

Problems with Narrative in the U.S. Survey and How Fiction can Help

Kevin Vanzant

Tennessee State University

NARRATIVE in a United States survey course is hard to avoid. In fact, if we define narrative as “the underlining story that holds a history together and keeps it from becoming a mere presentation of disjointed people, places, and events,” then how many of us can even imagine going without it?¹ In the book, *History on Trial* (1997), Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Dunn acknowledged not only the historian’s reliance on narrative, but also the subjectivity that necessarily comes along with it. Of course we employ narrative structures in our classes, they argued. We have to. Anything less would be “history without explanation, without analysis, without pattern...barren chronicle.”² History teachers take an almost limitless number of facts then and create a coherent story or explanation of an event. While we should always aim for accuracy and a “fair, balanced reconstruction of events,” history is an inherently “interpretative practice,” better understood, not as the “truth,” but as the “work of a lawyer who gathers evidence and builds a case to present to a jury.”³

If narrative is inherently subjective, then so, too, are most U.S. surveys, as history teachers have long understood, meaning these

courses in particular can make for some potentially contentious decisions.⁴ The context of Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn's comments on subjectivity was the heated debate on the proposed National History Standards, which they had helped to write, that took place during the mid-1990s. Lynne Cheney led a vigorous attack at the time against the Standards, which she considered a "great scandal," arguing that they were profoundly biased. In the proposed Standards, for instance, she pointed out that it was okay to praise Mansa Musa for being rich, but not John D. Rockefeller, and fine to celebrate the Aztecs for their technological innovations without paying too much attention to the practice of human sacrifice.⁵ For Cheney, the world had earned such generosity; the United States, not so much. In a 1995 interview with Charlie Rose, she talked specifically about the recommendations for U.S. history courses, noting the relatively frequent mentions of Harriet Tubman in the Standards (six) as compared to two of Tubman's white male contemporaries, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee (one combined).⁶ The imbalance made the history of the United States a "grim and gloomy story," which not coincidentally, in Cheney's view, aligned with the ideological and political beliefs of the individuals who wrote the Standards. For Cheney, ideology had clearly triumphed over "facts" and "objectivity." She called it the "the end of history."⁷

Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn highlighted the subjective nature of the historian's craft to expose what in their view was Cheney's disingenuous—or at the very least, uninformed—call for more objectivity and facts (Harriet Tubman did exist after all). Cheney was no less a partisan than the history professors she criticized, and for the historians, there was nothing necessarily anti-historical about either side. This type of debate was exactly what historians do. The Standards had not killed history. They had just moved away from Cheney's version of it.

For Alex Rosenberg, Professor of Philosophy at Duke University and author of *How History gets Things Wrong* (2018), history's subjective nature is not only a source of inevitable controversy, but also goes a long way towards compromising the entire discipline. In his book, he pays particular attention to the weaknesses of big narrative histories.⁸ Delving into recent advances in neuroscience, he makes the argument that narrative histories rely on myriad and often incorrect assumptions. Their conclusions, as a result, are constantly

revised, as they are little more than a house of cards to begin with. Despite these glaring weaknesses, people still tend to take narrative histories seriously, which is exactly what makes them so dangerous. “Narrative history,” he argues, does not give us “knowledge or wisdom” as it pretends to, but “at its best...[only] entertainment, escape, and abiding pleasure.”⁹ In his view, the world would be a far better place if human beings realized this and decided never to take a narrative history seriously again.

For both Cheney and Rosenberg, subjectivity in history is a big problem. Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn disagree, as would many historians, but what is interesting about incorporating narrative into the U.S. survey today is that its inherent subjectivity, in my experience, is now far better understood by our students as well. If anything, many of Rosenberg’s observations, despite his use of recent scientific studies, reads at the time of its publication (2018) as a little dated. My students have understood for a while now that my class does not represent the final word on the subject matter and that another teacher could, and in all likelihood would, approach the same class in an entirely different manner. Our students today, after all, are products of the “post-truth” age, which as much as anything else has highlighted the power of human individuality and subjectivity. Our current cultural moment has destroyed epistemological consensus for everyone to see.¹⁰ The question that I have confronted in my classes as a result is simple: do narratives still work in the surveys now that students understand their subjectivity, in many cases, as much as their teachers? Would too many students, like Lynne Cheney, be quick to find my courses too biased to be of any interest, or, like Rosenberg, would they simply find the whole exercise too unconvincing to take them very seriously?

For me, this was a scary possibility to consider. Narratives were a big part of my classes, and for good reason. Students, like most humans, tend to like stories. Even Rosenberg admits as much—the appeal of stories is, for him, precisely what makes narrative history so dangerous. Human beings, he argues, are easily duped by a good story. Viewed from a different perspective, however, one that does not seem to posit history as the root of all evils in the world, the universal appeal of stories can become a tool for good, not evil. As the humanities at large and history in particular struggle with the issue of declining student interest in our fields, so much so that

many people view the humanities as currently in “crisis,” it seems like telling stories in class should not be something we should give up on too quickly.¹¹ But, clearly, the idea of constructing large-scale narratives, the hallmark of a conventional survey class, faces some serious new challenges in contemporary circumstances.

