Truth of fiction
versus truth in fiction

Marie-Laure Ryan

Abstract

Literary experiments that combine verifiable statements and fictional invention have led to the often-expressed opinion that the border between fact and fiction is collapsing. In a time when concepts such as post-truth and truthiness threaten to replace the distinction between fact and fiction with panfictionality, it is imperative to find a way to accommodate hybrid texts without sacrificing the border. This article explores different levels of truth in fictional texts, from truth of fiction to truth in fiction, as well as different ways to deal with hybrid texts, from continuum-based models to binary models, and to models allowing an overlap between fact and fiction.

Keywords

Fiction; Truth; Narrative worlds; Hybrid texts; Gradual vs. binary theories

Truth of fiction *versus* truth in fiction

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The problem of the truth of fiction has been debated by philosophers at least since the advent of analytic philosophy, but as long as deconstruction reigned supreme in literary theory, it was largely ignored by narratologists and literary critics, who considered the concept of truth a non-issue because literature was supposed to be about language, not about external referents. In 1994, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen published a masterful treaty titled *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, but at that time literary theory was still under the spell of postmodern skepticism with respect to the notion of truth, and the book was therefore only noticed by the kind of critics who were familiar with the philosophical approaches to fiction.

This situation changed within narratology around 2015 when Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Richard Walsh published an article titled "Ten Theses about Fictionality" in the journal *Narrative* which promoted a theory of fiction known as the rhetorical theory. Even though this theory is not an embrace of the philosophical work that preceded it but rather an alternative, it takes the question of truth much more seriously than most other approaches, especially literary ones. In this article, I will compare the rhetorical theory with the one I personally endorse, a conception of fiction based on the notion of possible world inspired by Lewis (1978) that also borrows ideas from Searle (1975) and Walton (1990), in terms of their handling of the notion of truth. By truth I will not mean what Walton calls "fictional truth", i.e. what counts as fact within the storyworld, nor the possibility to make true statements about non-existing entities, an issue much debated by philosophical approaches (Kroon and Voltolini 2018), but rather the use by authors or inference by readers of propositions that correspond to individual facts or general laws of the actual world.

The purpose of the rhetorical approach is to free the concept of fictionality from what the authors call "generic fiction" – this is to say, literary forms such as novels and short stories, as well as fiction films – and to outline instead a theory that encompasses a wide variety of utterances: not only literary narratives, but also "hypotheticals, counterfactuals, speculations, and other deviations from the actual" (Nielsen *et al*. 2015: 64). Here is the theory in a nutshell: "Fictive discourse neither refers to actual states of affairs nor tries to deceive its audience about such states. Instead it overtly invents or imagines states of affairs in order to accomplish some purpose(s) within its original context" (2015: 63). According to the authors, the faculty of invention manifests itself in many genres of discourse: in informal conversation, through jokes and "kidding around", in political speeches, through projections, in sermons, through parables, and in philosophy, through thought experiments. As an example of spontaneous, non-literary fictionality, the authors mention Barack Obama's claim that Mitt Romney, his opponent in the 2012 election for U.S. President, suffered from "Romneysia", a condition obviously invented by Obama. Through this pun on amnesia, Obama wanted to remind his audience that while Mitt Romney was governor of Massachusetts, he installed a universal insurance plan, which he later rejected when he ran for U.S. President.

A distinctive feature of the rhetorical approach is that it does not use any notion of fictional world: it divides statements into fictional ones, which are obviously invented, and factual ones, which describe reality. A text can therefore be a blend of fiction and fact. In a world-based conception of fiction (such as Lewis 1978, Pavel 1986, Walton 1990 and Ryan 1991), by contrast, the difference between factual and fictional discourse is a matter of reference world. Factual discourse describes the real world, while fiction creates an imaginary world, and asks the audience to imagine it for its own sake, which means, to make-believe the statements that describe it , to pretend that it is real, and to construct it mentally on the basis of fictional facts. Following Walton, the difference between factual and fictional statements can be captured as "telling to be believed" vs. "telling to be imagined". The reference world of fiction, also known as fictional world or storyworld, can stand at

various distances from the actual world, from nearly identical (yet logically distinct) to very remote, as in fantastic texts[1].

