

# Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable

**Publication: Style**

*Author: Caracciolo, Marco*

*Date published: December 1, 2014*

*Language: English*

*PMID: 23245*

*ISSN: 00394238*

*CODEN: STYLBB*

*Journal code: PSTY*

H. Porter Abbott. *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2013. 178 pp. ISBN 978-0-8142-1232-5.

The word "narrative," it has often been observed, is related to the Sanskrit root for "knowledge." In his latest book, narrative theorist Porter Abbott explores the less charted side of narrative's connection with knowledge: namely, how storytelling, and particularly storytelling of the literary variety, can deal with states of unknowing. Abbott does not limit himself to asking how narrative can represent the unknowable, ineffable, or incomprehensible—arguably, a familiar question in literary studies. Rather, Abbott contends that literary fiction can convey to willing readers states of unknowing which are not a matter of narrative representation, or even interpretive negotiation, but of immediate experience: readers sensitive to certain kinds of textual prompts may become immersed in a "palpable experience of what is unknown" (17).

The premises of Abbott's book are intriguing, and the execution is admirably poised between affability of tone and uncompromising scholarly engagement with texts by Samuel Beckett, Toni Morrison, Gabriel García Márquez, Tim O'Brien, and others. Here the close readings are integral part of the argument, and Abbott's well-paced textual analyses pull off the feat of conveying the "palpable experience" he is theorizing. Anchoring his contribution in recent debates on theory of mind and empathy within cognitive narrative theory, Abbott draws on a wide array of scientific sources, from cognitive psychology and neuroscience to evolutionary theories. Chapters 1 and 2 tackle questions of selfhood and artistic creativity, showing how literary narrative may confront the reader with the mystery of self-consciousness and the inexpressible wonders of literary inventiveness. Chapters 3 and 4 turn to what Abbott calls the "syntax" of literary language and narrative, exploring the momentary hesitation of parsing a garden-path sentence, or of engaging with texts that invite us to entertain two narrative scenarios at the same time. Abbott looks at the epistemic dizziness that these narrative strategies may engender: it is almost—Abbott suggests—as if such texts worked against the grain of evolved cognitive functions, complicating and problematizing mental operations that have long been streamlined by evolution. Finally, in chapters 5 and 6 Abbott considers permanent ("egregious") gaps in a fictional world, or in the mind of an "unreadable" character, and how such gaps may force readers to acknowledge the intrinsic limitations of their cognitive apparatus. The concluding chapter teases out the ethical implications of literary encounters with the unknown, arguing that literature can function as a "machine to think with" (in I. A. Richards's phrase) and, perhaps, counter absolutisms of all kinds through the epistemological questions it raises.

One of the unique strengths of Abbott's book is how, without fanfare, it succeeds in integrating narrative theory, cognitive approaches to literature, and literary interpretation—a feat considered impossible by some of the critics of literary cognitivism (see Jackson). The path Abbott carves through these approaches is elegant and original, and his book is likely to appeal to literary scholars well beyond his "home fields" of narrative theory and cognitive literary studies. In this respect, *Real Mysteries* has something in common with Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* or Joshua Landy's *How to Do Things with Fiction*—two recent monographs theorizing, from different perspectives, how literary fiction can be employed as a tool for self-exploration and interrogation. Like Landy, Abbott zooms in on a particular set of "formative fictions" (Landy's coinage), demonstrating how these texts may impact readers willing to face the unknown. Both Landy and Abbott emphasize that readers must be predisposed to this experience, for the effects of literature are never inescapable: they are always a matter of hermeneutic circularity, with readers finding in fiction what they expect to find on the basis of their individual interests and sensibilities (in this case, a fascination for the

unsolvable mysteries of human existence and selfhood). Like Felski, Abbott places a premium on the experience of fiction as opposed to interpretive articulations of meaning. Or rather: Abbott makes a case for doing justice to the experience of the unknown from within interpretation, and his close readings put into critical practice this theoretical intuition.

