Three book reviews and an afterword: Hanna Meretoja's *The Ethics of Storytelling*, Peter Brooks' *Seduced by Story*, and Florian Fuchs' *Civic Storytelling: The Rise of Short Forms and the Agency of Literature*

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The Ethical Pedagogy of Complex Narrations

Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible*. Oxford University Press, 2019. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-19-064936-4.

Hanne Meretoja's admirable book asks how literary stories compel ethical reflection. She presents close readings of three European novelists — Julia Franck, Günther Grass, and Jonathan Littell — and the Israeli novelist David Grossman. The European novels are all set during or in the shadow of World War

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II, but all four can be considered post-Holocaust novels. As Meretoja notes, the Holocaust is the constant background to violent conflicts in contemporary Israel. The ethical questions raised are generalizable beyond wartime, but all these novels are about war.

Meretoja's readers get to these substantive studies after three chapters that contain no stories, except for one brief, charming anecdote about Meretoja's bed-time reading to her daughters. In these opening chapters *narrative* figures as a theorized activity, discussed through selected quotations from multiple philosophers. Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hanna Arendt are most often quoted. Meretoja's synthesized version of narrative hermeneutics leads, in chapter 3, to 6 ways in which literary stories develop readers' ethical awareness. Despite its title, the book is about *reading* as ethical inquiry. Literary storytelling is ethical insofar as it calls upon readers to confront the complexity of choices that a novel's characters have no choice about making; choices that cannot end well for anyone.

Hanna Meretoja is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Turku, Finland, and director of SELMA, which stands for Ethics of Storytelling and the Experience of History in Contemporary Arts. In *The Ethics of Storytelling* the experience of history is multi-sided and conflicted. The book is published in Oxford's "Explorations in Narrative Psychology Series" and is so much a part of that series that this review is a postscript to my longer review essay (Frank, 2018) on four volumes in the series, one of which included a chapter by Meretoja that reappears, expanded and better contextualized, in the present volume.

My preference for the second half of the book, when Meretoja gets to actual stories, reflects my impatience with talking about *narrative* in the abstract, an impatience that increases as years go by since the source material was written. Ricoeur and Gadamer, especially, frame narrative philosophically as human activity that — curiously, to me — can be analyzed without telling any stories, or even vaguely referencing actual stories more than occasionally. I have trouble taking seriously theorists of narrative who, first, don't show much interest in telling stories themselves or engaging with actual storytellers, and second, decontextualize narrative acts, treating *context* only as a theorized abstraction. Those who do not share my bias — which is: *when talking about narrative, tell stories early and keep them in the foreground* — will better appreciate the first half of Meretoja's book.

Meretoja's quotations are well chosen aphoristic testimonials to the centrality of narrative in human life; I agree with them. My disagreement is over how philosophical theorists do narrative hermeneutics, their textual practice. Narrative matters because humans become *caught up in* stories; stories capture us,

mobilize and immobilize us, inspire and distress us. If hermeneutics involves a self-reflective circle, then the interpreter herself needs to write from a position of being caught up in stories, or at least not write close to 150 pages before getting to any actual stories. Plus, at this point in the development of the literature on narrative, the same theorists have been quoted too often, reiterating the same issues. Those new to narrative studies will find Meretoja offers a clear, reliable introduction. Other readers might turn directly to chapter 4, where the stories begin.

Meretoja discusses novels from the late twentieth century (Günther Grass, although his memoir *Peeling the Onion* was 2006) and early twenty-first century (Julia Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau* [2007; translated as *The Blind Side of the Heart*, 2009]; Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* [2006; *The Kindly Ones*, 2010]; and David Grossman's *To the End of the Land* [2010] and *Falling Out of Time* [2015]). Her critical practice might be called meta-pedagogical. That is, Meretoja teaches her readers how these novels teach their readers how to be ethical human beings. She practices a form of literary criticism that enhances the novels' effect of enlarging readers' ethical capacity. The distinctive issue that collects these novels, beyond their shared historical context, is that central characters are both victims and perpetrators. Meretoja talks about the ethics of blurring that line, most provocatively when Littell's protagonist is a Nazi officer in a death camp — how can such a person be positioned as the narrator, giving that perspective a voice, even imagining him as a sort of victim? These characters inhabit wartime worlds that require choices most of us have been lucky enough not to face. Fiction brings us as close as we can get to the violence of having such choices forced upon us. Conflicted choices include what to remember and how to remember. What sort of guilt to feel and how to express that guilt can be an ethical crisis — options include silence, writing as witness, or suicide.