The problem of truth in fiction arises on several levels. First there is what I call in my title the "truth of fiction". Throughout the history of philosophy, the word truth has always had very positive connotations, in fact philosophy can be defined as the search for truth, so that by arguing for the truth of fiction we argue for its moral value and for its usefulness. Reading fiction should not be an escapist activity, a flight into some fantasy realm, but a learning experience from which we can extract valuable lessons about the real world. As Nielsen *et al.* declare: "Fictive discourse is not ultimately a means of constructing scenarios that are cut off from the actual world, but rather a means of negotiating an engagement with that world" (2015: 63). As an example of the "truth of fiction" they propose a text that departs very obviously from reality, namely the young adult novel *The Hunger Games* by Susanne Collins.

> Several times Collins shows Katniss facing either/or choices where both options are ethically unacceptable, and then shows how Katniss finds a way to refuse the either/or and instead to transform the entire structure of the situation. Thus, the fictional Katniss provides a model that we can try to emulate, though of course we have to find our particular solutions to our particular dilemmas. (2015: 71)

This moral can be considered the truth of *The Hunger Games*. It is largely independent of the truth of the individual statements that make up the text, since the text represents a dystopian society that, fortunately, differs widely from the real world. The idea that literature should provide a lesson for the real world, rather than merely entertaining the reader with an interesting plot, is so deeply ingrained that some critics

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[1] An unresolved issue with world-based approaches is whether the reference worlds of fiction have to be logically consistent. Does a text that contains contradiction still create a world? Only if we accept the paradoxical notion of impossible possible worlds.

will propose the vaguest message to justify a work. To wit, this review of Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*: "Strip away the counterfactual wrapping and *Machines Like Me* is ultimately about the age-old question of what makes people human" ("Who, Robot?", 2019: 76). Different readers will of course extract different truths from a given text, and this is why the interpretation of literary texts is such an endless and fascinating debate.

It is not my intent to question this interpretation of truth as synonymous with ethical value and as guarantee of the significance of fiction (and, by extension, of literature). But is this kind of abstract truth distinctive of fiction, or is it just a possibility, a nice bonus, perhaps a feature that distinguish great narratives from the not-so-great kind? If the label "literature" is considered honorific, then indeed the essence of literariness could be conceived as the ability to convey this kind of truth; but fiction is a logical category, not an inherently aesthetic one, which means there is good and bad fiction, instructive and escapist kinds, and we cannot regard the ability to convey truths-for-the-real-world as distinctive of fiction. Of the millions of fans of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings*, it is likely that many of them never ask themselves what the text tells them about the real world. They just enjoy the fictional world for its own sake. Lamarque and Olsen are clear on this point: this kind of truth is possible, even desirable, but it is not constitutive of the fictional experience. Nor is it necessary of the literary experience.

While the kind of truth discussed above is the product of the reader's interpretation, and is not explicitly stated in the text, the second level consists of general statements – known as gnomic statements – that are directly expressed, and that convey specific propositions. These propositions are quantified by the universal operator of logic: "all x" rather than "some x". A good example is the famous first sentence of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". This second level of truth provides a bridge between "truth of fiction" and "truth in fiction". A statement like "all happy families" should be verified by the plot of the novel, and if the plot convincingly supports it, the statement should be regarded as true for the fiction (or as true in the fictional world). But if it is taken as

an aphorism that describes the real world, it is also representative of what I have called the truth of fiction. Readers could decide that "all families" is true of the fictional world, because it is convincingly supported by the story, but false in the real world, because they know some counterexamples.

World-based theories of fiction can account for this discrepancy by relying on what philosopher Jaakko Hintikka (1988) calls "language as calculus", a conception of language according to which, rather than being limited to the real word, a given proposition can be evaluated separately for several different worlds. Just as "unicorns exist" is true of the world of fairy tales but false of the real world, and just as "Paris exists" is true of both the real world and of the world of Proust's *A La recherche du temps perdu*, so Tolstoy's sentence can be assigned a separate truth value for the real world and for the world of *Anna Karenina*. The rhetorical theory does not allow such double evaluation since the only world it recognizes is the real world.

