

My Narratology

An Interview with Susan S. Lanser

DIEGESIS: What is your all-time favourite narratological study?

Lanser: Narratology is blessed with extraordinary thinkers. I owe major debts for entire concepts (Gerald Prince on the *narratee*, Alex Woloch on character systems); other debts for transformative angles on received ideas (Ansgar Nünning's "Reliable Compared to What?" and Claude Bremond's theory of plot paths as mapped and mediated by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan). Where would I be without the pioneers who, before and including Dorrit Cohn (*Transparent Minds*), elucidated free indirect discourse (*erlebte Rede*)? or began to lay out the workings of novelistic time (I think back to Adam Abraham Mendilow's *Time and the Novel*, a perhaps forgotten classic)? or introduced a poetics of point of view (Boris Uspenskii's *Poetics of Composition*, which was crucial for my work in *The Narrative Act*)? And where would my students and I be without heteroglossia, or the chronotope, and thus Bakhtin?

You can see that I'm resisting the single choice. Yet if I must bow to the question, I will acknowledge that my "all-time favourite narratological study" – which is to say the one that has most definitively shaped my consciousness for forty years – would still be Gérard Genette's *Discours du récit*. Both in my scholarly work and in my teaching, I return time and again to Genette's fine-grained distinctions of order, duration, frequency, mood and voice. Even though I love to quote Ansgar Nünning's witty comment that narratology is all tangled up in obscure Greek-rooted terms composed of prefixes + "diegetic" that terrify students (1999, 347), I cannot imagine narratology without Genette's brilliant exegesis of narrative and his critical vocabulary.

DIEGESIS: Which narrative would you like to take with you on a lonely island?

Lanser: I can't imagine how I'd survive that lonely island with only *one* work of narrative! If I could have at least the whole corpus of a single author, then Jane Austen, Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Toni Morrison all come to mind as writers whose blend of narrative experiment, depth of understanding, rivetingly complex characters, and sheer storytelling brilliance might sustain me. Since I teach Austen often and know her best, I could sit on my island and simply *remember* her novels, rereading them in my mind. The entirety of Balzac's *Comédie humaine* might take up an

island of reading time, and *La Chartreuse de Parme*, *To the Lighthouse*, or *Sula* could keep me turning the same pages again and again.

But if I must choose just one book, I will pare it down to two choices: I'd opt either for Dickens' *Bleak House* or Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Both novels are riven, in a sense: *Bleak House* by its dual structure of narrative voice, *Daniel Deronda* by attempting to integrate the disparate stories of two protagonists, Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth. Dickens' novel introduces so many characters and so intricate a plot that I could either read for pleasure or hone my narratological muscles on that text for many moons. *Daniel Deronda* is a baggier affair that attempts to bring together two very different narrative worlds and also to confront England's "Jewish question" in ways that fascinate me. And yes, although I specialize in the eighteenth century and live in the twenty-first, I'm choosing two nineteenth-century novels. On a lonely island, I'd be grateful that these books are very long.

DIEGESIS: Why narratology?

Lanser: I've made a strong case for *more* narratology in a recent essay published in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (2015), which I co-edited with Robyn Warhol. Here is its core claim: "To the extent that narrative succeeds by covering the tracks of its own strategies, narratology provides a critical pathway to understanding how stories work. [...] To the extent that those narrative strategies function as narrative content, stories cannot even be apprehended unless we can read them as form." I add that "to the extent that the gender arrangements on which narrative depends – and the narratives on which gender arrangements depend – are complex, subtle, and sometimes elusive, feminist and queer studies might be among narratology's particular beneficiaries" (23). I still believe that the benefits of narratology remain under-tapped. I would caution, however, that narratology might need to reform some of its own theories, priorities, and terminologies if the field is to have the importance and influence it deserves.

DIEGESIS: Which recent narratological trends are of particular interest to you?

Lanser: What interests me most right now is the budding field of historical narratology (the subject of a terrific *DIEGESIS* issue not long ago). My choice to take *Bleak House* to my island notwithstanding, I think narratology has spent disproportionately too much of its time on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works. More importantly, though, I want to urge us to think more deeply and more broadly about changes in narrative practices over time. We need *histories* of narrative voice, temporality, focalization, character, plot – so that we can understand the deep ways in which form, as much as manifest narrative content, responds to the cultural and social dynamics of its time and place.

I am also deeply interested in what one might loosely call the politics of form. In *The Narrative Act* I called for a practice that attends to the ideological dimensions of narrative, and I think we narratologists have done too little work along those lines. I'm currently working with Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan on the formal elements of Palestinian and Israeli narratives. We argue that stepping back from the polarized content of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to look at the ways in which the conflict inflects narrative form, offers new understandings of the dynamics of the conflict and the investments of the two "sides." It's astonishing what one can learn from reading form – which is why I make such a strong case for narratology.

DIEGESIS: What is the future of narratology?

Lanser: I'll start by quoting a passage from David Lodge's academic novel *Small World* (1984): "Hasn't [the narratologist's] moment passed? I mean, ten years ago, everybody was into that stuff, octants and functions and mythemes and all that jazz. But now..." (134). Well, Lodge wrote that prediction in 1984, and narratology is still flourishing, indeed flourishing anew. My students are eager to soak up narratological concepts and to use them to understand narrative texts in new and deeper ways. In what is now called its "postclassical" phase, narratology has bridged what was arguably once a certain isolation from other critical movements and has shown how versatile a set of tools it offers. I would proudly call narratology "low theory" – I believe Genette once made that claim about his own work – and the beauty of "low theory" is that it can serve so many purposes.

In the end, though, the future of narratology will be what we make it. Or, to be more precise: what you, the younger generations, make it.

DIEGESIS: What other question would you like to answer?

Lanser: I'd like to be asked what I'm doing (academically speaking) when I'm not "doing" narratology, for I wear several academic hats. Along with my investments in gender and sexuality studies, I have primary interests in eighteenth-century Europe. I recently published a book called *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830* that reverses the typical trajectory of the history of sexuality: instead of asking, for example, what we can learn about sexuality from the eighteenth century, I ask what we can learn about the eighteenth century from (representations of) sexuality. I look for the ideas, tropes, and textual patterns that connect sexual representations to larger concerns of the times: rather than ferreting out queer content in closeted writings, I reread the surfaces of more obviously sexual texts for their more-than-sexual implications. I'm also strongly interested in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions and have begun two projects related to the French Revolution. One concerns a plot to spring Marie Antoinette from prison and whisk her off to – of all places – the State of Maine. The other is narratological: it concerns novels about the

French Revolution in which historical figures become fictional characters. I'm not sure where that project is headed, but I know I'll enjoy the trip.

And there I go, circling right back to narratology.

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Susan S. Lanser is Professor of Comparative Literature, English, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. She is the author of several monographs, including *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, and *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830* (winner of the Joan Kelly Prize in Women's History and runner-up for the Louis Gottschalk Prize in Eighteenth-Century Studies), as well as the co-editor of the following anthologies: *Women Critics 1660-1820* (with the Folger Collective), *Helen Maria Williams: Letters Written in France* (with Neil Fraistat), and *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (with Robyn Warhol). She is the past President of the International Society for the Study of Narrative and vice-president of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies.

Prof. Susan S. Lanser

Brandeis University

Waltham, MA 02454

E-mail: lanser@brandeis.edu

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