In my mapping of the academic world, I locate Metetoja's form of criticism as a sophisticated version of writing in which colleagues in health humanities describe how they teach specific fictional texts to student clinicians. Their criticism-as-pedagogy offers students resources that can help them remain fully human while doing work that is too often dehumanizing in its demands (for example, Stagno and Blackie, 2019). I regret that Meretoja does not discuss her relationship to health humanities; the comparison would be mutually elucidating. Health humanities teachers will find Meretoja's work well worth studying as an exemplar of how to bring out the ethical problematics posed by complex contemporary fiction.

Meretoja's conclusion about the ethics of storytelling is that stories are *good* when they proliferate more stories from different points of view. She writes:

"Ethically relevant is whether narratives invite us, through an ethos of dialogue, to such retelling—to a plurality of different versions and interpretations—or pretend, through naturalizing strategies, to be the only possible version" (p. 304). I agree, having once argued the same, stated negatively: "If there can be any inherent … quality that makes a story *bad*, it is that bad stories discourage moving to another story that presents the same content from a different perspective" (Frank, 2010, p. 153).

The politics of storytelling have intensified during the last decade. Stories claiming to be the only possible version ground personal identities, and political affiliations are increasingly based on acceptance of only-possible-versions. Stories thus appear more dangerous than ever; ethical questions become more immediate, with higher stakes. Meretoja seems more optimistic than I feel. "Cultural conflicts," she writes, "are frequently predicated on a lack of in-depth understanding of the sociocultural worlds from within which the 'others' make their choices and develop their basic beliefs" (p. 304). How frequently? I see around me people who understand others' troubles well enough, but they refuse to acknowledge how their own privileges depend on having created and continuing to sustain those troubles. They disallow *a priori* any narrative that might call their privileges into question.

Meretoja's choice of novels is especially useful as it allows her to explore "moral implication", by which she means readers coming to recognize their own participation, their unintended and unacknowledged duplicity, in violences being depicted (p. 231). She makes an exemplary case for literary fiction "as a mode of engaging what we do not know or understand, what perplexes us, unravels us, moves us viscerally or unexpectedly", *but* she adds: "we have to be reminded that nothing in narratives guarantees the actualization of their ethical potential" (p. 306). *The Ethics of Storytelling* does its share of the necessary work of making that ethical potential actual.

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Living dangerously with fictions

Peter Brooks, *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative*. New York Review Books, 2022. Softcover, ISBN 9781681376639. Ebook, ISBN: 9781681376646..

Peter Brooks is best known as the author of *Reading for the Plot*, first published in 1984 and a classic of literary narratology. His publications are numerous: most recently, *Balzac's Lives* (2020) and *Honoré de Balzac* (2022). *Seduced by Story* displays his extraordinary knowledge of European prose fiction and, in the final chapter, his reflections on the importance of narrative to legal reasoning and process. Nearing the end of the book, Brooks writes that his argument "has ranged, and digressed, over different uses and abuses of narrative, across a number of discursive communities" (119). I appreciate the author himself acknowledging that the writing does digress, because a review needs to note that, but I like this book too much to want to criticize it. I enjoyed reading most when I let go of seeking the development of an argument and instead appreciated Brooks's insights into whatever he happens to be discussing—which is mostly novels, with some short stories, and in the final chapter, the texts of legal opinions. At the end, we are left to put the pieces together ourselves, and when the pieces are as interesting as these are, that's fine.

Brooks opens with a trend so widely recognized that I recently saw a *New Yorker* cartoon satirizing it: A couple stands in a grocery store isle; one holds two boxes of cookies and says that she can't decide which company's story is more compelling.

> Every person has a story to tell, and the corporate person has understood, with a vengeance, that it must stake its identity, persuasion, and profits on telling a story, however bizarre or banal. Corporate reports have turned from the statistical to the narrative mode. And in the wake of the corporation are political candidates and parties, the military, the tourism industry, universities, hospitals, bakeries—even accounting firms. (8)

Among Brooks's multiple examples, pride of place might go to Ronald Reagan, who "appeared to govern by story" (8). Brooks writes that "This mindless

valorization of storytelling speaks to crucial facts in contemporary culture that need more analysis" (9). And yet, that analysis is not what *Seduced by Story* provides.

