EVERYDAY KNOWLEDGE IN UNDERSTANDING FICTIONAL CHARACTERS AND THEIR WORLDS

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The question of how readers use general everyday knowledge in reading fictional narratives has been the subject of lively debate in narrative theory in recent decades. Some of the more popular approaches to this question include: theories of the implied author or the implied audience, founded on the idea of a relevant historical context of a narrative's production and reception; possible-worlds approaches to literature that have investigated the relation between actual and fictional worlds at various levels; and cognitive literary studies that focus on mental models and image schemata, which are based on the reader's everyday language and conceptual systems.

In this paper, I will look closer at the common claim made in recent cognitive literary studies that the audience's everyday-world knowledge is the core mechanism in understanding characters in fiction. More precisely, I will focus on Anthony J. Sanford and Catherine Emmott's treatment of the question of characterization – that is, the representation and making sense of characters in narrative fiction – in their recent work *Mind, Brain and Narrative* (2012), in order to discuss the issue of relevant inferences about fictional characters. *Mind, Brain and Narrative* investigates the psychological mechanisms of narrative comprehension, drawing on neuroscientific evidence from empirical tests with readers, in an interdisciplinary model called the Rhetorical Processing Framework. This framework has three main strands: the Fundamental Scenario-Mapping Theory, concerning the basic processes of text interpretation; the Rhetorical Focusing Principle, which examines the ways in which the writer's style controls the reader's attention; and Experientiality, which focuses on embodiment and emotion as a basis for experiencing narrative[1].

Before moving forward, however, I must emphasize that my critical remarks are not derived from any empirical research that would counterpoint Sanford and Emmott's findings, but represent what they might call a 'discursive' and speculative approach[2]. More precisely, I will focus on four aspects of understanding characters in fiction that in my teaching experience are highly relevant but missing in Sanford and Emmott's model. These aspects address the significance of the reader's knowledge of characters in fiction, the function of the fictional narrative situation, knowledge of genre, and intertextual information. Unlike Sanford and Emmott, who emphasize the writer's rhetorical control over the reader's act of cognition, I consider these aspects to be conventions of reading that both readers and writers apply in narrative understanding. As a literary scholar, teacher and narratologist, I see that whatever may be said of the understanding of characters in fiction – and the meaning of real-world knowledge in this respect – will remain somewhat irrelevant for literary studies in so far as these aspects are ignored.

Knowledge about Fictional Characters

A basic claim in what Sanford and Emmott call Fundamental Scenario-Mapping Theory is that 'mental representations of a discourse are formed by relating what is being read to a situation that the reader knows something about already'[3]. Sanford and Emmott's argument about the understanding of fictional characters in written narratives – they leave other narrative media aside – follows this premise: readers draw on their general knowledge about everyday situations in making assumptions and mental representations about characters. More specifically, this process involves the recognition of typical character roles in typical scenarios of situations that are familiar to the readers from real life[4]. Such scenarios are flexible mental constructions in that they are selectively activated during reading and can always be adjusted, or replaced by another scenario, if new contradictory information is encountered in the narrative text.

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[1] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 5-6.
[2] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 248.
[3] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 20; see also 5-6.
[4] Emmott, Sanford and Alexander 2010: 378.

From this basic claim Sanford and Emmott derive the further distinction that some character roles are scenario-dependent – a customer and a waiter in a restaurant, for instance[5] – while others are non-scenario-based roles, typically those of the principal characters[6]. The privileged status of main characters in fiction is reflected in the fact that they may be involved in many activities at once, adopt different roles in different scenarios, and have psychological depth and interiority.

Thus, apart from the psychological concept of the scenario, the distinction between situation-dependent and principal characters follows to a large extent traditional distinctions in literary studies between protagonist and secondary characters on the one hand, and between round and flat characters on the other. In this model, a principal character, like E.M. Forster's 'round' character or the 'pure' individual in David Fishelov's development of Forster's notion (1990), typically has more psychological depth and prominence, and has the capacity to change during the course of the story.