Tolstoy's sentence has been parodied by Nabokov, who begins *Ada or Ardor* with this statement: "All happy families are more or less dissimilar, all unhappy ones are more or less alike". Which one is more true ? And does it matter for the reader's appreciation of Tolstoy's or Nabokov's novels? According to Lamarque and Olsen, "[p]erhaps the first feature to notice concerning the discourse about literature which one finds in criticism and conversation is that it does not contain much debate about the truth-value of [general] propositions" (332). In other words, critics of *Anna Karenina* and of *Ada* do not really care whether their first sentence is true or false. I cannot speak for all ordinary readers, but many of them (including myself) enjoy these texts because of their plot, their characters, their style, their setting, and not because of the wisdom they express. An author like Balzac is full of general statements about women which, in the current cultural climate, would be unacceptable, but this has not damaged his status as one of the literary giants of the 19th century, and I suspect that many contemporary readers rather enjoy, tongue in cheek, his prejudiced claims about women, as examples of how cultural attitudes have changed since the 19th century.

The third level of truth, which I call "truth in fiction", consists of textually present individual statements concerning specific entities, rather than of general statements. These statements are modified by the existential quantifier, "for a certain x, p", rather than by the universal quantifier, "for all x, p". An example is Tolstoy describing Napoleon as the leader of the French armies that fought the czar's armies at Borodino in 1812. It is no secret that novels, especially realistic and historical ones, can contain statements that happen to be true in the real world. Many authors engage in extensive research before writing novels that take place in determinate historical, geographical and cultural settings, and it is not uncommon for readers to learn something about the real world from reading fiction. For instance I learned a lot about medieval theology from *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, because I trust the scholarship of the author. But this learning must be placed under the warning *caveat lector*: one could never quote knowledge gained from a novel in a history book.

Once again, the rhetorical and the world-based approaches treat this issue differently. The rhetorical approach distinguishes a global and a local level of fictionality; these two levels are relatively independent of each other, so that there can be local fictionality in a globally factual text, and vice-versa, local factuality in a globally fictional text. For instance, the example mentioned above of Obama accusing Romney of Romneysia is a fictional island in an otherwise nonfictional speech aiming at persuasion. The reverse case of islands of factuality within a global fiction is illustrated by truth in fiction[2]. Such an approach explains

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[2] A philosopher who agrees with the proponents of the rhetorical theory in treating texts that use both true facts and invention as patchworks of fiction and nonfiction is John Searle: "Most fictional stories contain nonfictional elements: along with the pretended references to *Sherlock Holmes* and Watson, there are in Sherlock Holmes real references to London and Baker street and Paddington Station; again, in *War and Peace*, the story of Pierre and Natacha is a fictional story about fictional characters, but the Russia of War and Peace is the real Russia, and the war against Napoleon is the real war against the real Napoleon" (Searle 1975: 330).

how readers can learn facts from fiction, but only if they are able to detect what is true and what is invented in a global fiction. This sorting out of the text into true and false statements seems to me incompatible with the experience of narrative immersion (Schaeffer 1999, Ryan 2001), because each statement must be evaluated separately, and this process destroys the semantic unity of the content that the text offers to the imagination.

In world-based approaches, readers are concerned with the mental construction of the storyworld, rather than with the evaluation of individual propositions. This world is constructed on the basis of all the propositions asserted in the text, as well as on the basis of what I have called the principle of minimal departure (Ryan 1991)[3]. It does not matter whether a proposition is true or false in the real world: everything the text asserts about individual entities – that is, every proposition with an existential quantifier – must be taken as true in the fictional world. In extreme cases, every proposition asserted by the text could be true of the real world, but the text would still be fiction if the author presents it as such, thereby declining responsibility for the real-world truth of the text. Insofar as storyworlds are constructed on the basis of all the propositions asserted in the text[4], they are ontologically homogeneous[5]. Within the world of *War and Peace*, there is no ontological difference between Pierre, Natacha, Napoleon and General

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[3] This principle, which is inspired by Lewis' proposal for assessing the truth value of statements about fiction (1978), instructs readers to imagine the fictional world as the closest possible to (their representation of) the real world, and to make only those changes that are mandated by the text.

[4] Minus some of those asserted by unreliable narrators, though most of the declarations of unreliable narrators must be accepted as constitutive of the storyworld, otherwise there would be nothing for the reader to imagine. Unreliable narration mainly consists of objectionable judgments, and it is very rare for narrators to be wrong about facts.

[5] An exception to this rule is the case of embedded fictions: the characters of a fiction within a fiction – such as the stories told by Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights* – are fictional from the point of view of the characters of the embedding fiction, who regard themselves as real.

