

# The truth of fiction

by Peter Townsend

## Key terms

**Fiction** is not lies, or errors. Those are fictive, not fiction. Lies are deception; errors are inaccuracies or delusions. Fiction is overt. I shall suggest that *fiction gives us ways to understand*.

I shall use some key concepts: **understanding, patterns, examples**.

By **understanding** I mean: to fit into a general pattern and/or theory or hypothesis. And therefore to explicate by means of **examples** – which may be factual or fiction (hypothetical). For understanding, the structures of the theories must be consistent and coherent with their examples, so forming a conceptual whole (or web).

**Factual** examples (realized states of affairs – what is done, *factum*) are presented to us randomly; it is up to us to put them in order. We have to make patterns of them in order to act with consideration. We do this by **induction**, from the putatively factual examples we experience. This is a cyclic, iterative process.

**Fiction** is presented to us already ordered, as narrative. It has form, uses Kantian categories, e.g. cause-effect, embodies patterns and exemplifies them. It uses induced explanatory theory and explicates it with examples. Being stripped of the ‘extraneous’ contextual variables of fact, it serves as a **model** to aid understanding.

**Understanding** enables us to create **possibilities** which fit the model, and/or conceptual web – the frame for understanding. These are exemplars of the pattern. They can be said to be true if truly possible (*vraisemblable*). They are truly possible if the pattern is true.

Axiom: *A pattern is ‘true’ to the extent that it repeats.* (NB This is definitional, not a metaphysical claim. Neither is it a bivalent definition, being graded.) Note also that an *example* of a pattern is judged by the same criterion.

## Patterns

Patterns occur in time and space: cycles of day and night, seasons, sun and rain; like causes, like effects; Euclidean ratios and relations; laws of motion and energy; the symptoms of diseases; the perdurant and reliable qualities of things as they come and go. We also acquire and impose patterns, in engineering, architecture and design, and on behaviour. Sometimes we confuse the ones we impose with the ones that occur, as in history and politics.

The word ‘pattern’ itself has a range of extensions: climatologists, biologists and psychologists discover them; a tool-maker applies one, repeatedly; the Alhambra is covered with them; fractals create them; a career or an obsession patterns our lives; crystals form them; so do planetary systems; music is composed of patterns. Here is one, the dendritic (tree-like) form, that reappears in both time and space – though arguably, in a tree, they are the same:



This pattern shows up in plants, crystals, rivers and estuaries, cooling systems, in our vascular system, and our nervous system – including the brain. It can be mathematically described and generated, is both naturally-occurring and efficient, even without the help of evolution – although evolution itself has dendritic form. As do my hands. We have the ability to *recognize* it, even from a small part, wherever and whenever it occurs. Another example of a pattern in nature is the bell-shaped curve, which pops up all over the place. Newton’s Laws are patterns in time; Einstein’s are perhaps patterns *of* time.

What matters here, though, are the patterns in *our* time-line, because they are the basis of our ability to understand: they are what the world consists of and what we perceive and rely on. Sign-systems – language –

could not exist without them; neither, arguably, could thought itself. What fiction does, is **exemplify** patterns. As do facts. But each does it differently.

### **Science and fiction: in contrast but complementary**

In science facts come first: from a random array it induces patterns; from the patterns it makes predictions. Both patterns and predictions are based on decontextualised, idealized relations between facts, stripped of variables. The predictions are tested in variable-stripped environments – controlled experiments – in order to validate hypotheses. The hypothesis is a model of the pattern. Experiments are examples. If all are consistent – and preferably coherent with other good hypotheses – we are inclined to say that the hypothesis is ‘true’. It is true, I am saying, to the extent that it accords with our *experience* of the way the world is – its patterns – which enable understanding of what is and is not *possible*.

Fiction *creates* fresh possibilities based on that experience. Without formulating the hypotheses, it proceeds straight to the experiments – thought-experiments. Its science is unconscious – just the kind we might call ‘common sense’. It proceeds as if all the science were already done and understood, and explores the frontiers of the possible.

Whereas science is based in a contract between scientists, to test and critique each other’s work, so that it can form a corporate – ideally ‘objective’ – view, fiction is based in a different contract, between writer and reader. Both forms of contract are cyclic, where feedback from each constantly reforms the product of the other. But the writers and readers of fiction are not usually interested in objectivity (unless adherents of the *Nouveau Roman* school): they are interested in what it *feels like* to be each other; which opens up quite another kind of possibility – one of alternative subjectivities. Between them, I suggest science and fiction open up our world, and free us from the channels of dogma. Science, because it is a democracy of enquiry; and fiction, because it is overtly not *the* truth. Instead they offer the possibility of insight – truthful, *vraisemblable* insights.

Fiction, I am saying, stands in relation to fact as experiment does to science, and thought-experiment does to philosophy. It explores the possible, and tests it for . . . truthfulness? Verisimilitude? Metaphysically, it stands in relation to ‘what is’ – the noumenon – exactly as we do, judging what is possible from what we have learned.