My problem with Sanford and Emmott's model is not the distinction that they make – to distinguish between major and minor characters, after all, is a very basic convention in writing and reading fiction – but that such a distinction would have much do with real-life situations. Do we, in real-life situations, perceive and treat people as principal or scenario-dependent people? We certainly may focus our attention on a particular person and his or her role in a given situation, and unexpected non-scenario actions tend to draw our attention. We can also easily stereotype others and categorize people as types, and perhaps this has something in common with the way that stock characters are created and recognized in fiction. But are these kinds of attention and stereotyping similar in both fiction and real life?

I doubt this very much. In real life situation-specific roles, after all, people do not usually occupy narrative spaces or fulfil narrative functions that are determined by some story as a whole. The notions of principal and minor characters are based on the privileged perspective of a larger narrative unit that allows the reader to evaluate the weight of a given character's role. In other words, it is commonly known and expected that fictions apportion space and attention to different characters in different ways and give characters roles in relation to larger segments of the plot, or the narrative as a whole, not just in a particular scenario or a series of situations[7].

Rather, I would venture the hypothesis that the distinction between major and minor characters; between heroes and villains, and other character roles; or between round individuals and flat types, relates to the model of a story and a plot pattern, rather than real-life situations. Meaningful parallels, connections, contrasts and hierarchies between characters in fiction also function as elements of the narrative composition. Character roles in fiction can have a thematic function – characters are assigned to a moral category (good/bad, hero/villain) or they are played out against each other thematically, for instance – or a plot-function. I am not sure how such compositional functions would relate to real-life situations. Real-world people may represent ideas in a given real-life situation, for instance, in a political debate, or they may be used as symbols, – to exemplify evil, for instance – or as icons or stereotypes, such as saints, revolutionaries, or genius scientists. However, this does not entail an overarching sense of a story as a whole.

To be able to distinguish between major and minor characters, or between narrators or 'voices' that are different from the author – a complex issue that I do not have the time to discuss fully here – and to be able to appreciate a character's thematic function, is part of the reader's knowledge of fiction. By such knowledge I not only refer to an awareness of similar characters, narrators, situations and worlds in fiction, but also of how to relate to fiction and to be personally involved with it: how to read, use and enjoy fictions as different from other kinds of texts. This is a broad question, surely, and a much broader one than I am able to discuss here.

Knowledge and the Narrative Situation

My second critical point involves the question of narrative situation in fiction, that is, the mediating process through which the narrated story is presented[8]. How might a narrative situation affect the use of everyday knowledge in relating to narrative voices in fiction? My focus in this discussion will be on the so-called Principle of Minimal Departure, to which Sanford and Emmott refer on various occasions in their treatise[9].

Marie-Laure Ryan's Principle of Minimal Departure, which she has developed in her Possible-Worlds Theory on the basis of David Lewis's Modal Logic, holds that whatever in narrative fiction is not explained as being different from the reader's actual world is similar to that actual world[10]. In other words, readers fill in the textual gaps in fiction with their background knowledge of real-life situations and the actual world as if automatically, unless it is otherwise indicated, even if they are reading about fantastic characters and worlds. This means not only that readers fill the gaps with their knowledge about the contemporary actual world as they

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[5] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 23.
[6] Sanford and Emmott 2010: 381.
[7] See also Woloch 2003 on how narrative space may be apportioned to characters.
[8] Prince 1988: 63.
[9] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 47, 52, 55, 57, 70.
[10] Ryan 1991: 51.

know it, but also that they take into consideration the stage of the historical development of the actual world that serves as a model for the fictional world[11].

One important exception that Ryan makes to this principle one that Sanford and Emmott ignore, is the lack of correspondence between the authors' and the speakers' identities in fiction. More precisely, this concerns the expectation in reading fiction that authors do not fully identify with the narrators on the one hand, and real readers do not identify with the narratees (the one who is narrated to in the text) on the other hand. In other words, Ryan argues that the referents of the pronouns 'I' and 'you' are immune to the Principle of Minimal Departure in fiction[12]. This means that the readers of fiction do not expect, in general, that fictional speakers would correspond as much as possible to the real author, or that narratees are counterparts of the reader. On the contrary, it may be expected that they are not synonymous, and that in fact, as Ryan argues, readers assume by default that there is an absence of relation between them[13], even when there may be an indication that the author identifies emotionally with the narrator. The assumption of a lack of identity between these agents, however, does not prevent the author or the reader from engaging in an act of make-believe by which they relocate themselves as narrator and narratee in the fictional world[14]. It would be worthwhile to subject Ryan's claims about imaginative relocation in reading fiction to empirical testing, if it were possible to study imagination in this way.

