

Inheriting the World

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Abstract: A critical reflection on John Woods's new monograph, [Truth in Fiction – Rethinking its Logic](#). I focus in particular on Woods's world-inheritance thesis (what others have variously called 'background,' 'the principle of minimal departure,' and 'the reality assumption,' and which replaces Woods's earlier 'fill-conditions') and its interplay with auctorial say-so, arguing that world-inheritance actually constrains auctorial say-so in ways Woods has not anticipated.

Inheriting the World

1. Fiction and flotation

“Fiction,” says John Woods, “is somewhat like flotation. When objects subject to gravitational pull don’t fall down, competing causal powers are in play” (Woods 140).¹ One of the ways in which we might say that fiction is like flotation concerns its relationship to the real world: the real world exerts a certain gravitational pull over stories, ensuring that what is true in it is true in them as well—unless an author’s competing causal power is in play. In other words, what is true in a story is what is true in the world, unless the author says otherwise. This idea is neatly captured by Woods’s world-inheritance thesis and its corollary, the storyworld epistemic-access thesis:

The world-inheritance thesis: Except for contrary indications in the stories, fictional works inherit the world. Save for those auctorially sourced exclusions, the world of the story is the actual world. Everything true in the actual world at the time of the story is true in the world of the story, except for adjustments required by the author’s own creative interventions.²

The storyworld epistemic-access thesis: Except where otherwise provided by the author, what readers know of the world of the stories—Doyle’s storyworld, we could say—is what they know or could come to know about their own world at the times in which those stories were set.³

So everything that is true in the real world is also true in the story, apart from those ways in which the author has stipulated that the storyworld deviates from the real.⁴

World-inheritance enables readers to fill out unspecified elements of stories by mobilizing their real-world knowledge. Consider, for instance, Howard Pyle’s Robin Hood, who, if he is right-handed, must aim significantly to the left of his target in order to overcome the arrow’s dynamic

¹ Woods (2018: 140). Note that Woods actually uses this analogy to explain the asymmetry of our beliefs about fiction—that fictions aren’t real, but that they nevertheless relate true claims about the story. Nevertheless, this imagery aptly describes the world-inheritance thesis, too.

² Woods (2018: 81). The world-inheritance thesis is prefigured by Woods’s ‘fill’ conditions from (1974: 63-5).

³ Woods (2018: 81).

⁴ Although it is worth noting that not everything true in a story is part of that story. Consequence-having preserves truth, but not necessarily truth-in-a-story; see Woods (2018: 14-15).

bend and ensure a bull's eye (this is known as the archer's paradox). Although we are never told so much about medieval archery, we can be certain that ordinary physical laws hold in the story and affect its characters and their actions. The assumption is a safe one—indeed, it *must* be true—even if not explicitly sanctioned by the text, since it is implied by other facts which *are* explicitly stated in it.

I want to focus my attention here on two related questions about world-inheritance: (1) the role that auctorial say-so plays in setting the parameters of world-inheritance, and (2) what the introduction of inconsistent stories and outright contradictions can tell us about the limits of auctorial say-so and world-inheritance.

2. Auctorial say-so

My first question concerns the limits of auctorial say-so: what are they? What does an author have to do to make something true in her story?

At a first pass, we might say that an author must write truths into her story. J.K. Rowling may have always thought of Albus Dumbledore as gay, and she may well endorse readings according to which Hermione is black, but thinking and endorsing are not quite the right ways of making fictionally true. Authors make things true in their stories by writing them in, or by ensuring that they're implied by other fictional facts. They make things true in their stories by telling stories in which these things are true. And sometimes they leave the storyworld facts somewhat under-determined, thereby allowing different readers to fill them in differently

This is just how our practice of story-telling is organized; it could, in principle, have been organized any of an infinite number of other ways. We can imagine a (distant!) possible world, for example, where stories are constructed solely by rolling dice and consulting the appropriately numbered entry in the Book of Sentences; in this diceworld, auctorial say-so extends as far as determining the number of dice to roll, and how many faces each die will have, but no further. Or

we can imagine a world in which stories are determined by the author's intentions at every moment when the author is consulted about them; in this whimsical world, story-content shifts with the author's flights of fancy or follows the contours of her memory. But these are not our world. Ours is a world in which story-telling is a communicative act bound by certain constraints, including institutional constraints set by the publishing industry. These make it so that Rowling cannot revisit the question of Dumbledore's sexuality or Hermione's race without first creating a new story in which to relate them to us.⁵