### **So, in what sense is fiction ‘true’?**

Authors of fiction distinguish between false and true: they aim for truth by telling stories. Marilynne Robinson says: “Why is it possible to speak of fiction as true or false? I have no idea. But if a time comes when I seem not to be making the distinction with some degree of reliability . . . I hope someone will let me know.” They are engaged, I would say, with imagining for us a truth about the possibly possible.

We find within overt fiction itself the most penetrating analyses of deceptions and delusions. Overt fiction is covert fiction’s severest critic: Shakespeare hates deceivers; in *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Lear*, and even the comedies, his villains are the dissemblers, those who pretend: “’Tis meet I set it down, that a man may smile and smile and be a villain!” says Hamlet.

He is also constantly concerned with the nature of *illusion*, as in the prologue to *Henry V*, the *Dream*; or Hamlet again: “. . . That this *player* here . . . What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?” And there is the famous speech “All the world’s a stage . . .” in *As You Like It*. His comedies turn on mistakes and impersonations. His last play, *The Tempest*, plays with illusions and delusions, as does the *Dream*. His contemporary, Calderón, wrote *Life’s a Dream*.

Don Quixote is the classic victim of *delusion*. Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina are victims of their personal fictions; Ibsen gives us other examples. So, in less drastic ways, were Jane Austen’s Bennet family. In the game of let’s pretend, the truth will out: “The play’s the thing / wherein to catch the conscience of the king.”

### **Stories, myths and fables**

We have an appetite for stories, of many kinds – stories that give form to our lives and the world. But many of the most famous are fictions: myths and legends, parables and fables. Interestingly, in making a general point, we often prefer the false example to the true one . . . e.g. Putnam’s fantasia of a twin earth, or Mary’s Room (are they also fables?)

Marilynne Robinson again: “Greek and Roman boys memorised Homer. This was a large part of their education just as memorising the Koran is now for many boys in Islamic cultures . . . Narrative always implies cause and consequence. It creates paradigmatic structures around which experience can be ordered, and this certainly

would account for the craving for it, which might well be called a need.” The Greek and Roman and Islamic boys were reading stories that were as factual to them as the New Testament is for a Bible Belt fundamentalist today. Undermine those perceived truths, and you undermine their ‘paradigmatic structures’.

We don’t know now how the myths were once perceived – as ‘true’ in our sense or just as ways of understanding, or if they cared. There is a difference, though. When we are taught physics we are invited to picture the atom as a structure of little balls – ‘particles’. We are told that these are hugely out of proportion, that if the particles were really that size the model would fill the Albert Hall; and that they spin and whirl in constant motion. But that model is not the ‘truth’, it is just an illustration that offers an imperfect way of understanding – one of many possible ways. When a Greek boy was told about Eros, did he really think a winged cherub would one day shoot him with his arrow? Do we believe in that model of the atom? Or that the universe is infinite, and time had a beginning? If we believe that, either we have to adjust our idea of ‘time’ or ‘beginning’. And if we can do that, what can we do with the idea of causation? If our modern idea of ‘truth’ is shot through with contradictions, what should we hang on to? I submit that what we do is find *ways to understand*, and ways to understand *how* we understand (this last being the primary job of philosophy).

Homer is somewhere between history, fiction and myth. In a world whose whims of weather and chance were little understood, it made sense to give them superhuman faces and minds: to see storms as raised by Neptune and the sun as Phoebus’s cart. But did those boys see the stories as true, or just a way of seeing? Did they distinguish?

Do we? For most people on earth, religion and ideology conflate the two: history becomes the frame of understanding. The tenets of the religions of the book are founded in story – the story both *in* the book and *of* the book. Stories are the bases of other world religions too, carved in stone on ancient temples in deserts and jungles. We learn the stories before we learn to believe; first the story, then the moral imperative. The story gives the form of understanding (or misunderstanding).

### **The possible**

Understanding wakes us up, above all, to what is beyond immediate fact – it lets in the *possible*. Which is a lot more interesting; it frees us up to new perspectives. What happens in fiction is just what *could* happen. It offers us a pattern to take home, one we *want* to take home. Why do we want this? Because, I suggest, it offers us an alternative reality, an option. It is wrong to call this an escape; it is, on the contrary, a new tool in our locker. We have recognised fellows, people like ourselves though from another time and place – “Once upon a time, in a land far, far away”. We learn from them, their mistakes (about truths universally accepted at the time) and their triumphs, and share their (fictive) fears, hopes and joys. Our narrow life has been broadened to take in other lives. It is a kind of freedom – doubly so, because we can pick the book up and put it down; it enables, it does not bind.

That is precisely because we know it is *not* true; our belief is optional, temporary. In fiction, *we* are in charge, unlike reality, which governs us. While in the story, we can be who we want to be. We are *in* the story as we might be in another kind of role – parent, job, citizen – but these other kinds are more real and therefore constraining. At the same time, the fiction presents us with a limited set of possibilities, a predictable environment where we feel safe. The story has shape and continuity, a framework of expectations, a composition in a frame. While we are inside that frame, what happens *is* the truth. This is truth as coherence: as non-contradiction, as concordance, harmony and fit. These are ideas our ancestors thought very important to understanding the cosmos – Pythagoras, for example, or Confucius.

