

David Herman. *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780262019187.

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David Herman's argument in *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* shifts across an array of conceptualisations as to how narrative and storytelling come to be implicated within the world. His investigation, as he suggests in his preface, centres on "two key questions: How do stories across media interlock with interpreters' mental capacities and dispositions, thus giving rise to narrative experiences? And how (to what extent, in what specific ways) does narrative scaffold efforts to make sense of experience itself?" (ix) His work is structured across three main points of focus (the three parts of his text) to interrogate narrative as representing intentionality, and as both a target for interpretation and a vehicle for making meaning in the world. Insightful and detailed, particularly in terms of the depth of research it responds to, Herman's work offers challenging new positions for consideration across both literary studies and the sciences of the mind. But the greatest contribution made by this text is the manner in which it both exemplifies and argues for a new cross-disciplinarity in academic research.

Herman opens by focusing on the critical debate surrounding intentionalism as a cognitive structure. While his reading of the literary text "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"¹ is not as convincing as some of his theoretical approaches to the subject, his exploration of the relation between narrative and intentionalism offers an interesting perspective for applica-

tion, and carries his point that “ascriptions of intention and other reasons for action are inextricably interwoven with the experiences that support, or alternatively are supported by, engagements with narratives of all sorts” (56). Particularly appealing is the development in conceptualisation of narrative as an act within the world. Herman takes up Hutchins’ concept of “cognitive ecosystems,”² work which “characterises the mind not in terms of disembodied mental representations situated in an inner arena that remains detached from the wider world . . . but rather in terms of a dynamic interplay between embodied intelligent agents and their broader environments” (47). This concept of a cognitive ecosystem is expanded through Herman’s application of narratology to incorporate “narratives of all sorts” (50), with various forms of narrative corresponding to particular “exploratory processes” for perception generation. While Herman links this conceptualisation of narrative to the discussion of intentionalism, the concept of a narratological ecosystem in and of itself opens up the notion of narrative in a beautiful way. It is this version of narrative, as a human act in the exploration of the world on the most basic level, that the reader carries forward to the remaining two sections of the text. These concepts relate to Herman’s previous work in the field, particularly with regards to his focus on cognitive narratology. Across a vast bibliography of publications, Herman puts forward a “postclassical narratology.”³ Drawing from traditional narratological works, he suggests these theories “need to be calibrated with the assumption that stories are irreducibly grounded in intentional systems.”⁴

In both these previous discussions and that within *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*, Herman draws discourses of cognitive science and philosophy of the mind into close contact with readings of literary texts, producing a fluid and free-moving discussion relevant to a variety of applications of narrative within society.

The concept of a cross-disciplinary application of science within writing or literary studies is not a new one. Shakespeare’s apparent awareness in his works of the theory of the four humours, a medical and philosophical concept, is one example. And there are many others. The emergence of naturalism as a literary movement in the late nineteenth century engaged with scientific perspectives to the extent that, in the preface to its second edition, Émile Zola could declare that his objective in writing *Thérèse Raquin* “was first and foremost a scientific one.”⁵ William Carlos Williams, practicing as a paediatrician and obstetrician for the larger part of his writing career, suggests in his autobiography that interest in medicine and writing “amount for me to nearly the same thing.”⁶ The similarity he describes is the fascination of insight into life—“this immediacy, the thing,”⁷ the “perfections”⁸ of his patients as living beings. In writing, he claims, he was driven

to capture this. But “my ‘medicine was the thing that gained me entrance to these secret gardens of the self.’”⁹ On one reading, his experience of medicine simply provided Williams with material for creative study. But on another level, there is the suggestion that the creative impulse, the experience of connection with life, is for him comparable across both forms of engagement with the world. The lives he encountered in medicine drew him to recognise “the thing, the thing, of which I am in chase”¹⁰ in his writing. This inexpressible perfection is framed as simultaneously an intellectual and emotional impetus to both worlds: “my writing, the necessity for a continued assertion, the need for me to go on will not let me stop.”¹¹ In this sense, Williams’ writing is not so much cross-disciplinary, suggesting an intellectual basis in one position with concession to or movement towards another, as approaching interdisciplinary, work which functions simultaneously within two discourses.

Herman does something similar in *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*. As the title suggests, he seeks to highlight “the advantages of fostering a dialogue between scholarship of storytelling and the sciences of the mind” (25). He suggests that their interrelation encourages innovation in scholarship, even “underscores the need to re-think . . . perspectives on stories” (55). This is made particularly clear within his study of intentionalism in reading narrative. The use within the humanities of philosophical discourses specifically related to the science of the mind is well accepted—the widespread and incredibly varied use of Freud and Lacan within literary studies, for example, illustrates such productive crossing of discipline as Herman enters into. Herman’s project differs in that it specifically draws attention to the cross-disciplinary nature of such usages, and extends them in a work which he describes as “transdisciplinary” (311), seeking to “move beyond unilateral borrowing . . . in a way that fosters genuine dialogue and exchange” (311). Research from both fields is drawn together to focus on a common question—rather than drawn from one camp towards the other. Of course, cognitive narratology holds aspects of cross-disciplinarity by nature, both in the variety of discourses from which it draws—classical narratology beside cognitive studies—and in the manner in which it considers a variety of texts, including print and digital. But even within this context, Herman’s approach in making this focus on connecting fields of thought both overt and deliberate, along with the applications this is seen to produce, illustrates *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* as a potentially illuminating work within the wider academic world.

