



BOOK REVIEW:

Living Dangerously with Fictions

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Peter Brooks, *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative*. New York Review Books, 2022. Softcover, ISBN 9781681376639. Ebook, ISBN: 9781681376646..

Peter Brooks is best known as the author of *Reading for the Plot*, first published in 1984 and a classic of literary narratology. His publications are numerous: most recently, *Balzac's Lives* (2020) and *Honoré de Balzac* (2022). *Seduced by Story* displays his extraordinary knowledge of European prose fiction and, in the final chapter, his reflections on the importance of narrative to legal reasoning and process. Nearing the end of the book, Brooks writes that his argument “has ranged, and digressed, over different uses and abuses of narrative, across a number of discursive communities” (119). I appreciate the author himself acknowledging that the writing does digress, because a review needs to note that, but I like this book too much to want to criticize it. I enjoyed reading most when I let go of seeking the development of an argument and instead appreciated Brooks’s insights into whatever he happens to be discussing—which is mostly novels, with some short stories, and in the final chapter, the texts of legal opinions. At the end, we are left to put the pieces together ourselves, and when the pieces are as interesting as these are, that’s fine.

Brooks opens with a trend so widely recognized that I recently saw a *New Yorker* cartoon satirizing it: A couple stands in a grocery store aisle; one holds

two boxes of cookies and says that she can't decide which company's story is more compelling.

Every person has a story to tell, and the corporate person has understood, with a vengeance, that it must stake its identity, persuasion, and profits on telling a story, however bizarre or banal. Corporate reports have turned from the statistical to the narrative mode. And in the wake of the corporation are political candidates and parties, the military, the tourism industry, universities, hospitals, bakeries—even accounting firms. (8)

Among Brooks's multiple examples, pride of place might go to Ronald Regan, who "appeared to govern by story" (8). Brooks writes that "This mindless valorization of storytelling speaks to crucial facts in contemporary culture that need more analysis" (9). And yet, that analysis is not what *Seduced by Story* provides.

Engaging as this opening is, Brooks is less interested in analyzing why our present cultural and political moment calls for, even requires, such a proliferation of storytelling. His version of narratology focuses instead on qualities of stories that cut across cultural moments. Thus, his second chapter is on what he calls the *epistemology* of story, which asks how different narrators claim to know, and how that affects the story's claims to be able to tell the reader. "How can the teller know the tale?" (27) is the chapter's subtitle. Brooks collects novels and short stories across several centuries in which narrators, characters, and readers often don't know what they need to know to tell the story as it should be told: "The novel turns on this failure to know a world where knowing is what life is all about. Ignorance is mortal" (51). Brooks writes that specifically about Henry James's *Wings of the Dove* and Madame de Lafayette's *The Princess of Clèves*, and the discussion quickly segues to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Marcel Proust. A good example of Brooks's mastery is how he can make Long John Silver and the Baron de Charlus appear in the same paragraph with no sense of incongruity. These paragraphs also illustrate the style of the book: its dance across multiple literary references that are unified by Brooks's own aphoristic insights, and I do find him genuinely insightful.

Exactly how we readers are, as the book's title promises, seduced by story is perhaps most directly presented when Brooks takes issue with Jerome Bruner:

Is it possible that we should see narrative as a lie? This would mean that those like Bruner who claim that we are our narratives threaten to take us over the brink into delusion, into a belief in our demiurgic capacity to order reality as we like. Such a possibility does not seem to me reason to abandon narrativity, however; we still need to try to find order and meaning in our lives and in the flow of passing time. (112-13)

Brooks's resolution to this dilemma of risking seduction by story but also needing narrative is, unsurprisingly, narrative self-awareness:

One must use fictions always with an awareness of their fictionality. They are 'as if' constructions of reality that we need, that we have to use creatively in order not to die of the chaos of reality — but they are not reality itself. (113; cf. 104)

Awareness of fictionality becomes the core of Brooks's argument that legal practitioners are often naïve about how stories are used in courtroom proceedings and in the reasoning of judicial opinions. I find him convincing on the seriousness of this problem of narrative naïveté: "The weight of the unanalyzed stories, those that are propagated and accepted as true and necessary myths, may kill us yet" (152).

One can read Brooks happily and well simply for his multiple brief analyses of the narrative construction of particular novels. *Seduced by Story* is a master class in what I can best call, following Brooks's usage, epistemological reading: not close reading that asks how each word counts, and not socio-cultural reading that situates the novel in its historical moment, but reading for who — including characters in the story, the narrator of the story, and the reader — knows what, and who has what liability for not knowing. The instability of stories is a constant theme: "Stories are tricky," Brooks writes with some understatement, given his preceding analyses; "and designed to be so" (120). And yet, there is an underlying theory here, albeit one that is loosely sketched, which may be best for such a theory.

Moving fast from Friedrich Schiller through Sigmund Freud to Donald Winnicott, Brooks argues that narrative offers us spaces in which to do the serious play of adjusting ourselves to reality. Brooks's writing on play is where I find him most poignant:

We have fictions in order not to die of the forlornness of our condition in the world. That fiction-making is a form of play that is crucial to our survival because it is crucial to our capacity to understand our place in the world. (119)

Stories are more than tricky; they are dangerous because there is no certain way to determine when we are being invited into a space for creative play and when we are being seduced. Brooks concludes his discussion of stories in law by observing “the *fact* that stories can serve the worst as well as the better cause” (150, emphasis added). That fact haunts attempts to figure the place of stories in human lives.

The last words of this wisely digressive, often tricky book might serve as a mission statement for many of us engaged in the study of narrative:

The role of the literary humanities in public life may be this: to provide public tools of resistance to bogus and totalizing world explanations, to broadcast the means to dismantle the noxious myths of our time. (152)

And we might add his earlier words: to help people “not to die of the forlornness of our condition in the world” (119).