In their treatise Sanford and Emmott emphasize that the narrator's role is worth considering closely, especially when the I-narrator has a distinctive voice or when the I-narrator explicitly addresses a 'you'[15]. Their main interest in this discussion about the narrator, however, is how internal and external perspective can be cued in first-person texts; they do not explore what kinds of differences might occur between fiction and non-fiction in this regard. Even if we accept, as Sanford and Emmott do, that not all narratives have any obvious narrators[16], or that 'in reality much fiction incorporates elements derived from autobiography, and conversely supposed non-fiction may contain fabricated elements'[17], the distinction between authors and narrators can have much more relevance in fiction than it might have in non-fiction narratives. I wonder why Sanford and Emmott are not interested in examining the important exception that Ryan makes to her Principle of Minimal Departure in this respect. It might also be worth testing empirically whether the absence or uncertainty of a correspondence between the author and the narrator could constitute a kind of 'cognitive feat' in reading certain kinds of fiction.

All in all, Sanford and Emmott say little about the ways in which the narrative situation in fiction, involving for instance narrative mediation through character-narrators, can contribute to the experience of fiction. One exception is when they suggest in passing, by way of José Sanders' *Perspective in Narrative Discourse* (1994), that the reader might compartmentalize the information given by the narrator, in a mental space that is kept separate from a character's perceptions[18]. Sanford and Emmott point out in this respect that such compartmentalization might be one of several explanations, as to why readers are capable of feeling suspense regardless of their knowledge of the plot outcome, yet they also claim that 'this type of compartmentalization is difficult to imagine actually occurring'[19]. Much evidence shows that a story can be found to be equally suspenseful and satisfying even if the narrator has revealed the outcome on the outset, or the reader has previous knowledge of the ending[20].

Sanford and Emmott also discuss the narrator question, again in passing, when they argue that it is often important to distinguish between a character and a narrator in relation to uses of free indirect discourse in fiction. This may be important since, as they argue, some narrators (e.g. omniscient narrators) can be more reliable than characters who, typically, have a limited self-perspective tied to a specific spatio-temporal context[21]. Who might be the omniscient narrators in real life is less clear, however.

Furthermore, the point about the specific capacities of fictional speakers could be extended, beyond the issue of their reliability (or significant lack thereof), to the sources and scope of their supposed knowledge. For instance, for a narrator in fiction to have more knowledge about events and other people's minds than would be possible in the actual world does not necessarily undermine the realism of the story or the narrator's reliability. Much narratological attention has been paid to the phenomena of *paralipsis* and *paralepsis* in fiction, that is, the two ways of violating the default narrative style for a given text, either by 'saying too much' (*paralepsis*) or by 'saying too little' (*paralipsis*). In my experience in teaching narrative analysis, students are usually not too

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[11] Ryan 1991: 53.
[12] Ryan 1980: 408; see also Ryan 1991: 59-60. I have discussed some other possible exceptions and limitations to this principle in Mikkonen 2011.
[13] Ryan 1991: 60.
[14] Ryan 2005: 447.
[15] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 168.
[16] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 3.
[17] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 251.
[18] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 230.
[19] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 230.
[20] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 229-230.
[21] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 189.

bothered about how a character-narrator in fiction might have the knowledge that they have about other characters, for instance. They might not always be able to perceive the narrative situation as part of the fictional construct, but the sources and scope of the narrator's knowledge hardly becomes a question, unless this is somehow underscored in the text. If the latter happens, the issue of the narrator's unreliability arises. The narrator's unreliability, again, involves different expectations in fiction than in non-fiction narratives. Typically, unreliable narrators in fiction have a compositional function and can be enjoyed as one element of a well crafted story.