Herman ultimately upholds the notion of scientific knowledge as inherently related to knowledge within the humanities. His work draws equally from two disciplines to contribute to knowledge in each, his aim “to promote

cross-fertilisation” (ix) between disciplines, “to foster a fuller, more open dialogue” (ix) between narrative studies and the various branches of the field of cognitive science that he invokes. It is in this that he might be read alongside critics such as Daniel Dennett and Jerome Bruner as easily as critics of literary studies. But the applications for his work become far wider in the relevance of his practice to contemporary research. It is perhaps as an intentionally even-handed and dynamic “transdisciplinary” (311) work that Herman’s text holds greatest value. Methodologically, Herman describes at an early stage in his text the manner in which he will be working to explore four hypotheses—notably taking on a scientific lexicon in this description—which as a set combine the knowledge-generation of both science and the humanities, attempting to “pilot strategies for studying the nexus of narrative and mind” (312). Herman goes on to explore each hypothesis across a combination of critical discussions and case studies. But rather than maintaining an outwardly scientific structure through his writing, Herman’s discussions take up a form more normally associated with the arts, presenting detailed explorations which do not aim to prove conclusions but open up aspects of the topics covered for the reader to consider independently. This is a text which asks us to work hard as readers, but at the same time promises us a new way of understanding what it is, in criticism, that we do.

Herman is not alone in recognising interaction between disciplines as productive. Others have called for wider acknowledgement of cross-disciplinarity, particularly in discourses surrounding creative writing within the academy. Most recently, Julienne Van Loon has argued for creative writing as contributing to knowledge in challenging the notion that it is “something which can be assembled in a linear way.”¹² She puts forward the notion of play in creative research as opening up possibilities in other forms of knowledge. Her argument is to suggest that creative writing as a discipline offers a specific generation of knowledge in the manner in which it is “immersed, by necessity, in play”¹³—a generation of knowledge which is applicable across discourses: “Just as the Humanities has adopted and adapted elements of research methodology originating in the sciences, so too might the sciences and other research disciplines look across to the thriving Creative Writing discipline as an exemplar of alterity, restlessness, poeticism, possibility, non-knowledge.”¹⁴ Van Loon’s notion of play approaches Carlos William’s inexpressible need to seek in writing—it is the desire for knowledge as well as the act of reaching for it. She also espouses a cross-disciplinarity which is presented as inherently productive in the contrasting positions it is based on. Van Loon cites research from “neuroscience, animal studies, psychoanalysis, ludology and anthropology”¹⁵ in

considering her critical approach to play. In doing so, she suggests the inherent similarities of research as an activity across all disciplines, examining the act of seeking knowledge rather than the focus. Play, she argues, is at the heart of any research process. The final message of Van Loon's piece is to suggest that the modernist approach of the contemporary tertiary institution to research, and the general conception of knowledge produced in creative writing as sitting outside mainstream understandings of research production, "is deficient because it distances, obscures or blatantly excludes the essential component of play."¹⁶ She suggests that "the sense of permeability and restlessness, so crucial to creative practice, has much to offer everyone implicated in the game of research in the modern institution."¹⁷ Cross-disciplinarity is not only upheld, but in the acceptance of and openness to alternate forms of knowledge-production, seen as productive across all fields of research.

Herman's work in *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* can be seen thus as entering into a wider movement within academic research—one which desires to challenge accepted conceptualisations of knowledge and offer alternate possibilities for illuminating study. For example, his discussion of the manner in which stories "scaffold" behaviour, "facilitat[ing] humans' efforts to come to terms with diverse aspects of experience" (232) in chapter six, the opening chapter for part three, sees his focus shift from viewing stories as a target of interpretation to understanding narrative as an instrument of the mind. Neither the scientific disciplines here nor the humanities in the previous chapters are allowed precedence over the discussion. Instead, in a discussion where scientific discourses provide the majority of the theoretical background and might reasonably be expected to dominate the discussion, Herman uses principles of literary enquiry in a reading of *Beowulf* to build his argument (232–51). At every point, this work challenges preconceptions of discipline, and invites us as readers to do the same.

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NOTES

¹ Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," in *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*, vol. 2, *In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (Project Gutenberg, 1909/2004), <http://www.gutenberg.org>.

² Edwin Hutchins, "Cognitive Ecology," *Topics in Cognitive Science* 2, no. 4 (2010):

705.

³ David Herman, introduction to *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 2.

⁴ David Herman, "Narrative Theory and the Intentional Stance," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 6, no. 2 (June 2008): 240.

⁵ Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, trans. Andrew Rothwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2.

⁶ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), 286.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Julienne Van Loon, "The Play of Research: What Creative Writing Has to Teach the Academy," *TEXT* 18, no. 1 (April 2014): 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*