Engaging as this opening is, Brooks is less interested in analyzing why our present cultural and political moment calls for, even requires, such a proliferation of storytelling. His version of narratology focuses instead on qualities of stories that cut across cultural moments. Thus, his second chapter is on what he calls the *epistemology* of story, which asks how different narrators claim to know, and how that affects the story's claims to be able to tell the reader. "How can the teller know the tale?" (27) is the chapter's subtitle. Brooks collects novels and short stories across several centuries in which narrators, characters, and readers often don't know what they need to know to tell the story as it should be told: "The novel turns on this failure to know a world where knowing is what life is all about. Ignorance is mortal" (51). Brooks writes that specifically about Henry James's *Wings of the Dove* and Madame de Lafayette's *The Princess of Clèves*, and the discussion quickly segues to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Marcel Proust. A good example of Brooks's mastery is how he can make Long John Silver and the Baron de Charlus appear in the same paragraph with no sense of incongruity. These paragraphs also illustrate the style of the book: its dance across multiple literary references that are unified by Brooks's own aphoristic insights, and I do find him genuinely insightful.

Exactly how we readers are, as the book's title promises, seduced by story is perhaps most directly presented when Brooks takes issue with Jerome Bruner:

> Is it possible that we should see narrative as a lie? This would mean that those like Bruner who claim that we are our narratives threaten to take us over the brink into delusion, into a belief in our demiurgic capacity to order reality as we like. Such a possibility does not seem to me reason to abandon narrativity, however; we still need to try to find order and meaning in our lives and in the flow of passing time. (112-13)

Brooks's resolution to this dilemma of risking seduction by story but also needing narrative is, unsurprisingly, narrative self-awareness:

> One must use fictions always with an awareness of their fictionality. They are 'as if' constructions of reality that we need,

> that we have to use creatively in order not to die of the chaos of reality — but they are not reality itself. (113; cf. 104)

Awareness of fictionality becomes the core of Brooks's argument that legal practitioners are often naïve about how stories are used in courtroom proceedings and in the reasoning of judicial opinions. I find him convincing on the seriousness of this problem of narrative naïveté: "The weight of the unanalyzed stories, those that are propagated and accepted as true and necessary myths, may kill us yet" (152).

One can read Brooks happily and well simply for his multiple brief analyses of the narrative construction of particular novels. *Seduced by Story* is a master class in what I can best call, following Brooks's usage, epistemological reading: not close reading that asks how each word counts, and not socio-cultural reading that situates the novel in its historical moment, but reading for who — including characters in the story, the narrator of the story, and the reader — knows what, and who has what liability for not knowing. The instability of stories is a constant theme: "Stories are tricky," Brooks writes with some understatement, given his preceding analyses; "and designed to be so" (120). And yet, there is an underlying theory here, albeit one that is loosely sketched, which may be best for such a theory.

Moving fast from Friedrich Schiller through Sigmund Freud to Donald Winnicott, Brooks argues that narrative offers us spaces in which to do the serious play of adjusting ourselves to reality. Brooks's writing on play is where I find him most poignant:

> We have fictions in order not to die of the forlornness of our condition in the world. That fiction-making is a form of play that is crucial to our survival because it is crucial to our capacity to understand our place in the world. (119)

Stories are more than tricky; they are dangerous because there is no certain way to determine when we are being invited into a space for creative play and when we are being seduced. Brooks concludes his discussion of stories in law by observing "the *fact* that stories can serve the worst as well as the better cause" (150, emphasis added). That fact haunts attempts to figure the place of stories in human lives.

The last words of this wisely digressive, often tricky book might serve as a mission statement for many of us engaged in the study of narrative:

> The role of the literary humanities in public life may be this: to provide public tools of resistance to bogus and totalizing world explanations, to broadcast the means to dismantle the noxious myths of our time. (152)

And we might add his earlier words: to help people "not to die of the forlornness of our condition in the world" (119).