Knowledge of Genre

In line with much recent scholarship in cognitive narrative studies that focuses on the commonalities between all kinds of narratives, Sanford and Emmott leave aside the issue of different narrative genres. One exception that they make in this regard, however, is the general distinction between fiction and non-fiction narratives based on the concept of counterfactuality. Sanford and Emmott define counterfactual worlds as 'depictions of worlds in which the "facts" are essentially false, or not realized, or [are] an alternative to reality'[22], and state that in such worlds 'what is proposed is in fact false, but [where] the reader is invited to suppose that it is true'[23]. The notion of a counterfactual world is, thus, used synonymously with a fictional world. This is misleading, as I will show briefly.

Sanford and Emmott's view is that to understand a counterfactual world in fiction, and to be able to immerse oneself in it, the reader must voluntarily suspend disbelief in the sense of Coleridge's famous dictum. Nevertheless, at the same time, they also claim that not everything in fiction is counterfactual or requires the suspension of disbelief. Fictions, they hold, involve a mixture of imaginary things that are asserted as true in the fictional world, yet are false in the actual world, *and* as true both in the fictional and the real world[24]. Moreover, fictions may require readers to partition their knowledge about counterfactuality: there is the counterfactual in relation to the reader's world, that is, what is different from our factual world; and there is the counterfactual in the reality of the fictional world, that is, embedded worlds in fiction such as characters' dreams and fantasies that may be seen as false in the fictional world.

These are common and widely accepted claims in the theory of fiction. However, I find that Sanford and Emmott's discussion of the relation between everyday knowledge and specialized knowledge about genres of fiction remains underdeveloped and contradictory. On the one hand, they emphasize that readers readily use real-world knowledge when trying to comprehend a counterfactual situation[25], and that real-world constraints can have a priority over any counterfactual information. On the other hand, they claim that knowledge about certain kinds of fiction can override, at least locally, real-world knowledge.

Let me take one of their examples to illustrate this contradiction. In their comments about *The Incredible Hulk* – an unusual case among their examples since it is not a written narrative in the pure sense of the word – Sanford and Emmott underscore the importance of the reader's expectations concerning cartoon-like worlds and characters. More precisely, they point out that it does not come as a surprise to readers of the *Hulk* comic that the eponymous character is capable of throwing a heavy truck off the road since such behaviour is typical of this well-known character[26]. Drawing from empirical research[27], Sanford and Emmott also use this example to argue that readers rely on counterfactual information about the character's actions immediately, without needing to think whether this conforms to their knowledge of what actual people can do.

The contradiction I find in their argument is this: on the one hand, everyday world knowledge is supposedly used in all inferences about characters in fiction while, on the other hand, in reading certain kinds of fiction, everyday knowledge can be given up as soon as relevant counterfactual information becomes available. The contradiction might be easily solved, I think, by taking the generic expectations into more serious consideration. Generic expectations – understood as conditions of meaning and conventions of reading that relate to a specific genre – can provide the theory of narrative interpretation with a kind of middle level of theoretical abstraction between the 'anomalies' in fictional worlds and real-world scenario-based knowledge. The attention to generic expectations that readers bring to a text can also help to explain how readers set up a certain kind of fictional world and channel their inferences according to what can be regarded as probable, possible or relevant knowledge in this world. Thus, the recognition of a genre, involving for instance a character-genre relation, has an impact on the larger question of what is relevant knowledge in understanding narratives. Characters' genre-related roles, as representatives of moral categories or certain themes, or their relation to their

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[22] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 45.
[23] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 70.
[24] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 47.
[25] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 70.
[26] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 48.
[27] Filik and Leuthold 2008.

perceived realism, can take precedence over real-life social knowledge and stereotypic frameworks, as some empirical research has also shown[28].

To return to the *Hulk* example: since there are innumerable graphic styles available for creating a fictional world, or a version of our actual world for that matter, in comics, generic information about superhero comics offers an obvious explanation for the Hulk's strength. In a superhero comic, it is common for the heroes and the villains to be able to throw heavy trucks off the road. Not all comics or cartoons are compatible with this expectation however.