The lesson here is just that auctorial intent is not sufficient for story-truth; the author must also take appropriate steps to encode her intended truth into her story, e.g. by explicitly writing it in. But it is also worth observing that authors may be wrong about which things they have, in fact, encoded into their stories. It is well-known, for example, that Conan Doyle believed in faeries; suppose that he also believed of his fellow Victorians and Edwardians that they, too, believed in faeries. And so, let us suppose that he intended for there to be faeries in the Holmes stories, too, even though he never went to the trouble of actually writing them in. Would Holmes's London thereby be chock full of faeries?

Certainly not. There are three ways in which an author can make some proposition *P* true in her stories: she can either (1) explicitly state *P* in her story, (2) explicitly state certain facts which imply the truth of *P*, or (3) she can rely on world-inheritance to supply *P*. Each of these decisions is entirely up to our author, but that is as far as say-so goes. Authors set the parameters for world-inheritance; no more, and no less. The rest is up to the world, and to readers.

It is worth asking, however, just how far we should take the storyworld epistemic-access thesis to modify world-inheritance: is Robin Hood's world one in which the laws of gravity apply but are unexplained, or is it a world in which Aristotle's theory of return to "natural place" obtains?

⁵ As perhaps she did, in Dumbledore's case, with the introduction of Grindelwald. But it is worth noting the difference between clues which make an interpretation *plausible* and facts from which its *truth* necessarily follows.

Is it a world in which women are oppressed and subject to systemic discrimination, or is it a world in which it is true that they are inferior to men along all relevant dimensions? In other words, how much of the storyworld gets filled in by the way the world is *actually* organized, versus the ways in which readers (ideally-situated or otherwise) *believe* it is organized either at the time of the story's reading, setting, or writing?⁶

3. Inheriting inconsistently

I said, above, that authors set the parameters for world-inheritance. In fact, say-so does not even go quite that far. For suppose our author errs, as Conan Doyle did when he described Watson as having been wounded in the leg, rather than in the shoulder, as in previous stories. In these cases, it is clear to everyone that the author has erred, and that we are not meant to encode the error into our compendium of storyworld truths. Indeed, as Woods observes, readers mostly do not pay much attention to such inconsistencies—in fact, they often go entirely unnoticed.⁷ Watson's wound is in one place or the other, not both, but which place exactly is epistemically unavailable to us. We might hazard a reliable guess based on the frequency of its mention in one place or another, along with other storyworld facts which might help to imply it (such as Watson's limping along). Woods calls these “fussbudget” inconsistencies, because all but the fussiest philosophers of fiction recognize that the inconsistency results from an inadvertent slip, and should not be encoded into our reflective reading of the story. If the fussbudget insists, then we need only mobilize Woods's notion of sites to explain the slip in an entirely intuitive manner: Watson has a shoulder wound *in situ A Study in Scarlet* (1887), a leg wound *in situ The Sign of the Four* (1890), and has some indeterminate wound “in one of

⁶ Stacie Friend has recently tackled this particular problem, arguing that the background encoded into the story is the world as it is, rather than as the author or intended audience believed it to be (2017: 37).

⁷ Woods (2018: 94, fn 4).

his limbs” *in situ* *The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor* (1892) and *The Cardboard Box* (1893);⁸ *in situ* the Holmes canon as a whole, however, we simply cannot say.

So much for auctorial slips; slippery say-so does not make propositions true quite as readily as deliberate say-so. But what, then, should we make of *deliberate* inconsistencies, as when Ray Bradbury tells us, in *A Sound of Thunder*, that Keith was and was not elected President of the United States in 2055? This is no mere fussbudgetry: the proposition that Keith was elected President in 2055 and was not elected President in 2055 is internal to the story, and deliberately so. Nor will an appeal to sites help us here, since the proposition is true and false at one and the same site, namely, Bradbury’s *A Sound of Thunder*.