The literature of small things

Florian Fuchs, *Civic Storytelling: The Rise of Short Forms and the Agency of Literature*. Zone Books, 2023. Hardcover, ISBN 9781681376639. Ebook, ISBN: ISBN 978-1-942130-74-1.

Florian Fuchs is both the hedgehog who knows one big thing and the fox who knows many things. *Civic Storytelling* combines breadth of scholarly detail concerning different narrative forms with depth of insight into what stories can do. Fuchs is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Free University of Berlin. He received his doctorate from Yale in 2017 and has had fellowships at Princeton and Stanford. His major previous publication was as a co-editor and translator of selected essays of Hans Blumenberg (2020), who is one of the major influences on the present book, along with Hannah Arendt.

The book's subtitle summarizes what it's about, but the three key terms require specification. Just what civic storytelling is isn't fully clear until the book's Coda, effectively a final chapter. Civic storytelling is "the recasting and reimagining of civic life through a certain kind of brief narrative that can radically modulate the ontology of human encounters" (225). What is at stake is that civic life—comprising both encounters in the public sphere and individual consciousness that is always already oriented to relations with others—requires constant maintenance work: the work that Fuchs calls recasting and reimagining. Storytelling performs part of that work, and my guess is that for Fuchs, it is the crucial part.

The stories that Fuchs argues do the most of this work are short forms: principally the novella, proverbs, fables and fairy tales, and what he calls the epiphany. Basically, "short form" means shorter than epics or novels. For Fuchs, each is a form of narrative, with form sometimes meaning something more than

genre, and elsewhere genre and form seem interchangeable. These forms can guide "our attention to extraordinary occurrences within the everyday, bringing them and the underlying problems and questions into the world for the first time" (226).

Fuchs repeats the claim that a story "can act on its own behalf" (245). Short-form stories exercise agency by doing their work of guiding attention. "Citizen storytellers" (24, 225) are persons, but individual agency works not only through forms but alongside them. He writes with appreciation of stories' "unpredictable and selective adaptation of reality and fiction" (227). Stories select, unpredictably. As I read Fuchs on agency, the agency of the teller merges with the agency of the tale.

Or to put the book's argument negatively, what civic storytelling is not is "storytelling that glosses over its problems to make them disappear" (225). So, we might ask, what storytelling doesn't make things disappear? One of Fuchs's few if carefully considered exemplars of a contemporary citizen storyteller is the media artist Steyerl, whom he quotes saying: "It seems that one not only has to defend facts, but maybe fiction has to be defended equally rigorously" (228). Doing both is difficult but necessary at a time when, as Steyerl is also quoted saying, "The thing formerly called real life has already become deeply imagined" (229). Fuchs positions narrative studies at the intersection of facts—formerly called real life—and imagination. And his short forms, novellas and fairy tales, work best at that intersection.

In most of its content, *Civic Storytelling* is a scholarly archaeology of literary forms, beginning with the ars topica as the foundation of rhetoric, especially in Aristotle. Fuchs then discusses the novella at some length, but risking some violence to the book's argument, I'll move directly to the fable, where Fuchs builds his case for the agency of the literary form.

In discussing fables Fuchs offers one of several close readings which were my stepping stones through a dense presentation. Fuchs's chosen fable (75-6) is one of the less retold episodes from the *Odyssey*. Odysseus has finally gotten home to Ithaca and, suspicious of what awaits him, disguises himself as an old beggar. Sitting with his swineherds at night and feeling cold, the disguised Odysseus improvises a story about when he was fighting at Troy and went on a night raid led by Odysseus. He, the protagonist of the fable, had neglected to bring his cloak and was cold. So he concocted a need for someone to take a message back to camp. Odysseus, in this fable, dispatched a soldier who ran off, leaving his cloak, which the storyteller was happy to put on. The beggar's host, hearing the story, brought him a blanket. That exemplifies what matters to Fuchs: interpretation takes the form of a responsive action (79). Because stories elicit responses, they have "pragmatic intent" (70), especially as indicators of "what is missing" (71) in the immediate situation. I retell this layered fable as one of Fuchs's best examples of

literature having agency. Odysseus does things with stories; or, stories get things done for Odysseus, and maybe to Odysseus.