This last point deserves attention: Abbott builds on a long tradition of approaches distinguishing between the immediate experience of literature and literary analysis (see, e.g., Phelan), the latter being an explanatory endeavor which can, if pursued unwisely, "explain away" the experience and sideline its real mysteries-including the palpable unknown. Abbott is certainly right to say that experience has been given short shrift in literary interpretation as an academic practice, but one wonders if the distinction between interpretation and experience couldn't be problematized further, and if Abbott's resort to interpretation throughout the book does not run counter to his defense of the palpable unknown as an experienced feeling. I have said that Abbott's close readings are effective in giving a sense of this experience, but his book makes it difficult to disentangle the feeling itself from a certain, retrospective, and-no doubt-highly personal interpretation of this feeling. In short, experience and interpretation converge in the palpable unknown, and the fact that experience is never discussed in abstraction from literary interpretation prompts two considerations: first, experience and interpretation are closely intertwined, and experience always contains an element of interpretation-an idea championed by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch in their *The Embodied Mind*, one of Abbott's cognitive-scientific sources. Of course, academic interpretation is not the same as interpretation in the existential sense, or interpretation as practiced by non-specialist readers, but even these divides could have been acknowledged and addressed more fully in the context of Abbott's book.

Second, the experience of engaging with literature should be studied through other methods than literary interpretation alone. How can we characterize the experience of the palpable unknown? What does it feel like to experience a breakdown in one's cognitive faculties? Abbott has some valuable suggestions, but in the end he appears to conclude that one can only "talk around" (44) such experiences, because they are as ineffable as the unknowable itself. Surely, literary interpretation can only take us this far. But I am less pessimistic than Abbott. For the experience of the unknowable, no matter how dizzying, can at least be probed and described through introspection; it would be illuminating to explore the gamut of immediate-as well as reflective-responses that make up this experience. (I am thinking here of Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora's phenomenological path to empirical literary studies.) Abbott distinguishes between the "aboutness" of literary interpretation, with its penchant for representation and thematic meanings, and the bare "isness" of literary experience, but his close readings only seem to graze this "isness," coming across as no less "representation-hungry" than readers captivated by the opacity of *Bartleby's* mind in Herman Melville's short story. It is, of course, extremely difficult for literary analysis or theory to eschew representation. But if literary experience deserves being examined more carefully-and Abbott makes a powerful case for this-then we should strive to talk about (and not just "around") it.

I have touched on some of the issues surrounding experience and literary interpretation, but *Real Mysteries* raises equally important questions about literature and knowledge. Abbott sees human nature as intrinsically limited by biology, evolution, and culture, and yet unique in its potential to conceive of-and acknowledge-its own limitations. This acknowledgment, Abbott concedes in the conclusion, is in itself a kind of "experiential knowledge" (154)-a point that dovetails with work on art and experience in the field of analytic aesthetics (see Gibson; John), and particularly with philosopher John Gibson's theory of fiction as a form of existential and axiological acknowledgment. If read in this light, Abbott's exploration of the boundary between narrative knowledge and literature-induced states of unknowing appears exceptionally rich: what does this concern with the unknowable show about the value of literary practices? How does the literary unknowable differ from other, similar experiences we may have in our day-to-day transactions with the world? And how do readers connect it to their horizon of existential concerns? This array of questions testifies to the interest and depth of Abbott's discussion.

#### Works Cited

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008. Print.

Gibson, John. *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

Jackson, Tony E. "'Literary Interpretation' and Cognitive Literary Studies." *Poetics Today* 24.2 (2003): 191-205. Print.

John, Eileen. "Art and Knowledge." *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. Ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic Lopes. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005. 417-430. Print.

Kuiken, Don, David S. Miall, and Shelley Sikora. "Forms of Self-Implication in Literary Reading." *Poetics Today* 25.2 (2004): 171-203. Print.

Landy, Joshua. *How to Do Things with Fictions*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.

Phelan, James. "Toward a Rhetorical Reader-Response Criticism: The Difficult, the Stubborn, and the Ending of Beloved." *Modern Fiction Studies* 39.3 (1993): 709-728. Print.

Varela, Francisco J., Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991. Print.

Author affiliation:

Marco Caracciolo

University of Groningen

Author affiliation:

Marco Caracciolo (m.caracciolo@rug.nl) is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. He is mainly interested in phenomenological approaches to literature and cognitive narrative theory. His work has been published in journals such as *Poetics Today*, *Narrative*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, and *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*. He is the author of *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Account* (De Gruyter, 2014), and the co-author-with Marco Bernini-of an introduction to cognitive literary studies in Italian (*Letteratura e scienze cognitive-*, Carocci, editore, 2013). He is currently working on a book project on defamiliarization and empathy in readers' engagement with the first-person narrators of contemporary fiction.

---