

The Qualities of Fiction Describe Consciousness:

A Nonreductive Approach

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Fiction has a confused reputation. Encyclopedia Encarta lists the following synonyms: untrue, fabricated, invented, made up, pretended, conjured, all of which seem to suggest some kind of evil subterfuge. Yet we have, for our perusal, this well-established and immensely popular genre of literature that powerfully engages us individually and influences the society we live in. What is really going on when we write and read fiction?

My personal experience with fiction was accentuated by my ten-year stint as a middle school librarian. This library is a breath-taking place, a peaked ceiling cathedral-like space with expansive northeast facing windows that display a classic view of desert mountains. One of the first things I did when I took over this library was to rearrange our materials so they would be easier to find. I cut out some huge block letters and displayed the word FICTION to the left upon entering and NONFICTION to the right. My young patrons were faced with an immediate choice of direction that would place them in the general area of their preferred browsing or lead them to specific holdings.

Fiction was a hard sell in my years at the middle school. The genre for juveniles was suffering a popularity crisis and students checked out fiction mostly when they were required to by English teachers. When a teacher would present her class expecting me to arouse student enthusiasm, I would frequently engage them by throwing out the deceptively simple question: "What is fiction?" I could depend on some character piping up with, "It's a lie!" Others, who were more forgiving to their librarian, would point out that fiction books always related a story.

Warming up to a modest level of Socratic dialog I might prompt, “Yes, so what is a story?”

“Well, it’s something that has a beginning and an end.”

“What goes on between the beginning and the end of the story?”

Students might suggest aspects of character, setting, and plot, concepts sure to show up on their standardized tests therefore worthy of review.

At times I was tempted to assert that characters in books can become as real to us as people we know, but only a few of these adolescents had ever engaged in a novel sufficiently to experience this. So I attempted to draw parallels to more popular media forms. “Your favorite TV shows have fictional characters that you talk about as if they were real people...”

But somehow the question of a story’s veracity is never answered to any degree of satisfaction. How can a gripping novel be characterized as a trick played on the reader? Even my colleagues in the teaching profession grew impatient with my attempts to pin down fiction. “It’s a ubiquitous something that takes many forms, that can be taken for granted. OK?”

When the prospect of retirement gave me room to yield to a longstanding urge, I began investigating the puzzle of consciousness. One day it occurred to me that the inexplicability of it had a familiar ring: Something commonplace that’s difficult to explain.

Motivated also by my experiences at the SAC conference here in Portland three years ago, I began exploring these questions and ideas in earnest. Reflecting upon my profession, I found that it brought something to the table. In this paper I’ll present some ideas prompted by my love affair with fiction that may give us a fresh approach to this thing called consciousness.

To bring the mystery of fiction to bear on the mystery of consciousness, I present the following summary of nine qualities of fiction. This list is not closed. I invite the reader to add or subtract at will according to the reader’s own engagement with fiction.

1. Fiction writing, of course, always has an **author**. I would suggest always a single author, collaborations being a process of taking turns. There are muses, editors, and reviewers who contribute but don’t rise to the status of coauthor.

2. As my students frequently noted, fiction is **sequential** in nature. Stories, especially as they're presented in book form, have an obvious beginning and an end with a sequential plot in between.
3. Fiction provokes a set of **visual images** in the mind of the reader. Fiction is often critiqued by the richness of its scenario. This detail that zooms across the pages at the speed of fiction is faster than we can reasonably absorb in ordinary living.
4. A definition that I frequently suggested to my students is that fiction is a work of the **imagination**. They countered that this is only a nice way of saying that it's a big lie, something that never really happened, something that someone concocted because they thought it might have been nice if it had happened. But I argue there is room to consider that the novelist can artfully represent the significance of real events.
5. Fiction slows down a bit toward real time when relating dialog but then rushes out ahead of the spoken word by exposing the unexpressed **thoughts** of its characters. This facility to render a candid peek directly into thought processes is extraordinary. A behind-the-scenes narrator, critic, or speculator, is represented in the musings of a protagonist and rendered comprehensible to our voyeuristic fascination.
6. An aspect of fiction that came up occasionally during my interactions with students was that stories are **multilayered**, can be read on different levels. Fables and parables most obviously, but all stories have a moral sequence in addition to a plot sequence. There is a lesson, a payoff, just desserts, a sense of what ought to be the consequence of the behaviors exhibited by the characters. There is no particularly correct interpretation. Every reader gets to take a stab at it filtering the novel through their own life experiences.
7. The main reason that fiction was not popular with my middle school students, I believe, was that it is so **lonely**, so exclusively individual. In a world increasingly dominated by the near-real-time stories of social networks, the immediate demands of middle school life render it irrelevant, isolating, nerdy. Consideration of a story inevitably leads to examples of individual responsibility, something many adolescents avoid. We ultimately make decisions alone then live alone with the consequences. Middle schoolers would rather blend in with the crowd.