One of the most recent and exciting ideas of how we can improve the survey, for instance, revolves around the idea of “uncoverage.”¹² Lendol Calder, the pioneer of this approach, sees the sheer scope of the U.S. survey as its biggest problem. His solution, apparent in the name itself, is to deprioritize coverage, which he sees as the primary reason for much of the survey’s pedagogical backwardness. Pick fewer topics, he recommends, and cover those subjects in more detail, seminar-style. By digging deeper, the student gets to “think historically,” which in turn will lead to more student interest in the subject and better learning outcomes.¹³ It also will allow for more perspectives to be considered on each individual topic, preventing the professor’s own interpretation from exercising too much influence. As I understand Calder’s pedagogical approach, he is not necessarily against narrative, but he certainly is against big narratives.

In my experience, you would have to look far and wide to find a student unsympathetic to Calder’s harsh takedown of the conventional surveys’ many flaws, and most would admit that his suggested changes would indeed put the survey on better footing pedagogically, but I still struggled to adopt the “uncoverage” model in my particular circumstances. The stumbling block for me were my concerns about historical literacy. Many of my students come from uneven academic backgrounds, and frequently, I have found, can be reluctant to speak about the present because in doing so they risk a well-known historical precedent being used to refute their position. Not only would this bring up a germane fact that they have yet to consider, but it would also expose an embarrassing gap in fundamental knowledge that, fairly or not, would go a long way towards discrediting them. In this way, I have found the importance of historical literacy to be most obvious in its absence, and I wanted my classes to do something about it. Uncoverage, in its defense, is not an attack on historical literacy, per se, but the means by which it is pursued. Yet there were simply too many topics I found myself struggling to omit.

For this reason, I wanted to stay with narratives broad enough to cover a wide range of important topics, but at the same time, I needed some non-defunct pedagogical justification for this teaching decision. The case against big narratives was simply too strong. I found what I was looking for, surprisingly, in the world of fiction. In some literary circles right now, narrative fiction is also facing criticism and much of it, for the survey teacher, should feel familiar.¹⁴ Narrative in fiction, however, unlike the U.S. surveys, has a host of spirited defenders. The slightest mention of the novel's demise has people lining up to defend its enduring appeal, including writers, of course, but also scientists, who have produced a plethora studies of late claiming to prove that fiction, including narrative fiction, can still do important intellectual work. If we follow this debate, paying special attention to the defense of narrative forms in modern circumstances, a new possibility emerges for how we can make narrative work in the survey, even in the post-truth age.

Defending Narrative Forms in Fiction

The critics and defenders of narrative in fiction are both careful observers of a changed world. In the post-truth era, objectivity is clearly on the run, and, as a result, conventional narrative forms have begun to take on some water. Their scope can appear quite limited and even dishonest if they seem to be claiming a measure of objectivity that for many is no longer possible. Others, though, have gone in the other direction. Far from ignoring the impact of the post-truth age, they argue instead that narrative forms can adapt and find solid footing in these changed circumstances.

Karl Ove Knausgaard, the famous author and de facto leader of the movement criticizing conventional fiction, elaborates on narrative's lost credibility. It has, in all forms, become dubious:

Wherever you turned you saw fiction. All these millions of paperbacks, hardbacks, DVDs and TV series...TV news and radio news [all] had exactly the same format, documentaries had the same format, they were also stories, and it made no difference whether what they told had actually happened or not.¹⁵

Everything is narrative, and narrative, for Knausgaard, is always more spin than truth, whatever the form. This created for him an

artistic “crisis” that he “felt in every fibre of [his] body.” “Just the thought of a fabricated character in a fabricated plot,” he went on to say, made him “nauseous.”¹⁶

In response, Knausgaard has developed a writing style, often referred to as “autofiction,” that looks to lessen the “distance from reality” by negating as far as possible the influence of his own narration. To this end, he includes details usually omitted from fiction—the “granular details of daily life.”¹⁷ One reviewer refers to it as the “‘Supermarket Sweep’ approach to writing.”¹⁸ Proust is both model and muse here. Knausgaard’s six-volume autobiography is 3,600 pages, not quite matching *In Search of Lost Time*, but not far off either. In it, he describes defecation; in another part, he gives a very thoughtful and thorough description of a cornflake. Truth is still possible in fiction for him, but only in these types of details—an approach that has clearly hit a nerve. Knausgaard’s memoir has been described as a “literary sensation,” his writings overall as an intellectual “movement,” and his overall ethos as the “Knausgaard phenomenon.”¹⁹