Sanford and Emmott acknowledge the importance of generic expectations elsewhere, in passing, by pointing out that if a handsome prince were to sit down and light up a cigarette in a fairy tale, this could not be easily accommodated by existing situational knowledge of that genre[29]. However, in their discussion of the roles of the handsome prince and the princess locked in her tower, the main emphasis is on the significance of everyday knowledge about known situations rather than generic expectations about fairy tales. For Sanford and Emmott, a smoking prince in a contemporary fairy tale is a deviation from a known situation rather than a potential comment on, or a parody, of the tradition of characterization in this genre.

I also wonder how we could apply the Rhetorical Processing Framework to popular fantasy fiction that contravenes real-world knowledge systematically, and where otherworldly elements become so established that they are accepted as the norm[30]. The specific adjustment that fantasy fiction demands from readers could be phrased as a modification of Coleridge's dictum: besides the suspension of disbelief, the reader also needs to accept experiences and assumptions about incredible things and worlds as possible ones. Sanford and Emmott acknowledge that suspension of disbelief 'enables readers to become absorbed in worlds containing many incredible things', as is the case with J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series[31]. But my question is: does fantasy fiction modify Coleridge's dictum in some important ways?

Sanford and Emmott's use of the term 'counterfactual' is misleading since it is not clear why we would need to emphasize that worlds of fantasy are contrary to the facts or are possible alternatives to our actual world. I concede that writers or readers of fantasy may see fantastic worlds as possible alternatives to their world. There are kinds of fiction, however, which are explicitly 'counterfactual', such as counterfactual novels, and the association between them and fantasy does not do justice to either genre. Other readers might also judge everything fantastic in a fictional world on the basis of their knowledge about our actual world, constantly pointing out to themselves, for instance, that 'this is different from our world, and yet this is different...', and so on. But the latter would not be the most intelligent response to fantasy and I doubt that it would be a very common reaction either, at least not for anyone wanting to know what is going on in the world of the story. Moreover, the worlds and characters in realist fiction do not have to be counterfactual in the sense of 'counter to the facts' either, but can conform to our world and what we know about it.

In reading immersive fantasy[32], is it not more relevant for the reader to pay attention to the basic assumptions and experiences of that world than to hold onto real-world scenarios and keep readjusting them whenever they confront something that differs from our world? Is it not important also to learn to forget, at least to some extent, the basic assumptions about our world?

Obviously, I say this again without any support from empirical research, but to me at least it is a convention of reading fiction to suppose that in order to understand the world of superhuman characters, fairy tales or immersive fantasy, it helps to hesitate from using real-world scenarios that are too easily available. This is different from realist fiction to a degree, but it is worth asking whether the recognition of familiar scenarios is the predominant reason why people read realist fiction. The relaxing of expectations concerning real-life based scenarios, or what is regarded as possible and probable in our immediate world and experience, might even be one motivation for what Sanford and Emmott, in another context, call the specific cognitive feat of fiction. I wonder, however, whether such a claim could be tested in an empirical study.

Intertextual Information

My fourth and last point, and one that I can touch on only in passing, is the meaning of intertextual information in understanding characters in fictions. This dimension in characterization includes several aspects. One of these is knowledge about the kinds of roles that characters may have in fiction. These include their mimetic (verisimilitude or lack thereof) or thematic functions, plot function, or metatextual and poetic functions (character considered as a construct in itself, or as one element in the literary achievements of a work). Another aspect is the recognition of stock characters and types such as superheroes or fairy-tale princes that are familiar to readers from other fictions, narratives and literary genres.

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[28] See Livingston 1998: 80-81; Louwerse & Kuiken 2004: 171.
[29] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 20.
[30] See also Pavel's Principle of Maximal Departure (1986: 93).
[31] Sanford and Emmott 2012: 47.
[32] Mendlesohn's (2008) term.

Still another intertextual dimension of characterization is the way in which characters are explicitly based on existing models and meaningful contrasts and resemblances with these models. For instance, the contrast that is made explicit between Balzac's Louis Lambert, and Lewis Lambert Strether in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, or the resemblance between J.M. Coetzee's Michael K and Franz Kafka's K, draws the reader's attention to the protagonist's namesake in the intertext, as well as emphasizes the significance of the relation. In more direct 'transfictional' borrowings of existing characters in fiction – also known as interfigurality [33] – such as Coetzee's *Foe,* which adapts the characters Crusoe and Friday from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, it is a serious handicap for the reader not to know about a character's previous 'existence' in the intertext. In such cases, knowledge of the model is a prerequisite for the understanding of the new version.

