A New Anatomy of Storyworlds: What Is, What If, As If by Marie-Laure Ryan (review)

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*A New Anatomy of Storyworlds: What Is, What If, As If* is a scholarly work on a storyworld-based theory of narratology. However, its strengths lie beyond the scope arguing the merits of such a theory. They include its thorough address of fundamental concepts connected to narrative including, truth, fiction, narrators, and representation. The book’s systematic address of these topics in a relatively easy-to-access manner allows the book to serve as a useful resource for educators focused on narratology and related concepts.

If one is interested in wading quickly into the depths of “the implications of the concepts of world for narratology” (1), this book is an accessible entry point. The ideas present may also offer considerable provocation for scholars of narratology. Ryan includes primers and exploration not only of their central topic but for many of the concepts fundamental to narrative and fiction. The Introduction alone offers insight and detail of the history of narratology and a foundational understanding of the theory Ryan develops: “[n]arrative texts cannot represent ‘all that exists,’ but they can, and should, represent how individual existents relate to the people and objects that define their living environment” (7).

The book is written in a way that allows each chapter to familiarize the reader with the chapter’s focal topic within the context of narratology rather than foregrounding Ryan’s storyworld theory of narratology. The chapter topics follow: Truth, Fiction, Narrator, Characters, Plot, Mimesis and Diegesis, Parallel Worlds, Impossible Worlds, Virtual Worlds, and Transmedia Worlds. The expansive and historical orientations present throughout are one of the recurring strengths of *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds*. They offer straightforward perspective and dominant ideas to which one may align or work against to form one’s position.

As one moves through the text, within the thoroughness of Ryan’s thought, one faces the foundational consideration that any character, any event, must have a world, in the sense of a container, even if that container is a fictional nothingness. This consideration alone makes evident that storyworlds do have a fundamental place within narratives, if not a primacy. The first chapters are particularly interesting though their content makes clear that the body of the text is not limited to pressing major points of the argument for a storyworld-based theory of narratology, so much as immersing the reader in a broad perspective which itself is informed by the storyworld-theory.

The first chapter, as an illustration of the approach and tone throughout much of the book, considers in detail the practical consideration of whether truth is an apt defining characteristic of fiction. If one is interested in concepts of truth, this chapter is a highly functional introduction and map of the highlights. It clearly lays out many of the relevant primary texts, such as Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*; Alfred Tarski’s *The Semantic Conception of Truth* (1969); Richard Rorty’s *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989);
David Lewis’ *Truth in Fiction* (1978); and Kendall Walton’s *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990), among others.

Toward the end of the chapter, there are three sections on truth from a perspective more attuned to narratology. These sections—Fictional Truth, Literary Truth, and Mythical Truth—are additional examples of what makes the book so functional as a broad reader which can take one from beginner toward expert remarkably swiftly. Following these sections, Ryan’s reflective conclusion to the Truth chapter returns to a thought introduced at the beginning of the chapter, Alan D. Sokal’s 1996 challenge of the postmodernist critique of scientific truth in “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” reprinted in *The Sokal Hoax* (2000). Ryan conversationally wonders “what would happen if the postmodern critique of truth as correspondence succeeded in bringing the scientific community down to its knees” (33).

While it may be surprising there are no chapters devoted to environmental writing nor directly to post-humanism, as in some ways these two seem to offer opportunity for mutual benefit, there are two chapters, the last two, Virtual Worlds and Transmedia Worlds, which offer extensive consideration of how contemporary paradigms connect with narrative and specifically to Ryan’s theory of narratology grounded in storyworlds. Though here too the emphasis is on broad concepts with some examples for illustration. While this reviewer is neither a narratologist nor one who has trained their attention on either virtual reality or transmedia within narratology, Ryan again provides a detailed foundation that allows the opportunity to develop thoughts and positions on prominent topics within narratology.

For me, the more impactful academic writing is not that which convinces, but that which offers information and thought in a way that supports me in considering the topic. *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds: What Is, What If, As If* achieves that on a multitude of levels, from introducing which topics are significant within narratology, such as concepts of narrators, mimesis and diegesis, as well as presenting details about those topics while also developing thought on a Ryan’s specific perspective, grounding narrative in storyworlds. For that alone, I consider it a useful addition to my bookshelf. In addition, the book’s accessibility may allow it to serve as a source text to introduce several topics it addresses within a classroom, though I would need to supplement it with applied literary readings and critical exercises. Lastly, the book offered succinct breakdowns of concepts which I may find useful when addressing adjacent topics and concepts within my research.

There were two qualities of the book which may surprise. The first was that throughout considerable passages, Ryan’s thesis seemed either sublimated or not present. This is a strength in terms of using the book as a source on the topics it mentions, particularly for educators who may want to use the text in classes. If one is interested in a text that introduces the reader to, for example, multiple concepts of narrator in an introductory way without the need to filter argumentation for a storyworld theory of narratology, this book may serve well. However,
it does pose a challenge if one is hoping for a singular address to a storyworld theory of narratology. The detailed and expansive perspective can be considered as merits of the book rather than something in which the argument is lost. Overall, it was refreshing to find such a useful book that brings together concise foundational thought on topics typically scattered across disciplines and texts.

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