Kutuzov, since all of them are real persons within this world. It is only when readers de-immerse themselves from the storyworld, and look at it from an external perspective – the perspective of the real world – that they make a distinction between characters that are born fictional, and characters imported from reality. While the rhetorical approach is better at explaining how people can extract knowledge from fiction, the world approach is better at explaining the reader's imaginative experience.

An issue that causes problems for both the rhetorical and the world-based theories of fiction (and in fact, for any theory that attempts to define fiction and therefore to set a boundary between fiction and its other), is the existence of texts of uncertain status with respect to the fiction/fact binary. If a trend can be detected in recent literary narrative, it is the increase of verifiable statements. I am thinking not just of realistic novels and historical fiction, but of texts like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (to which I will return later), *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, which narrates a true crime using some novelistic techniques such as dialogues or representation of the characters' private thoughts, and *My Struggle* by Karl Ove Knausgaard, which is called a novel but consists mostly of autobiographical material and could just as well have been called a memoir. The existence of such texts has led to the frequently heard claim that the border between fact and fiction is collapsing.

These transgressions, or hybridizations, raise indeed the question of why we still need a border. Rather than trying to draw a strict dividing line between fact and fiction, why not arrange narrative texts along a continuum, based on the proportion of truth and invention? This continuum would look like figure 1a below. On the left, we have strongly factual narrative genres such as historiography, biography, court testimonies and news reports, which must rely on documented facts and adhere narrowly to the truth. One step to the right, we find genres that represent what I call low factuality, such as autobiography, memoir, and conversational narratives. Autobiography and memoirs contrasts with biography and history in that authors can make assertions about the main character (i.e. themselves) without documenting them, since they are the only one to know. The unreliability of memory makes

it often impossible to tell what is true and what is not, especially when the author dwells on deeply private matters. Conversational narratives such as gossip or narratives of personal experience are told to be believed but they must also entertain the audience. These conflicting goals often lead storytellers to play loose with the truth. For instance, dialogues enliven the performance, but the audience does not expect from the storyteller to remember conversations precisely: it is good enough to report what people *could have said*. Next on the scale are the narratives I have mentioned above as hybrids of truth and invention—*In Cold Blood*, *My Struggle*, and *Maus*. Further to right are novels that place non-existing characters in a realistic historical setting. Then we have science fiction, fantasy, and to the extreme right, nonsense texts such as Lewis Carroll's poem *Jabberwocky* or texts that could never be true of the real world because they contain logical contradictions. The criterion that orders these texts concerns the possibility of their actualization, or if one prefers, their distance from the real world.
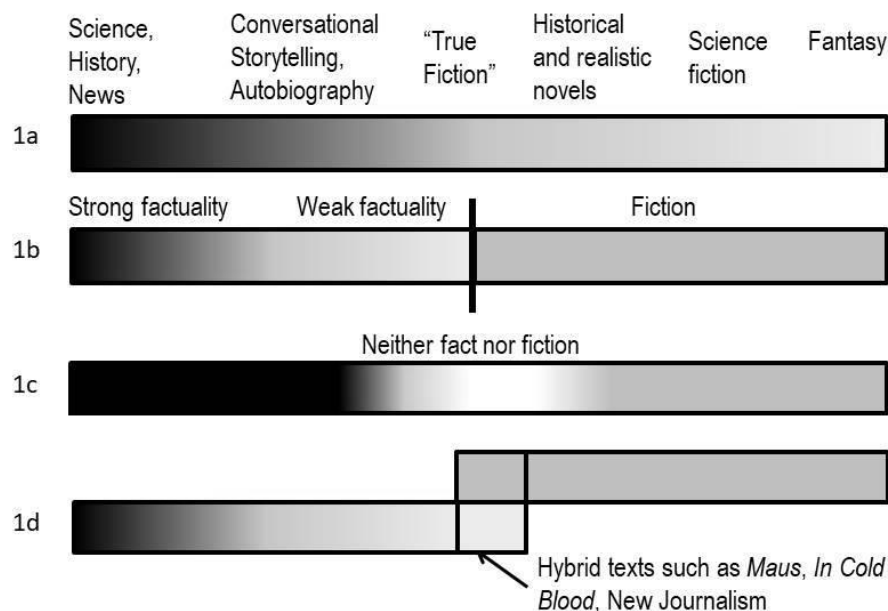
Figure 1 - Gradual and binary models of the fact / fiction distinction