The study of the intertextual dimension of characterization in fiction raises two important issues about everyday knowledge that Sanford and Emmott do not address in their study. First, how do readers differ in their knowledge of fiction and literature, concerning for instance the kinds of knowledge that I have described here and what do those differences mean for empirical studies about narrative processing? As empirical research has shown, the difference between expert and non-expert readers of literature correlates with how much people, in making sense of fiction or poetry, rely on literary knowledge on the one hand or social everyday knowledge on the other[34]. The knowledge that expert readers have acquired, for instance about particular literary genres, forms and periods, or intertexts, can contribute significantly both to their understanding and enjoyment, as well as appreciation, of literature[35]. The notions of expert and novice readers are always to some extent relative, but different audiences therefore necessarily give different results on the relevance of everyday knowledge (versus specialized knowledge) in understanding fiction and literature.

Second, it is worth asking what is included in real-life knowledge – everyday knowledge, common, public or background knowledge, or however we wish to call it – and how does that relate to or differ from specialized forms of knowledge? Any attempt to distinguish between everyday knowledge and, for instance, literary expertise, is only approximate since the two are mutually intertwined and informative. Literary expertise, schemata about fictional characters and worlds, and intertextual information, are tied to our general education in language and communication. Expectations about how to be engaged with fictions and their characters involve socially shared ideas, attitudes and practices that may be familiar to us regardless of any experience of reading or watching fictions. Yet, at the same time, experiences in reading fiction, and knowledge about the traditions, genres and conventions of literature, changes the way we read. But how could such transformations in reading habits and experiences, or uses of fiction and literature, which happen over a longer stretch of time, be investigated in an empirical study?

We also know parts of our world through literature and fictions. Real-life-people knowledge and fictional-character knowledge may overlap: while social stereotypes can become literary stereotypes, literary characters and types can also be used to describe real people, for better or worse. An important research topic for an empirical study could then be how knowledge about characters, their minds and behaviour, drawn from fictions may shape people's perceptions of actual people and their situations in real life[36]. Marie-Laure Ryan's Principle of Minimal Departure permits the choice of a textual universe as a frame of reference when we try to understand our world, for example when anyone reconstrues 'the domains of the real world for which we lack information as the closest possible to the world of a certain fiction', or when an author 'expands, rewrites, or parodies a pre-existing fiction' in their work[37]. The possibility that several different textual universes might simultaneously function as frame of reference, as complementary sources of information for understanding our everyday world, is not fully perceived in Sanford and Emmott's study.

Conclusion

I also want to say this by way of conclusion: what has often bothered me about cognitive theories of literary character is that their argument about the importance of everyday knowledge is so basic, and their definition of everyday knowledge is so rudimentary, that they manage to say very little about what is specific to the understanding of characters in fiction. It is, of course, very sensible to argue that fiction exploits our everyday abilities to reason about situations that are familiar to us, or to attribute mental states to people around us, but fiction must also do something beyond this. Why else would it exist?

Moreover, the questions that empirical studies about narrative processing and cognition tend to pose, concerning for instance the time spent in processing narrative information, are not always that relevant from literary, narratological or stylistic perspectives. While I admire the way in which Sanford and Emmott are able to question some poorly justified theoretical assumptions about reading fiction through empirical research, for

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[33] See Saint-Gelais 2011; Müller 1991.
[34] Schneider 2001: 612-613, 626.
[35] See, for instance, Peskin's study on "expert" and "novice" readers of poetry (1998: 253-256).
[36] See Culpeper 2002: 264, 274n13.
[37] Ryan 1991: 54-55.

instance concerning the thorny issue of narrative suspense, their Rhetorical Processing Framework is not unlike much other work in this field that has not always been so successful in explaining the relevance of neuroscientific findings, cognitive schemata and empirical psychological testing to literary study. However, the thrust of my criticism has not been directed at this particular study so much as the all-too-common assumption that everyday-world knowledge about people in familiar social situations is the core mechanism and the central frame of reference for making relevant inferences about characters in fiction.

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