Fuchs's chapter on fairy tales was my favourite in the book. He attempts nothing less than to reconstruct the unfinished theory of fairy tales that Walter Benjamin intended to present in a book for which he had a publishing contract. As one of Fuchs's best phrases puts it, the chapter works "to retrace the lines of these scattered splinters" (184). Much writing praises Benjamin. Fuchs shows Benjamin's writing doing its work.

In fairy tales as throughout the book, the issue is power; in this instance, short fairy tales against the power of long myths. Here Fuchs comes closest to describing exactly how, in his definitional statement of civic storytelling quoted earlier, short-form narratives "can radically modulate the ontology of human encounters" (225).

> [Fairy tales] are the archives of generations, telling about their practices of *defending the freedom to decontextualize and recontextualize one reality with another*. This archive of short forms is therefore also directed against the concentration of power through the unifying force of myth and its narratives, whether about nations, cultures, or other lineages…. In regard of its agency, the fairy tale is therefore likely the most effective short narrative form and bears a specific metaliterary virtue. *It makes visible and unmasks, it reduces and magnifies, it reformulates and declares*, and thus is active as a virtual reality whether retold or transmitted. (199-200, 201-202; emphases added)

That for me is Fuchs's clearest statement of what he values in stories and his case for stories' centrality in civic life. He follows the project he attributes to Benjamin: to use "fairy tales as a training ground to shape the phenomenological ability to understand the world" (201). The chapter is rich in examples of how specific fairy tales do that work.

By epiphanies, Fuchs refers to literary fragments found in the unpublished notebooks of James Joyce, which few people will see in their original form; some Joyce wrote into his published works. Joyce's notebook epiphanies are not insights about the everyday, but rather moments of fullest attention to just what is, which is seen as being sufficient in itself. The epiphany brings clarity of focus on the everyday as worth that intensity of attention.

What Fuchs says about epiphanies has a generalized applicability to the value of stories in any individual life: "I then carry the epiphany's agency with me as an option to behave in my lifeworld as a remedy for the next encounter where … my behavior or my answers fail me" (214). I have tried to make this argument in my own writings: stories accompany us, ready to act as a remedy in moments when our other resources are insufficient.

For all Fuchs's seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of literature and rhetoric, his scholarly specialization is new media, and the book concludes with discussions of both the conceptual artist Steyerl and of Internet "aggregation platforms" (249) that collect multiple individual stories to induce a collective impact. These are his exemplars of civic storytelling.

Different readers will seize on different issues in this wide-ranging book. My particular interest is Fuchs's contrast between civic storytelling and the genre of case studies, as stories told by and for professionals. Fuchs's way of thinking about narrative is illustrated by how he describes how case stories work:

> Case studies and case histories have generally been read to contain a specific scientific knowledge relevant for fact-based epistemologies such as scientific observation, medicine, and law. Yet they reveal facts in such casuistic systems only because readers in such a system know what range of information they are looking for and already understand such stories as representations of a specific type of case…. The epistemic system in place prescribes what can possibly be found in such case stories, namely, by definition, nothing outside of the system that organizes them. (235)

He concludes with what is his main argument throughout: "What gets overlooked in such a system is the agency of the form of the story" (235).

For me, Fuchs's discussion of case studies offers a way of understanding how readily qualitative narrative research can tacitly reaffirm the structures of professional power that it ostensibly studies. What such research selects as "findings", and its rhetoric of producing what it calls findings (a.k.a., its method), reinforce what professional epistemic regimes "are looking for and already understand" (235). That is, research reinforces the legitimacy of an epistemic system and the privilege of certain readers who qualify as professional insiders—an effect that both Fuchs's own book and this review also exemplify. Maintaining the legitimacy of this hierarchical system depends on overlooking the work that the form of the story tacitly does.

Fuchs's textual examples and citations are most often situated in German-language literature and scholarship; some of his key sources are not yet translated. Thus as in any narrative study, I found Fuchs reinventing wheels already discovered in scholarship he apparently does not know, but just as often he shows me where my own discoveries were actually reinventions—that's what it is to work on narrative. For all the pragmatic intent of *Civic Storytelling* and the clarity of Fuchs's prose, the discursive mode is thoroughly scholarly, and I hope Fuchs will now present his arguments in a style that can reach a broader readership.

In keeping with the title of this journal, Fuchs shows us how narrative forms do their work, and how important this work is in sustaining life we call *civic*, which is to say, life lived in togetherness that includes the stories themselves.