According to this model, standard narrative fiction occupies the right side of the continuum, factual narrative the left side, and hybrid experimental texts are somewhere in the middle. But there is one big problem with this account. It classifies texts according to their relation to reality, but it does not take into consideration the author's intent, nor the user's awareness of this intent. Therefore, it cannot distinguish fiction from lies and error, both of which also depart from reality. This equation of fiction with falsity corresponds to a widespread non-technical, "naïve" use of the term fiction, demonstrated by Donald Trump when he labelled *Fear*, a book by Bob Woodward that depicts the dysfunctionality of the Trump White House, "a work of fiction". Writing fiction was of course very far from Woodward's intent, whether or not his book contains inaccuracies. Fictionality is not a matter of degree of truth of a text with respect to reality, it is a matter of framing[6]. The exact same content can be presented as fact or as fiction, though when it is published as fact, it will be subjected to different criteria of validity than when it is published as fiction. This ambivalence can be demonstrated by the case of *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey, a text which chronicles the narrator's drug addiction and recovery. It was originally published as a memoir and selected by the Oprah Winfrey book club for the non-fiction category. But a scandal erupted when many inaccuracies and fabrications were discovered, and Winfrey withdrew her endorsement because the book did not fulfil the truth requirements of a memoir. Nowadays *A Million Little Pieces* is published as a novel, and though the text is exactly the same, the controversy has abated. What this example demonstrates, is that the divide between factual and fictional narrative is far more rigid than the continuum model suggests, and that it does not depend on the truth of the text. Factuality is a matter of degree, since representations of the real world can be more or less true, but fictionality is not: realistic and historical fiction is no less fictional than the genres on the extreme right side, such as fantasy and science fiction.

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[6] This framing is usually performed through a paratextual label implying fictionality or factuality ("novel", "memoir"). But when there is no such label, the classification of the text is problematic.

Every serious theory of fictionality postulates a binary distinction between the texts of the right side and the texts of the left side. This distinction has been conceived in various ways. For the rhetorical theory (2015), fictionality is a matter of signaled invention, as opposed to hidden invention (deceit) and non-invention (fact). For Searle (1975), the distinction is a matter of sincere vs. pretended assertion. For Walton (1990), factual texts are offered to be believed and fiction is offered for make-believe. For Noël Carroll (1996), authors of factual discourse assert propositions and authors of fiction present them unasserted. For world-based theories, nonfiction refers to the real world and fiction creates an alternate possible world. These accounts do not admit degree: either you signal your invention, or you hide it. Either you pretend to perform speech acts, or you do it seriously. Either you refer to the actual world, or you build and refer to an alternate possible world.

The binary theories are certainly a step above the continuum model, since they propose an account of fiction that distinguishes it from lies and errors, but they are not perfect. By placing texts either on the right or left side of the divide (figure 1b), they encounter difficulties with texts that combine features from fiction and factual narrative, and that different users will classify differently. Virtually everybody will agree that a classical Napoleon biography—one that is accepted by historians as a serious work—belongs on the left, even if the author engages in speculations of the type "what if", such as "what if Blücher had not been able to connect with Wellington at Waterloo?"[7] And virtually everybody will place *War and Peace* on the right side of the divide, despite Tolstoy's claim to make valid statements about history. (A very long ending exposes his philosophy of history and why he believes that Napoleon could never have conquered Russia.)

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[7] Counterfactual ("what if") statements are regarded as fiction by the rhetorical theory, but not by world-based theories, because they only construct nonactual possible worlds in order to say something about the real world (Lewis 1973), and they do not invite readers to contemplate an imaginary world for its own sake.