Enough of a review geared for kids aged ten to fourteen. Let's turn to a couple of experts, accomplished practitioners. Surprisingly few novelists seem to take time to write about their impressions of their art but a few brave souls have tackled it.

8. Henry James, brother of William James, was a prolific novelist at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1884 he wrote an article called *The Art of Fiction*. He suggested that fiction is

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it-- this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education.

This sweeping endorsement of fiction is breath-taking. E. L. Doctorow, author of *Ragtime*, is best known for his fiction but has also written some brilliant commentary. He claims to so completely believe in fiction that he regards it as a mega-discipline that incorporates all others.

The discipline itself is empowering, so that a sentence spun from the imagination confers on the writer a degree of perception or acuity or heightened awareness that a sentence composed with the strictest attention to fact does not. Every author from the writers of the ancient sacred texts to (Henry) James himself has relied on that empowering paradox. It involves the working of our linguistic minds on the world of things-in-themselves. We ascribe meaning to the unmeant, and the sentences form with such synaptic speed that the act of writing, when it is going well, seems no more than the dutiful secretarial response to a silent dictation.

Doctorow calls the sudden dawning of an idea that consumes a writer “the little bang,” an allusion to the Big Bang that supposedly gave birth to our universe. James and Doctorow identify an **expansive** quality of fiction. We whip up small clues or excitations into something much bigger.

9. Finally, I’d like to suggest a quality of fiction that I’ve been exploring lately. (This would not have come up in my conversations at the middle school.) The idea is that fiction excites a kind of **relational memory**, a glue that ties people, objects, and events together, extrapolating connections within diverse groupings. We remember associations that are far more complex than factual knowledge.

So here are nine qualities of fiction we can use as reference points. Do you find yourself agreeing with them? Perhaps some other qualities of fiction crossed your mind during my

review. By all means, use the spaces at the bottom of the following checklist to fit them in. I invite the reader to bring to mind a favorite novel. Run down the list and check any quality that is evoked by your recollection.

Qualities Of Fiction	Favorite Novel	The Two Cats	The Double Helix	Consciousness
1. Authorship				
2. Sequential				
3. Visual imagery				
4. Imaginative				
5. Thought verbalization				
6. Multiple layers				
7. Lonely				
8. Expansive				
9. Relational memory				
10.				
11.				
12.				

Now let's conduct a joint experiment with our fiction criteria and consider a story in Carlos Castaneda's book *Tales of Power*. To this day there are lingering uncertainties regarding the legitimacy of Castaneda's anthropological work. Was it fiction or nonfiction? Read this excerpt then we'll see if our qualities of fiction shed any light on the controversy.

He (Don Juan) was referring to a story I once told him about a friend of mine who had found two kittens almost dead inside a dryer in a laundromat. She revived them and through excellent nourishment and care, groomed them into two gigantic cats, a black one and a reddish one.

Two years later she sold her house. Since she could not take the cats with her and was unable to find another home for them, all she could do under the circumstances was to take them to an animal hospital and have him put to sleep.

I helped her take them. The cats had never been inside a car; she tried to calm them down. They scratched and bit her, especially the reddish one she called Max. When we finally arrived at the animal hospital she took the black one first holding it in her arms and without saying a word she got out of the car. The cat

played with her, pawing her gently as she pushed open the glass door to enter the hospital.

