

2. This passage comes from Charlotte’s preface to the 1850 edition (1981: 368).


4. See, for example, the legitimation of “the most romantic parts of this narrative” in the “Postscript” to Waverley (1978: 4–5).

5. The nature and extent of Trollope’s involvement with his characters is usefully discussed by Stephen Wall in Trollope and Character (1988).

6. The idea of fiction as an exercise in the tautological definition of its own truths has been explored to its limits by Michael Riffaterre in Fictional Truth (1990).

7. Indeed, a comment from James’s preface to The Princess Cassamassima could have supplied the epigraph to this chapter: “the teller of the story is primarily, nonetheless, the listener to it, the reader of it, too” (1962: 63).

Chapter Eight

1. Apart from Horne, Macready, and Jeffrey, her supporters included Ward (1882: 41–45); Bulwer-Lytton (Flower 1973: 82); Hood (Collins 1971: 94–98); Landor (Forster 1969: 1:458–59); and Gissing, who even at the turn of the century found distaste for Nell “unintelligent” (1898: 176).
2. See Damman (1992). A more nuanced position, from a narratological point of view, is provided by Peter Rabinowitz’s concept of “narrative audience” in *Before Reading*, though this still keeps one foot in the “belief” camp I am opposing: “The pretense [involved in joining the narrative audience] is closer to Coleridge’s ‘willing suspension of disbelief,’ except that I would argue not that disbelief is suspended but rather that it is both suspended and not suspended at the same time” (1987: 95).

3. These are the parameters which emerge from a special number of *Poetics* in volume 23 (1994), on “Emotions and Cultural Products.”

4. Several more recent approaches to character have sought to negotiate between mimetic and structuralist perspectives: Martin Price’s *Forms of Life* (1983) and Baruch Hochman’s *Character in Literature* (1985) both reassert the priority of the mimetic; Robert Higbie’s *Character and Structure in the English Novel* (1984) elaborates a syncretic model founded upon (early) structuralist premises; and James Phelan’s *Reading People, Reading Plots* (1989) advances an inclusive view which recognizes three components to character—the mimetic (as person), the thematic (as idea or value), and the synthetic (as construct). See also the special issue on fictional character in *Style* volume 24 (1990), which includes cognitive psychological and textual approaches.

5. An account by Mrs. Jane Greene of her uncle’s reaction, in a letter sent to Forster after the publication of the first volume of the *Life* (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:x). Forster endorsed the letter, “Kept for its comicality!”; but the humor must have lain more in its manner than its substance, if we are to judge by his own comment on the evolution of the novel: “I was responsible for its tragic ending. He had not thought of killing her . . .” (1969: 1: 123).

6. (Ward 1882: 215); the *OED*, rather unhelpfully for the present argument, cites this under the relevant meaning (17a.) of “character.”

7. See Kaplan (1987). I would want to insist upon the ambivalence of Dickens’s relation to this tradition: a too simple categorization of his fiction leaves no place for the powerful and disconcerting appeal of Quilp, to take an obvious example.

8. (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:153). The editors of the Pilgrim letters mistakenly attribute this response to the appearance of chapters 54 and 55 (*Master Humphrey’s Clock* number 35), thus unfairly reinforcing posterity’s low opinion of the literary competence of Dickens’s contemporaries: the crucial note (on p. 144) draws the moral that Dickens’s readers were too superficial to notice his foreshadowings in chapter 53. Hood, writing about three weeks earlier, may be excused his misplaced optimism; but the generality of Dickens’s readership clearly understood what he was about from the moment number 34 of *Master Humphrey’s Clock* appeared on the 21st of November, and their response (if he himself is to be believed) was prompt and vociferous.

9. An implication of my argument is that it ought to be possible for a clearly antirealist fiction to generate emotional engagement. I think it is, and I offer Donald Barthelme’s *The Dead Father* as a candidate. This is a playful and innovative exploration of the manifold cultural meaning of fatherhood, and despite being thoroughly antirealist and extremely funny (a quality that militates against emotional involvement in any context), it does indeed accumulate emotional resonance. See my discussion of the novel in *Novel Arguments* (1995).


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Theory and Interpretation of Narrative
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Because the series editors believe that the most significant work in narrative studies today contributes both to our knowledge of specific narratives and to our understanding of narrative in general, studies in the series typically offer interpretations of individual narratives and address significant theoretical issues underlying those interpretations. The series does not privilege one critical perspective but is open to work from any strong theoretical position.

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