

## Fiction as Imagining: How Possible Worlds Theory Escaped the Prison of Language

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### Abstract:

According to *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* (2019), possible worlds theory was introduced to literary studies when the textualist schools of thought dominated the field. Literary interpretation had come to a dead-end: if everything was language, literary meaning could be interpreted only as a play of language. The edited volume explains how viewing fiction as world-building instead of a language game made it again “possible to say that literary works were *about* something” (p. 316). The book's main focus is on what the theory offers to contemporary narratology and developing it further.

**Fiktion als Imagination: Wie *Possible Worlds Theory* dem Gefängnis der Sprache entkommen ist**

### German Abstract:

Laut *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* (2019) wurde *Possible Worlds Theory* in die Literaturwissenschaft eingeführt, als die textualistischen Denkschulen das Feld beherrschten. Die literarische Interpretation war in eine Sackgasse geraten: Wenn alles Sprache ist, kann die literarische Bedeutung nur als Spiel der Sprache interpretiert werden. Das Buch erklärt, wie das Betrachten von Fiktion als weltbildend anstelle eines Sprachspiels es ermöglichte, den Fokus wieder auf den Inhalt zu richten: „to say that literary works were *about* something“ (S. 316). Das Hauptaugenmerk des Buches liegt auf dem, was die Theorie der zeitgenössischen Narratologie bietet und weiterentwickelt.

### How to cite:

Jaulimo, Juulia: “Fiction as Imagining: How Possible Worlds Theory Escaped the Prison of Language [Review of: Bell, Alice and Marie-Laure Ryan (ed.): *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2019.]“ In: KULT\_online 63 (2021).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2021.1204>



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Bell, Alice, and Marie-Laure Ryan (ed.). *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 341 pages, 60,00 USD. ISBN: 978-0-8032-9499-8.

Why do we hold statements like ‘Emma Bovary was a dissatisfied country doctor’s wife’ as true, even though Emma Bovary is fictional and does not exist? The relationship between fiction, language, and truth has intrigued scholars of philosophy and literature for decades. According to *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* (2019), in the 1970s, literary studies were dominated by the belief, held by structuralists, New Critics, and poststructuralists, that we cannot, as Frederic Jameson (1975) is quoted, “escape the prison-house of language” (p. 1). Meaning was seen as something determined not by its relationship to the world and its objects but in relation to other elements of the language system. Ultimately, the whole reality was seen as a construct of language. These beliefs, however, lead to a dead-end for literary interpretation: the objects of fiction do not speak about the world but always only about the language itself. This point of view both reduced literary meaning to the play of language and bypassed the question of fictional truth. If everything is language and about language, we cannot determine the difference between truth-seeking and fictional texts (p. 2).

*Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* explains how possible worlds theory was first introduced to literary studies in this atmosphere when Thomas G. Pavel argued against the “‘moratorium’ imposed on questions of truth and reference by textualist literary schools” (p. 9). He stated that literary texts are not just about language, but they create fictional worlds onto which they impose their own laws (p. 9). While reading, the reader adopts this new ontology proposed by the fictional world. This approach does not see, for example, fictional characters only as constructs of language but as imaginary human beings existing in alternative possible worlds (p. 9).

*Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* aims to clarify what possible worlds theory and viewing fiction as world-building offers to contemporary narratology and develop the theory further. The edited volume by Marie-Laure Ryan and Alice Bell includes inputs from a few of the most important pioneers of the theory: Lubomír Doležel, Pavel, and Ryan herself.

The volume's introduction summarizes the theory's background and explains how and why Pavel imported possible worlds theory to literary theory and how it has developed. The theory and its concepts have changed profoundly in the transition from philosophy to literary studies and over the years. Hence summarizing its history is not straightforward. The introduction to the volume succeeds in this challenging task. However, it delves deeply into the philosophy of language from the start, and it might require some knowledge about literary theory, possible worlds theory, philosophy of language, or semiotics. After the introduction, the book is divided very reasonably into four parts, all including three articles that provide contemporary perspectives on the subject.

The first part is about theoretical perspectives of possible worlds. It deepens the understanding of possible worlds theory's key concepts, and each of its articles aims to resolve one underdeveloped question in the field. The part explains the relationship between possible worlds theory and the other fictional world metaphors and offers a systematic approach to differentiate between different possible worlds and voices present in the text. Also, Doležel explains in his contribution how possible worlds theory is positioned in the fields of philosophy and literature. Doležel's article and the volume's introduction position possible worlds theory firmly against the formalist or textualist approaches of literary studies, like New Criticism and poststructuralism.

The second part of the book focuses on possible worlds and cognition. It explains possible worlds theory's relationship to one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in contemporary literary studies, cognitive narratology, and how readers process fictional worlds. It approaches the question by discussing both the world metaphor's problems and the reasons for its intuitiveness in Marco Caracciolo's contribution and presenting a close reading of the novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the contribution by Michelle Wang.

The second part also includes Jan Alber's article about impossible worlds and situations where novels' worlds provide challenges for the readers' cognition. When possible worlds theory's application to literary studies has been critiqued, for example, by Ruth Ronen, the existence of impossible fictional worlds has been one of the main targets of critique. According to philosophical interpretation, for example, logical contradictions make a possible world impossible, hence non-existent. Ronen defends a textualist conception of fiction, claiming that fictional worlds can be impossible, unlike possible worlds of philosophy. The book takes note of this, and Alber's article focuses on the subject of impossible fictional worlds. However, the question is not fully answered, and Alber's article also raises the question: are most of Alber's examples, like dead narrators narrating their own story, indeed examples of logically impossible narration or just cases of possibility? The definition of impossibility, and logical consistency, seems to vary throughout the volume.

The genres of science fiction and fantasy frequently come up when discussing world-making, and the third part of the book discusses literary genres and possible worlds theory. The section discusses what possible worlds theory can offer in the study of these genres as well as utopia and dystopia. The fourth part of the volume is about possible worlds theory and its relationship to digital media. As Daniel Punday notes in his article, possible worlds theory and digital computation are more alike than they might initially seem because of their shared interest in the philosophy of language. (p. 296) The fourth part's articles by Alice Bell, Françoise Lavocat, and Punday inspect the relationship through web-based fiction and online games: they inspect the role of hyperlinks in digital narratives and ask how possible worlds theory might benefit from the metaphor of the world as a database and its rules as algorithms.

Lastly, the book includes a postface, where Pavel responds critically to the volume. He concludes that it is a merit of possible worlds theory that "it became again possible to say that literary works were *about* something." (p. 316) This "promise of clarity and precision" (p. 317) possible worlds theory has offered has also been critiqued by, for example, Ronen. She has claimed that the theory has been transformed into a diffuse metaphor when transferred from analytical philosophy to literary studies. The book manages to answer that critique and explain both why the metaphorical use of the concept has been necessary for literary criticism and what it has to offer to literary studies.

All in all, *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* manages to justify possible worlds theory's relevance to literary studies, give a balanced overview of the ways it can be used, and develops the theory further. Indeed, it unmask what is possible in literary interpretation after breaking out from the 'prison-house of language.'