Here, Woods invokes his *no-bother thesis*: the inconsistency is irremovable and absolute, and that is just something that sometimes happens in fiction. We all know and accept it, and we don’t lose any sleep over it, even under threat from *ex falso quod libet*. This is because we know that the contradictory proposition, *K*, is not true *in situ* the real world—and, even if it were, belief is not closed under logical consequence, thus saving us from cognitive collapse.⁹ The result, he argues, is that “The full story inherits the world, but it doesn’t inherit any world-proposition that isn’t a world-truth.”¹⁰ So *A Sound of Thunder* does not inherit every proposition and its negation, as it would if it were a story true *in situ* the world. What is more, for Woods these observations are reinforced by the fact that our lectoral habit is to take such contradictions at face value, without so much as blinking. Indeed, the contradiction does not impede readers’ ability to understand the story, or to see how it fits into the story itself. Nor do readers thereby conclude that, *in situ* the story, the Prime Minister of Canada is a Martian, or that an archaeopteryx launched a nuclear warhead into space.

⁸ Note that Watson sustains a second wound—most definitely in his thigh!—in *The Adventure of the Three Garridebs* (1924).

⁹ Woods (2018: 16).

¹⁰ Woods (2018: 192).

4. Lectoral experience

For my part, I am not convinced that this is quite how lectoral experience suggests we handle Keith, or deliberate inconsistencies more generally. Allow me to explain.

A Sound of Thunder is a story about time travel, and about an apparent paradox generated by altering the world's history. Happily, there exists an entirely commonplace way of making such stories sensible, upon reflection, and it is widely distributed among readers and filmgoers, as any perusal of internet fora dedicated to such stories forcefully attests.¹¹ It is an elegant, powerful, and simple strategy which we all intuitively deploy: instead of talking about time travel *simpliciter*, we talk instead of travel in and between *timelines*. In other words, the folk strategy for parsing the paradoxes of time travel is to appeal to *Woods's 'sites'*: the true proposition finds itself indexed to one timeline, and the false to another. And, *poof!* The inconsistency disappears. So we shouldn't worry too much about Keith's story, which turns out to be rather more like a fussy inconsistency than at first glance. Call it 'persnickety' instead, to mark the fact that Bradbury was being cheeky rather than sloppy.

But there are other, more worrying kinds of stories. These are stories in which the contradiction is (1) internal to the story, (2) deliberately implanted, and (3) not site-specific. I have in mind stories like Graham Priest's *Sylvan's Box*, according to which Priest inherits a box which is empty and contains a small figurine; another might be Italo Calvino's allegorical fantasy, *The Nonexistent Knight*, whose titular character, Agilulf, does not exist and yet clearly undertakes actions which imply his existence.¹² There is no obvious recourse to sites here, since *in situ* the story, Priest's box is empty and contains a figurine, just as *in situ* the story Agilulf exists and does not exist.

¹¹ Consider, for example, the detailed explanations of the events in the film *Primer* (2004) offered by Wikipedia <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primer_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primer_(film))>. and by Bharat Krishna Swaminathan <<https://www.thisisbarry.com/film/primer-2004-movie-plot-ending-explained/>>.

¹² Indeed, Agilulf 'exists' by will power alone—until the purity of his cause is undermined and he loses the will to exist, at which point he promptly (and actually) disappears.

Woods's prescribed treatment for *A Sound of Thunder* suggests that these two new stories are contradictory, but not explosive; the relevant proposition and its negation is true in each, but that is as far as the contradiction goes. The list of facts about *Sylvan's Box* will include all of the story's explicit claims, including that the box is empty and not, along with everything those facts imply and everything which it inherits from the world. But it does not inherit every proposition and its negation, because these are not constituent truths of the real world.

I am not so sure that this is how we *do* understand these stories, let alone how we *should* understand them. In fact, I think that straightforward evidence about lectoral experience tells against this interpretation; it is not obvious that we accept the contradictions in these stories at face value.

It is useful, here, to distinguish between two different kinds of reading: reading *occurently*, and reading *reflectively*. Occurent reading is the sort of reading we undertake when we speed through a page-turner; it is the kind of reading we perform when we're wrapped up in the story, and primarily interested in getting through it. Reflective reading, however, is the kind of reading we undertake when we read with an eye to understanding the internal relations of one part of the story to another; it is book-club or classroom-style reading, the sort of reading we do when we dust off the 'to read' pile on our hard drive or office desk.

Evidence from the psychology of text-processing indicates that during the occurent act of reading, we tend not to notice inconsistencies unless they occur very close together, such as one or two sentences apart; and even when we do notice these inconsistencies, we tend to simply ignore them and read on.¹³ Thus, we're not too bothered by the precise location of Watson's wound, or even whether Keith is POTUS. The point, rather, is just to absorb a darn good yarn.