### **Ways of seeing**

So, by saying that fiction offers us examples, I am saying that it offers tokens; it does not, in itself, establish a theory or set up types. Quite the contrary in fact: good fiction fleshes out its exemplary characters and makes them as ‘real’, as complex and fully imagined – and unimaginable – as us and our friends. Most people read fiction in order to confirm their world-view (the same reason that we choose our version of history or daily source of news). The best fiction does something else: it jogs that world-view, that chosen lens or framework, a bit, so that we see askance, and are granted a fresh vision. As Picasso said, “It took me 60 years to learn how to see like a child.” Some authors are famous for that new and different vision – Dostoyevsky, for instance, or Borges, or

Kafka. We talk of a 'Kafkaesque world', and for a while we may live in it; he has created a new way to see 'reality'. But we don't want to live there permanently; we are grateful for the ability he has given us to slip in and out of it – the option. It is a kind of freedom, a new place to go, or avoid if we can. Other authors invent escapes to idealised worlds – of dreams, not nightmares. Others allow us into the worlds of other kinds of people, people less or more fortunate than us, people with obsessions we are glad we don't have, or with intricate and rich powers of observation that enable us to see . . . like a child? Or like a botanist, or an animal, or an artist. Each tints our circumscribed world with different colours and changes its forms and priorities. We like that, and it frees us precisely because it *is* fiction, an option, and we know it; it is overt.

### **Overt versus covert fictions**

A story: when my granddaughter was about three and a half she offered me a cup from her toy tea-set. "Here's a cup of tea," she said. Then, as I lifted the empty cup to my lips, confidentially, "It's not *real* tea." She knew, you see, the difference; she was *playing*. Playing is a rehearsal, a fiction; it does two things for a child: it gets her into shape for the real thing; but it also – and this may be more important – it teaches the difference between the real thing and the rehearsal. One sees baby animals playing at fighting; sometimes one goes too far, and gets punished. You have to learn about possibilities and consequences, and play is a harmless way to do that. So is fiction; maybe fiction is a sort of play. But, to do that, you have to be able to believe and not believe at the same time, like my granddaughter, and know what's which.

I want to make a distinction between overt and covert fictions: the overt kind are written in order to be read as fiction – as possibilities, as ways of understanding; as if by understanding *them* we may come to understand what actually happens; disbelief is suspended, but only for now. The covert kind, on the other hand, pretend to be real – like the stories told by politicians and sensation-peddling newspapers (often the same stories). The latter are not merely false, but falsehoods; they aspire to be believed, like false friends, deceivers. Shakespeare and Milton reserved for them the ultimate, lowest circle of hell: both Iago, Othello's nemesis, and Satan in *Paradise Lost* use the same sentence, "I am not what I am." Liars, it seems, are less than fully human.

Typically, covert fictions present a narrative to account for origins, history, mystery and moral compulsions. (You may already have in mind some examples of your own. To be clear, I know of a number of religious and ideological narratives I don't believe in – a very large number. I expect all of us could make a similar list. Why anyone chooses one of these rather than another is a mystery for another day.)

We have an insatiable appetite for simplicity and certainty – which go together: it is difficult to be certain about something too complicated. Simplicity is a short-cut to understanding – understanding on the cheap. Covert fictions, notoriously, *convert*. Overt fictions, on the contrary, open up options, leave us able to postpone commitment, perhaps, with luck, forever. Not everyone approves. (It is notable that puritans and fundamentalists of all persuasions seek to eliminate fictions, play, as frivolous, even dangerous, alternatives to their truth.)

Like the proverbial lamppost, fictions offer both light and support; we can use them for either purpose; it is up to us to choose which. If for light, then they will light up other alternative sources; if for support, we can be afraid to let go.

### **Can fiction be falsified?**

If we cannot apply normal 'truth-makers' to fiction, can we, instead, falsify it, like a hypothesis? In fiction, we judge as 'false' what appears 'insincere': writing or telling that is either falsely motivated – to bully or persuade, for example – or falsely mediated, as when the style betrays posturing, or showing off, or the adoption of ready-made attitudes and clichés. It proceeds from a false source or *persona*, via false means.

Or it does not relate to us, to our experience (our patterns of experience). We cannot empathise or sympathise with the characters; we do not see *ourselves* in there. The author has not spoken to *us*. Fiction, I now claim, is falsifiable in that sense – by the reader, or critic (we are all critics). Literary criticism, then, that much-maligned profession, does have its uses!

My claim then, in short, is that fiction helps us to understand; in particular, the difference between true and false ways of understanding. As the late lamented Terry Pratchett said: "Fantasy can't get you anywhere; but it tones up the muscles that can."