But what about works like *In Cold Blood*, *My Struggle*, or especially *Maus* by Art Spiegelman? A case can be made for *Maus* as a historical work: Spiegelman recorded his conversations with his father, an Auschwitz survivor, and he stayed as close as he could to his father's testimony. Many people, including myself, read the graphic narrative in order to get an idea of the Holocaust experience. The historical truth of the narrative is a major source of its appeal, and a major form of the reader's curiosity. But a case can also be made for its fictionality. *Maus* presents a world inhabited not by humans but by cats and mice and dogs and frogs. These characters behave like humans, but they still look like animals. So how does the reader imagine the storyworld of *Maus*: is it a world inhabited by speaking animals who behave like humans—like the world of one of La Fontaine's or Aesop's fables? In this case it would clearly be a fictional world. Or is it a world inhabited by Nazis who pursue Jews like cats hunt mice? In this case one could say that in the storyworld of *Maus* there are no cats nor mice nor other animals (except for the attack dogs kept by the Auschwitz guards), there are only Nazis and Jews and other identities. The visual representations of Nazis as cats and Jews as mice would be like a visual metaphor: when somebody says of my friend Bill that he is a donkey, I do not imagine Bill with long grey ears, I assume that the speaker means that he is stupid. But the interpretation of the cats and mice as visual metaphors ignores the graphic nature of the medium. Visual media give less freedom to the imagination than language-based ones, because unlike language, they consist of sensory data that force the mind to visualize things the way they are represented in the text. If I imagine the world of *Maus* visually, I will imagine it with cats and mice, and if somebody was going to expand the world of *Maus* through fan fiction, this fan would draw a cartoon with cats and mice. We cannot make the cats and mice disappear from the imagination by saying that they are just metaphors, or allegories, because they are the main source of the text's artistic innovation.

This ambiguity explains why nobody has an easy time classifying *Maus* as either fact or fiction. As Marianne Hirsch notes, "the Pulitzer prize committee invented a special category for *Maus*, suggesting the

impossibility of categorizing it as either fiction or nonfiction" (1997: 274). Nancy Pedri (2013) writes that such texts are neither fact nor fiction (figure 1c). But this verdict gives readers no reason to be interested in *Maus*: if it is not fact, it does not contribute to their knowledge; but if it is not fiction, its world is not worth imagining for its own sake. The rhetorical theory would say that *Maus* consists of both fictional elements—the animals—and non-fictional ones—the narrative based on the father's testimony. This explanation works on the micro-level, but the theory also postulates a macro-level on which a decision must be made: is *Maus* a global fiction that contains lots of facts, or a global factual narrative that contains lots of invention? The theory gives no reason to choose one of these interpretations over the other.

My own solution to this dilemma says that a work like *Maus* combines the appeal of fiction and fact (figure 1d). We read fictions for the sake of the pleasure we take in imagining the storyworld. We read factual narratives for the sake of getting information about the real world, which means for the sake of acquiring knowledge. Why should these two types of motivation be incompatible with each other? The alternative to regarding *Maus* as neither fiction nor fact is to make the territories of fiction and fact overlap, so that hybrid texts can find a home, without giving up the advantage of a clear distinction between fact and fiction. In the zone of overlap, I place not only *Maus*, but *In Cold Blood*, *My Struggle* and New Journalism[8]. The overlap model explains why some people call these works factual, others call them fictional, and still others do not know.

It could be objected that postulating an overlap is an *ad hoc* solution that denies the specificity of fiction. A definition that works for both

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[8] A different situation occurs in texts that are clearly marked collages of fact and fiction. For instance, the novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders combines quotations about Lincoln borrowed from historical texts with fantastic dialogues between the people buried in the cemetery where Lincoln's young son, Willie, has been laid to rest. This novel is clearly part fact, part fiction, and it is easy to tell which parts belong to which category. Rather than placing it in a zone of overlap, I would split it between two zones.

hybrid texts and clear representatives of fact and fiction would certainly be more satisfactory, but such a definition would have to be at the same time gradual and binary—which means, it would have to resolve a logical contradiction. I see no way of doing this. Figure 1 captures all the possibilities (except for the possibility of giving up any distinction between truth and fiction), and I have shown that options (a), (b) and (c) all present significant weaknesses, so this leaves only (d). The lesson to be drawn from the case of hybrid texts is that there is no perfect theory of fictionality that answers all the questions one might want to ask. Every theory is inspired by a desire to account for a certain type of phenomenon: the world-based theories try to capture the imaginative experience of readers, players or spectators of fiction; the rhetorical theory wants to show that the mental operations that underlie culturally recognized fictional genres also appear spontaneously in other types of discourse. Once a definition has been crafted, it can be used as a heuristic device to make decisions about marginal cases. But no theory can be valid unless it is able to account for the difference between *War and Peace* and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, or between *Lord of the Rings* and *The Mueller Report*. This difference has to do with expectations of truth. In a time when concepts such as post-truth (McIntire 2018) and truthiness threaten to replace the distinction between fact and fiction with panfictionality (Ryan 1997), i.e. with the idea that all texts are fabrication, it is imperative, as Lavocat (2016) forcefully argues, to defend the border.

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The Article

Date sent: 31/05/2019

How to cite this article