

Book Reviews edited by Joshua Parker

***Narrative in the Anthropocene.* By Erin James. Ohio State UP, 2022, 207 pp.**

How does the Anthropocene affect the arts – and vice versa? This question has been looming large in literary studies for the last two decades or so. Erin James offers a response from the perspective of postclassical narratology. Her compact monograph is, to this reviewer’s mind, a must-read for scholars and students who want to know whether and how narrative texts can answer this pressing concern. Framed by an introduction and a coda, James subdivides her take on the matter into chapters entitled “Worlds,” “Material,” “Time,” “Space,” and “Narration.” Throughout the volume, the author strikes a fine balance between innovative extensions of narratological theory and often strikingly insightful analysis of numerous examples of narrative fiction. She, moreover, embeds her crisp argumentation effectively within the historical development of her field and positions her work in relation to competing schools of narratological thinking throughout anglophone scholarship.

According to the introductory chapter, the monograph “corrects two shortcomings: a lack of engagement with narrative theory within the environmental humanities” and the “relatively scant considerations of the environment in narrative theory” (4). The trajectory of what she calls “Anthropocene narrative theory” (5) proposes that there are reciprocal impacts between the conditions of the Anthropocene and specific features, uses, and effects of narrative. Readers obviously play a central role in this endeavor because they are cast as responding both to the current epoch and to narratives of the same. Rather than siding with scholars who have claimed anything from narratives’ responsibility for the current condition of Planet Earth via certain types of narratives as offering real-life solutions to the supposed impossibility of even conveying climate change in fiction (7–14), James makes a case for studying how “readers interact with narrative” (14). In contrast to the frequently content-focused research by scholars in the environmental humanities, she argues that narratology’s emphasis on form complements and enriches analyses of underlying worldviews and ideologies (16), as feminist and postcolonial narratological works have also demonstrated (17). The central points in all of the five main chapters latch onto useful insights into specific schools of thought, but the author consistently carves out a niche for the added benefit of a postclassical Anthropocene narratology

that will heighten our understanding of the triangular relation between narrative, recipient, and a world affected by anthropogenic climate change.

Chapter one, “Worlds,” provides the argumentative basis for the subsequent chapters, highlighting an innovative perspective on defining narrative as the creation of “storyworlds” with specific purposes in mind. Especially the gaps built into such fictional storyworlds encourage readers to imagine how the “*unnarrated*” (39, original emphasis) may translate into their actual environments. Based on the theory of the “extended mind” (42) from cognitive narrative theory, the author argues that narrative can serve as a connector between individual human minds and the world around them. Further developing Caroline Levine’s new formalist stance, James emphasizes “narrative as an *affordance of worldbuilding*” (46, original emphasis) by offering an “aesthetic design” (46) that sets in motion “worldbuilding for some purpose” (46). As a result of addressing gaps and the ways texts elicit responses that take into account readers’ notions of the(ir) worlds, James cogently argues that narratives do not necessarily have to thematize the Anthropocene explicitly in order for us to study their storyworlding strategies. Her model here is Edward Said’s “*contrapuntal reading*” (53, original emphasis) of the real-world, yet mostly un-narrated colonial subtext of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814). From this perspective, the “extradiegetic heterodiegetic” (63) narrator of Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010) satirically highlights the dire consequences of the myopically solipsistic protagonist’s inability to perceive the dystopic state of the world outside his own mental cage.

Having closed the first chapter with stating the absence of “adequate analytical language” (65) for researching texts and formal features not yet included in the environmental humanities, James then proposes new terms in the following chapters and applies them rigorously. The second chapter, “Material,” offers a fresh take on new materialist claims about the ostensible narrative agency of the material more-than-human world (68, 69–72) which glosses over the use of human language, writing, and communication necessary to make texts known to readers. James develops convincing alternatives such as the concepts of “*material narrativity*” and “*material-narrative cognition*” (69, original emphasis). Rather than adopting the notion of material as an agentic narrator with independent powers of self-expression, she argues “that many types of nonhuman matter do encode within them certain significations” (72) – such as “tree rings” – which, in themselves, “are not narratives” in the sense of engaging in “worldbuild[ing] for some purpose” (72). Instead, these “significations” allow us to deduce that “*something happened*” (73, original emphasis) to them. The example of Aldo Leopold’s depiction of a tree serves as a case in point (75–76). It also brings to mind a narrative that, in James’s sense of not only considering Anthropocene-themed narrative texts, would provide fine material for an analysis: *Quercus*,

the invented novel embedded as the protagonist's reading material in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (Russian original published in 1935–36, English translation in 1959), which is an experiment in contemplating deep time *avant la lettre*.