Things are different in the reflective mood, however. When we read with an eye to the text's internal relations, we are trying to determine exactly what is going on in the story, which literary

¹³ See, e.g., McKoon and Ratcliffe (1992: 441-4) and Graesser, Millis, and Zwaan (1997: 183).

devices are being mobilized and how, etc. That kind of mentation requires us to step outside our lived experience of the text, and reflect on it critically. It is here that world-inheritance becomes absolutely crucial for basic story comprehension; and one of the things which is true of the real world and which we bring with us into the storyworld is the knowledge that we cannot have both P and $\neg P$ at the same time, and in the same respect.

So: the law of non-contradiction comes into stories by way of world-inheritance. So far, so good—I've not yet claimed anything especially controversial. And remember, world-inheritance provides that we should accept what is true of the world as being true of the storyworld, *unless the author indicates otherwise*. It might seem, therefore, that all is well: Priest and Calvino have told us that their stories are not bound by the law of non-contradiction, and so they are not.

5. Why bother

The problem is that, upon reflection, readers do not actually believe that this is the case. Instead, in the reflective mood, we treat inconsistency in general and contradiction in particular as problems to be solved, as indications that something has gone wrong with either the story, or our understanding of it. In the reflective mood, we most assuredly *do not* accept that Watson is wounded in the shoulder and the leg but not both, that Keith is and is not POTUS, that Priest's box is empty and not, or that Agilulf does and does not exist. It is precisely because we do *not* believe these things, upon reflection, that we are at pains to explain them away by appeal to sites, or by invoking the no-bother solution. And this is just as true of *Truth in Fiction: Rethinking its Logic* as it is of the ordinary, neurotypical reader. Indeed, the internet is chock full of puzzled readers who wonder how Agilulf could exist before he was a (nonexistent) knight, since he seems to have earned his knighthood (and, thus, his nonexistent existence) by saving Sofronia.

Outright contradictions are jarring, and invite us to marshal our explanatory hypotheses. If, as Woods argues, texts implicate their readers in energy-to-information transitions,¹⁴ then contradictions throw a wrench into the works by reducing processing fluency. We know that increased scrutiny inhibits text integration, and that belief is a condition on understanding a text;¹⁵ outright contradictions are explicit invitations to *disbelieve* and scrutinize. This has led many logicians and philosophers to conclude that at least some inconsistent stories are, in fact, contradictory. Some, like Priest, have concluded that this indicates that the logic of fiction is paraconsistent;¹⁶ a very few, led by Christian Folde and Nathan Wildman, have concluded that the logic of fiction is explosive.¹⁷ But these are philosophers' answers to a fairly common occurrence; they represent strategies derived from antecedent philosophical commitments, rather than from data about lived lectoral experience.

Woods's methodological commitments are rightly reversed, taking lectoral experience as giving us the basic data to be explained. The psychology of reasoning shows us that ordinary folk are not particularly convinced that disjunction-introduction supplies a valid inference rule, especially when compared to other valid one-premise inferences such as *modus ponens* or *tollens*.¹⁸ That much is plain to see in any introductory logic classroom, and if those classrooms are reliable guides to folk intuitions about inference, then very much the same is also true of *ex falso quod libet*. Indeed, an explosive story by definition could not reward any genuine literary interest we might take in its content, thus inviting the kind of big-box skepticism Woods is at pains to avoid. The psychology of text processing likewise shows us that occurrent readers are relatively insensitive to contradictions (and causal relationships too, for that matter).¹⁹ The question before us is just what it is that ordinary readers do when they encounter such hard-shelled contradictions—first occurrently, and then

¹⁴ Woods (2018: 58).

¹⁵ Woods (2018: 145-6).

¹⁶ Priest (2005).

¹⁷ Wildman and Folde (2017); see also Estrada-González (2018).

¹⁸ Woods (2018: 180).

¹⁹ McKoon and Ratcliffe (1992).

reflectively. Woods's money is on the no-bother thesis; but for my part, I suspect that the no-bother solution applies better to occurrent than to reflective readings.

My only qualm, then, is that we *do* actually seem to bother quite a bit, even if we eventually decide to throw up our hands and move along quietly.

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