I glanced at Max; he was sitting in the back. The movement of my head must have scared him for he dived under the driver's seat. I made the seat slide backwards. I did not want to reach under it for fear that he would bite or scratch my hand. He was lying inside a depression on the floor of the car. He seemed very agitated; his breathing was accelerated. He looked at me; our eyes met and an overwhelming sensation possessed me. Something took hold of my body, a form of apprehension, despair, or perhaps embarrassment for being part of what was taking place.

I felt the need to explain to Max it was my friend's decision and that I was only helping her. The cat kept looking at me as if he understood my words.

I looked to see if she was coming. I could see her through the glass door. She was talking to the receptionist. My body felt a strange jolt and automatically I opened the door of the car.

"Run, Max. Run." I said to the cat.

He jumped out of the car, dashed across the street with his body close to the ground, like a true feline. The opposite side of the street was empty; there were no cars parked. I could see Max running down the street along the gutter. He reached the corner of a big boulevard and then jumped through the storm drain into the sewer.

My friend came back I told her that Max had left. She got into the car and we drove away without saying a single word.

First, let's consider a series of questions that might certify the story as a research-based anthropological work.

1. Was there a woman who rescued, then abandoned two cats?
2. Did Carlos help the woman take the cats to be put to sleep?
3. Did Carlos tell this story to an Indian named Juan Matus?

4. Did Don Juan refer to this story while he and Carlos were sitting in the Alameda in Mexico City?
5. Does the story relate an instructive lesson regarding self-determination?
6. Did Carlos adopt this lesson as a personal guideline regarding his own self-determination?

Affirmative answers to these questions would suggest Castaneda had credentials as an anthropologist reporting on his field observations. But we have no way to make a confident determination. Because Castaneda declined to make evidence available, we feel uncertain about the nature of his research. Some conclude his work must accordingly be rejected.

Now look at the passage through the lens of our qualities of fiction. I supply examples that jumped out at me. This view yields a strikingly different data set.

Author: Indisputably Carlos Castaneda.

Sequential: First the black cat is taken, then Max escapes.

Visual Imagery: Max hunkering down beneath the car seat.

Imaginative: Speculative thoughts about Max's awareness of the situation and his success after diving into the sewer.

Verbalization of Thoughts: When Carlos looked into Max's eyes he thought Max understood.

Multiple Layers of Meaning: Disposal of unwanted cats. Cat self-determination. Human self-determination. Relationship between Carlos and his woman friend.

Lonely: Feeling despair when Carlos and his friend drove away without saying a word.

Expansive: This brief, ordinary incident exploded into a rich commentary on self-determination.

Relational Memory: The connections made in the story become a reference point in don Juan's instruction of Carlos.

Comparing the factual and fictional qualities of this vignette does not resolve the longstanding veracity issues. It does, however, reveal that fictional qualities are richer, more nuanced and

evocative than factual criteria. More obviously meaningful information is relayed through them than the presumptuous true/false questions.

To further examine this dynamic let's probe into the realm of hard, empirical science. (I have a perverse desire to confront the hallowed halls of nonfiction with our checklist.) The scientific method endorses steps we call hypotheses and theories. These elements are fictive. Their significance has not yet been proven.

A classic instance of scientific discovery is the search for the DNA molecule by scientists James Watson and Francis Crick. Watson recorded his experience in *The Double Helix*. This is considered a nonfiction book, like Castaneda's story an autobiographical view of how events transpired. As he was trying to extract clues from his data he used his imagination. One day, in a flash, he envisioned a molecule with a symmetrical twisting configuration.

Not until the middle of the next week however did a nontrivial idea emerge. It came while I was drawing the fused rings of adenine on paper. Suddenly I realized the potentially profound implications of a DNA structure in which adenine residue formed hydrogen bonds similar to those for crystals of pure adenine.

...my pulse began to race. If this was DNA I should create a bombshell by announcing its discovery.

For over two hours I happily lay awake with pairs of adenine residue swirling in front of my closed eyes. Only for brief moments did the fear shoot through me that an idea this good could be wrong.