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Afterword: Stories, fabrication and falling apart

The preceding three reviews were written over a couple of years, with time lapses between each. Due to the change of this journal's editorship, they now appear together. The three books were, so far as I can tell, each written without knowledge of the other two. How different their communities are is reflected in how few, if any, of the same source materials they cite. The books thus demonstrate the diversity of narrative studies, but despite basing their arguments in different sources, they also show overlaps of concerns. The editor has kindly invited me to add this afterword, in which I reframe a couple of these overlaps in the terms of my own orientation to narrative studies.

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I like Florian Fuchs's book so much because of his complementary emphases on how stories do their works with a degree of autonomy from their human tellers, and how stories' works are civic: stories are shaped within communities; when and how particular stories are told constantly reshapes these communities. My way of putting this adapts the idea of "fabrication mechanisms",

as introduced by the late Bruno Latour (2005; see also Frank, 2010, p. 130-31). Latour understands what we call "social", as in social life or social interaction, as processes of people coming together in a form of affiliation, which might be a marriage, a corporation, or a nation, and keeping themselves together despite tensions. Fabrication mechanisms are whatever does the work of stitching the group together and holding the weave in place, maybe making repairs. Latour, writing in 2005, shows less interest in what historically follows: how the mechanisms weaken and the fabrication comes apart.

I understand stories to be primary among fabrication mechanisms. People know themselves as group members when they can tell stories about their group's origins, what it has survived and its achievements. For nations, these stories include the form of the epics that Fuchs may not like, but he does not deprecate their importance for that nation to exist. The short form stories that Fuchs prefers fabricate by giving people a sense of the shared everydayness of their lives. When people hear the highest circulation forms—parables, folk and fairy tales—they know their fellow members as those who respond to the same story that they respond to; that recognition of a shared response is membership. A chapter on jokes as short-form narratives would have fit Fuchs's argument.

But history also shows what might be called narrative entropy: eventually, stories can no longer hold the civic together. As I look south across the border to the United States, I see people at opposite ends of the political spectrum seeking, with what looks like increasing success, to shut down stories told by those whom variously effected acts of censorship transform into others. Stories told by those outside the group risk contaminating the group; group identity depends on narrative boundaries. Censorship attempts to shore up a fabrication that is already weakening by defending its boundaries. But it creates new boundaries of acceptability within the group, and so it de-fabricates.

When too many people are no longer hospitable to each others' stories, the civic has broken down. That goes some ways beyond Fuchs's interests and arguments, but it follows from his writing. Looking back on my reading of Fuchs, I paraphrase Marx: people tell their own stories, but they tell stories within groups that make different fabrication demands on members and that exist at different stages of fabrication: coming into being, holding together, coming apart.

That leads to how I would respond to the issue that Peter Brooks sets up in his first chapter: why, right now, does every person, interest group, or corporation have to put forward what they claim as their story? Brooks provides numerous and diverse examples of the "mindless valorization of storytelling" (p. 9), which he also calls "the storification of reality" (p. 10). A sociologist could begin with the same observations but the analysis would develop differently.

Arguably the biggest concern of the earliest sociologists—Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Emile Durkheim—was modernity, which begins in

demographic change. What happens, those sociologists asked, when rapid urbanization and new levels of geographic mobility require people to lead their lives among strangers: people whom, if they know each other at all, have met only recently and meet only in particular segments of each others' lives? These strangers have to be trusted, so problems of maintaining trust in conditions of modernity have been a persistent issue for sociology.

Personal stories—telling one's own story in a recognizable rhetoric of authenticity—are tokens of the teller's trustworthiness, whether that teller is a person or corporate entity. Trust is based on perceived authenticity—the two coexist in mutual dependence. An actual story is not required. When corporate packaging invites potential consumers to go to the company's website and read their story, simply the willingness to tell their story makes the company trustworthy, regardless of who actually reads that story. Offering the token is what counts. If we are seduced by stories, it's because life in the public sphere requires trust, and the only alternative to seduction seems to be withdrawal.

