

## Book introduction

### Narratives in social life

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society

(Barthes, 1977 [1966], p. 79)

This book draws together recent work in language and related fields which demonstrates the foundational role of narrative across a wide spectrum of social activity. The ubiquity of narrative in private and public life is matched by the rich variety of its forms across different media, and of its functions and purposes. Contemporary stories found in such diverse contexts as young children's crib talk, conversation, Facebook updates, the founding myths of commercial companies, verbatim theatre and commemorative quilts transform the raw material of human experience into creative expressions of identity, relationship, suffering, pleasure, hope and aspiration – all of which play a unique and complex part in our lives. Chapters focus on topics such as the role of narrative as a fundamental communication mode for making sense of experience, as well as the role of narrative in childhood, the workplace, illness, creative writing, translation and social media. Recurring themes include: the complex construction of narrative truth and authenticity, the interplay between memory and imagination, the frequent recycling and reconfiguration of narrative elements across language, modes, genres and media, narrative as creative critique, and the important role of narrative in the performance of identity.

Chapters reflect the recent turn in narrative studies from texts to practices, and from narrative structure and individual canonical stories

to contextualised accounts of narrative performance in everyday life. Thus, authors to some extent replace traditional structural and poetic analyses with discourse, multimodal and ethnographic approaches, drawing on cross-fertilisation between literature and language studies, and anthropology, sociology and psychology. The shift to contextualised approaches foregrounds the important role of the audience. It also highlights the intrinsically multimodal nature of narrative expression, in other words how spoken and written language are combined with gaze, gesture, action, images, sound, light and colour to produce meaning and creative effects. Whether through the articulation of gaze and action with speech in children's play, infographics in visual CVs, body maps in HIV narratives, or visual and sound effects in online videos, all chapters deal with the intersection of different modes and media in narrative, discussing narrators' creative manipulation of these in their pursuit of personal, social and political purposes.

## How the book is structured

Each chapter presents contemporary work on narrative in a particular area, drawing variously on analytic traditions from discourse and sociolinguistic studies, linguistic ethnography, stylistics, creative writing and translation studies. In the opening chapter, Alexandra Georgakopoulou introduces key concepts and themes from narrative studies and explains the recent shift towards contextualised studies which analyse how stories are performed and used in people's everyday lives.

Chapters 2–4 then examine the nature and purposes of narrative in different areas of social life, employing a range of analytic methods. Chapter 2 by Rosie Flewitt and Janet Maybin draws on linguistic ethnography to show how narrative creativity drives children's development and play, mediates their engagements with different media, and provides a key resource for adolescents' creativity, criticality and emerging identity. In Chapter 3, Zsófia Demjén presents a semiotic analysis of how narratives are exploited and reversioned in the workplace by individuals and institutions, in CVs, in job interviews and in the creation of company image and branding. In Chapter 4, Corinne Squire uses an interdisciplinary approach to examine the production of life stories about AIDS and HIV, at both personal and societal levels. Squire considers what these multimodal stories achieve for their tellers

and audience, and discusses their complex relationship with truth and authority.

Chapters 5 and 6 switch attention to creative writing and translation/adaptation, showing how similar questions about truth, authenticity, memory and imagination recur in these more traditionally literary areas of narrative study. Chapter 5 by Heather Richardson examines the interplay of fact and fiction in autobiographical fiction, verbatim theatre and historical novels. Comparing different authors' approaches to personal, political and fantastical dimensions of their work, the chapter also includes activities which encourage deeper engagement with the creative writing approach. In Chapter 6, Fiona Doloughan uses two case studies – Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers* and the creation of a film adaptation of *Macbeth* in a Belfast prison – to explore the questions and dilemmas involved in translating and adapting stories across cultures, languages, genres and media.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Caroline Tagg turns to the new opportunities for creativity and identity performance in the rapidly circulating material produced by online digital tools. Social media narratives, she argues, require us to rethink local/global distinctions and question traditional concepts of authorship, audience and textual authority.

Chapters include both close-up examinations of narrative creativity, and also consideration of their individual and societal significance. Overall, within a fast changing world, the book explains how and why narrative remains a key form of meaning making across our personal and public lives.

## Reference

Barthes, R. (1977 [1966]) 'Introduction to the structural analysis of narratives', in Heath, S. (ed. and trans.) *Image, Music, Text*, New York, Hill and Wang, pp. 79–124.