Watson employs strikingly unscientific language in his narrative: ideas emerge, potentially profound implications, racing pulse, bombshells, swirling residues. It turned out his hypothesis was incorrect. The angles of his imagined structure were impossible to reconcile with the shapes of the actual molecules involved. When he arrived at the lab the next day, he had to face the reality that DNA could not possibly be configured that way. So he went back to his imaginary drawing board.

A few days later the DNA configuration that turned out to be accurate popped into his head. At this point of popping, though, his idea remained fictional. In order to confirm that his latest conjecture had merit, he consulted with his collaborator, Francis Crick and asked the shop to

quickly finish constructing a set of ball and stick molecule models. When the tinker-toy-like model fit together, Watson's imagination congealed into objectivity.

Soon, the chemical composition and shape of DNA was independently confirmed by many scientists and accepted as a fundamental biological fact. But the process of discovery drew upon resources that smack of fiction. Briefly apply the checklist. Many elements are clearly evident. Regarding authorship, Watson made an interesting observation. In a review of scientists mentioned in the book he noted, "All of these people, should they desire, can indicate events and details they remember differently." This is a humble acknowledgement that his narrative is bound by fictitious elements.

Now, let's fit all this in to what we know or sense about our consciousness. Point for point, the qualities of fiction describe qualities of our conscious, subjective experience.

Authorship: There is a powerful, inescapable sense that we record our own story.

Sequential: A history, passing through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood is integral to our being.

Visual imagery: Reconstituted images "swirl" through our heads.

Imaginative: We fill in space left by incomplete knowledge according to an "... internally held image of an intended achievement." Bruce Bridgeman explains, "The image is an internal representation, not necessarily a graphic visualizable entity."

Thought verbalization: This what don Juan called the "internal dialog." The new sciences of mindfulness and multiplicity key in on this.

Multiple layers: Our job, family, secrets, aspirations, etc. create contrasting meanings for different scenarios of our lives.

Lonely: We can share only a small slice of our personal experience with others. Also, like students avoiding fiction, we are unnerved by this consciousness that accentuates our personal responsibility and our mortality.

Expansive: Our constant propensity for extrapolation, using conjecture to fill in knowledge gaps.

Relational memory: Complex associations form the basis of our personal standards, mores, loyalties, talents, and character.

About twenty years ago, consciousness started to become a legitimate topic for scientific inquiry. Naturally, scientists applied the tools of empiricism to their investigations. The new availability of fMRI images revolutionized the study of brain activity. Many hoped that advancing technology would enable us to reduce our consciousness to a set of physical structures and processes, following an investigative path similar to the discovery of the DNA molecule.

But early in the game, philosopher David Chalmers warned of the Hard Problem. He said, “An analysis of the problem shows us that conscious experience is just not the kind of thing that a wholly reductive account could succeed in explaining.” At the annual conference of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness last July in San Diego, presentations drew upon quantifiable data of brain activity. One scientist claimed to track the firing of single neurons. But the futility of the reductive approach was palpable. The most animated session presented a panel of scientists-turned-philosophers who acknowledged that Chalmers’ Hard Problem remained monolithic. Diverting from the empirical line, one panelist, Giulio Tononi, stated, “Consciousness is a dream mediated by reality.”

The qualities of fiction fit well within this perspective. With fiction there is no reductive pressure. Proof is tedious; fiction circumvents the brick wall of veracity. Instead, it postulates a provisional reality that may be so poignant that it safely qualifies, at least temporarily, as a working representation of the human condition or natural processes.

This just in: The “structure” of consciousness has finally been discovered! Scientists are a bit chagrined that a novelist beat them to the punch. Drawing on the historicity of the 20th century, E. L. Doctorow wove together the essential features of consciousness and published his findings in *City of God*. Subsequently, he defended his discovery with philosophical essays and presented it at the Aspen Summer Institute.

Our consciousness seems to be under the influence of the same qualities through which fiction thrives. Our minds creatively fill in knowledge gaps with imagination, bringing into being a qualitative experience that is only marginally quantifiable or verifiable. Like fiction,

consciousness has endured a confused reputation because it holds in suspension both dark and wondrous elements. We struggle with the lie, working through the dissonance that exposes our inconsistencies.

Consciousness perpetuates our story, each of our successive experiences reflecting a place somewhere along a continuum extending between the objective and the imaginative.

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