But the appearance of books with titles like *Seduced by Story* might indicate that narrative inflation is already effecting changes. When we perceive self-consciousness in claims made for stories in political life, that suggests a weakening of civic engagement, or intensified engagement in fragmentation. Brooks begins his book quoting President George W. Bush, who introduced his cabinet in 2000 by saying: "Each person has got their own story that is so unique, stories that really explain what America can and should be about" (p. 3). Here is a clear attempt to use stories as a fabrication mechanism: trust each cabinet member because their story is "so unique" (that is, authentic) and that somehow becomes "what America can and should be about", which is, apparently, people having unique stories.

Bush's statement leaps wildly from the individual to the collective, but it's not mindless, in Brooks's phrase quoted earlier. I hear Bush, or his speechwriter, accurately perceiving what needs to be said to shore up the national fabrication that is weakening. Bush was still trying to speak to the entire country and to unify that country in his speech. By the inauguration of Donald Trump, 16 years later, fabrication of his "base" required a narrative of alienation from both government and demonized others. Trump's storytelling fabricated the base by fragmenting the whole, and it did so more effectively by no longer pretending to be a coherent narrative. Instead, the story was and remains expressed in icons of his brand onto which multiple hopes and fears can be projected. This reduction of narrative to repeated phrases and visual symbols crowds out reflective apprehension. The phrases and symbols are powerful fabrication mechanisms, though not of an inclusive civic order.

Given the pervasive use and misuse of stories, both Brooks and Hanna Meretoja end up with the problem of how to distinguish good from bad

stories, as I myself once asked. Like Brooks and Meretoja, I could not discover any textual litmus test of a story's goodness or badness. That judgment depends on who takes up the story and uses it to what ends. But we judge a story's consequences—we evaluate what happens as good or bad—only after having been affected by the story, or by a different story. It is too simple to say that Bush's "weapons of mass destruction" narrative was bad only retrospectively, once the invasion had failed to institute a stable government. But it is equally too simple to say that the invasion failed because it was based on a bad story.

Over the years, I've come to think more about what's wrong with the presupposition that there could be some analytic device that enables distinguishing good from bad stories: such an attempt both takes stories too seriously and not seriously enough. On the side of taking stories too seriously, the cover illustration of Brooks's book is a painting based on a famous scene from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Francesca, consigned for eternity to the Inferno, accounts for the sin she shared with her lover, Paolo, by blaming it on the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere that they read together. The painting shows her dropping the book as Paolo kisses her, while his brother, her husband, watches menacingly from the shadows. He will soon kill them. Francesca might have been forgiven her adultery, but what proves that she belongs among the damned is her blaming an external agency for her own failure. Hers is a cautionary tale about taking stories too seriously. But she also takes stories not seriously enough: a better reader might have learned from the story that adulterous affairs don't end well.

Moral philosophers risk not taking stories seriously enough when they attempt to distinguish good from bad stories by appealing to a priori ideas such as Aristotle's concept of human flourishing. Such attempts forget that we can know what words like flourishing mean only by telling stories, whether fictional or non-fiction, that show flourishing in action. If you press me to specify what flourishing is, once I have exhausted a string of synonyms, my final recourse is to tell you a story. Whether we can be members of the same group depends on whether or not you, hearing my story, acknowledge that yes, there we see flourishing. The *we* is born in that moment of mutual I-see-what-you-see and evaluate it as you do; the civic depends not on shared principles but on shared stories.

But the practical problem remains. Each of us, in our story-saturated times that Brooks's examples so well circumscribe, needs to distinguish which stories we will affiliate with and which we refuse. Those decisions confront us hourly, as stories call out for our affirmation. As the stakes on our affirmation choices increase, our fate depends on which call of stories we follow. Both Brooks and Meretoja favour stories that lead us, at best even force us, to question on what basis we engage with them. Whether a story incites narrative self-reflection—and leaves space for refusal—seems a thin ethic of how to discriminate between stories. But in the struggle over which stories we allow into our lives and which we hold at

a distance, maybe a thin ethic is all we can have, lest we either take stories too seriously or not seriously enough.

Stories have a pride of place among fabrication mechanisms if only because we tell stories about other fabrication mechanisms, such as political elections. Those stories affect trust in those mechanisms, further enabling or disabling their capacity to fabricate. Reality is always already storified, to further twist Brooks's word coinage. How we choose among stories—which stories we credit as authentic and trust—is as fateful as it is uncertain.

References

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