The subsequent chapters are just as cogently argued. Chapter three, on "Time," addresses the debate about scalarity, which has been one of the top concerns in scholarly work on the (un)representability of climate change in the arts. Here, James introduces Anthropocene-appropriate new narratological categories such as the "*pseudo-singular*" and the "*effect-event*" (97, original emphasis). In particular, her reading of Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) demonstrates the usefulness of reading such a text for young readers narratologically because, otherwise, the understanding of its contents and its central arguments may remain comparatively superficial. In chapter four, "Space," James highlights how setting has become a moving target in Anthropocene narratives that highlight swift change and the unrecognizability of devastated locations. Her notion of "*despatialization*" (122, original emphasis) encapsulates a narrative technique that targets readers' imagination in depictions which force them to feel their way into fictional settings that explode their previous notions of possible (and, i.e., mostly stable) locations. This chapter illustrates that James's perspective allows in-depth study of a broad range of works, be they works favored by the Blue Humanities or narratives that depend heavily on the affordances of digital communication.

Chapter five, on "Narration," prepares the shift towards the discussion of claims made by scholars outside literary studies. The author elucidates variants of we-narration and second-person address, homing in on what she dubs "*inconstant we-narration*" and new variants of "the fictional *you*" (150, original emphasis). The oscillation between I- and we-narration requires readers to comprehend the switching between individual and collective subjecthoods, especially in relation to the imagined worlds to which they are connected (159). James's reading of Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020) lets this technique and the demands it puts on readers become clear (162–66) and beautifully demonstrates how the amazingly innovative expressive possibilities of inconstant we-narration transcend the storyworld and encourage us to contemplate the relation between "collective action" and "the personal responsibility of the individual" (166).

The chapter entitled "Coda: Narrative and Climate Science" points out the problematic ways in which some scientists have used often hopelessly antiquated, simplistic notions of what narrative is and what it can supposedly do to find ways of communicating climate science to lay readers. Especially the lack of consideration for

worldbuilding is at fault in such reductive perspectives on narrative as mostly a sequence of events arranged into a plot. By contrast, James closes with brief descriptions of two large-scale research projects which rely on National Science Foundation funding and take the synergetic collaboration of natural sciences and narratology seriously. One of the projects combines the forces of “two geographers, an environmental philosopher and indigenous scholar, and [James] as a narrative theorist,” who jointly study “water quality and governance in two indigenous communities” (186). The other project focuses on how people narrate their experiences with “wildland fire in rural Idaho” (187) and how such narrative-based data could be used “to increase scientific literacy” (187), to produce new insights into the occurrence and management of fires, and to improve ways of managing fire hazards (188). This section about her involvement in interdisciplinary research is all-too-brief and does not quench the thirst for more insights into innovative research designs and their results. At the same time, it leaves this reader looking forward to publications coming out of the projects and, more generally, further books and articles by James herself.

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Narrative in Crisis: Reflections from the Limits of Storytelling.
Edited by Martin Dege and Irene Strasser. Oxford UP, 2024, 182 pp.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced epidemiologic crisis as the antagonist of an overwhelming number of global narratives of precarity, inequality, and conflict. Individually and collectively, the human species cast, perhaps more frequently in liminal spaces than otherwise, for ways to make sense of its devastating grip, not only through a frantic resort to statistics (and the necropolitical figurations that it stood for) but also by means of narrating (with and without numbers). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, with its lingering shadow more than half a decade since it started, was and continues to brim with stories.