Not all agree, however. There has been considerable pushback to the Knausgaard position. The defenders of the novel do not deny objectivity’s fall from grace. They embrace that development and find contemporary space for the novel nonetheless. Writer and journalist François Busnel has just begun production of sixteen-issue “mook” (part magazine, part book) in France called *America*. Its aim is historical. The editors and contributors aspire to be the defining “memorialists” of our age, but, tellingly, they are not all historians. Fiction writers fill *America*’s pages.²⁰ In explaining this editorial decision, Busnel identifies many of the same post-truth quandaries noted by Knausgaard. Writers and journalists, he writes, “substitute their vision of reality for reality itself.” “Objectivity,” he maintains, “is a sham”—“the truth has become an opinion like any other.” From these shared observations though, Busnel and the likes of Knausgaard soon diverge. The novel is actually more important than ever, Busnel contends, because in this world, it “tells us the real better than anything else.” As the news has gotten “weirder and faker,” the novel has become the “most credible vector of truth” for Busnel, the “antidote of alternative facts.” The narrative novel, less a problem, is more like our salvation. We are now in fact living, Busnel asserts, in “a profoundly novelistic age.”²¹

What does narrative fiction do for Busnel that sets it apart from other art forms and genres? How does Busnel find truth in fiction, whereas Knausgaard sees only more artifice and manipulation? George Saunders, the highly regarded writer and defender of fiction's contemporary relevance, offers one explanation, pointing a way forward for novelists and, possibly, history teachers. Pressed on whether narrative fiction has a role in today's world, he responded in the affirmative:

I think so, yes. Because fiction, as Chekov said, doesn't have to solve problems, it just has to formulate them correctly. So a good story can answer "the question" in several contradictory ways, and just let those answers hang there, resonating beautifully—and that IS the (larger) answer: that field of contradictions. When we have to choose one or the other, and eradicate the other truths, then we start making mistakes. My sense is, the longer we can abide in a space of not-knowing—or letting the many truths hang there—the better off we are. If, eventually, we have to act (as, of course, we sometimes do) that action will be a better action for the longer period of waiting-to-act. The longer we abide in ambiguity, the wiser we get.²²

Busnel is getting at something very similar when he says a novel reflects truth by "stepping aside" and works to "propose—not impose—the analysis." The right kind of narrative has value in today's world. Narratives can continue to exist, just not in static and authoritative forms. They have to be about raising questions as much as answering them.²³

The Scientists Have Their Say: In Support of Narrative Fiction (Part II)

Parallel to these literary debates have been numerous scientific studies, all designed to better understand the learning potential of reading.²⁴ They have found that some types of fiction make you smarter, and some do not. The key distinction seems to be the presence of characters complex enough to defy expectations and challenge readers' assumptions.²⁵ The novels that they claim do this end up sounding quite a bit like the narratives described by Saunders and Busnel. These studies add some science to the claims of the novel's relevance in contemporary circumstances.

To make their case, these studies frequently employ the language of literary criticism to separate characters into two broad categories: “flat” and “round.” To be flat, you need to be simple. E. M. Forster, the author and careful commentator on the issues of characterization, pointed to Mrs. Micawber from *David Copperfield* as a prime example. Her character, he said, can be described in one line: “I never will desert Mr. Micawber.” That attribute defines her; she has “no existence outside of it.”²⁶ She is an “idea,” not a fully formed human being. One scholar prefers the term “essentialist” for flat characters; another prefers “category-based.”²⁷ The larger point, though, is that these characters are “types,” “sometimes caricatures,” and often “trope-like,” which is exactly, in the end, what they are supposed to be. For they do important work in novels and are far superior to round characters in one area: moving the story forward. They are “useful cogs in the mechanism of plot,” one scholar notes.²⁸ They “make the plot work.”²⁹ Flat characters and plot go hand in hand; more of one, in all likelihood, means more of the other. See Charles Dickens for one notable example. Flat characters pay a price, though, in serving this purpose. They never amount to much on their own. “No human being is simple,” Forster notes, as flat characters purposefully are. In failing to capture “the complexities of the human mind,” many readers turn against them, having “very little patience with such renderings of human nature.”³⁰

Round characters, on the other hand, are everything flat characters are not; they give the sense of a whole person, they do change, and they can surprise. Forster talks about formulas, for instance, which always hold for flat characters, but not so for round characters, who often find themselves in circumstances where the “formula does not work.”³¹ Round characters are not predictable then, and they are capable of resolving tensions in unexpected ways. This, in part, is what makes these characters more compelling than flat characters. “For we must admit,” Forster writes, “that flat people are not in themselves as big achievements as round ones.”³² In their complexity, round characters require more time to develop, with their characterization often taking up more space in the novel. This is one reason that literary fiction often contains more round characters than genre fiction, such as thrillers or spy novels (not to say anything bad about spy novels). With less plot, typically, literary

fiction has more room to develop round characters. In fact, the presence of round characters is often the lead indicator of the genre.

Round characters, in line with Saunders' recommendations, complicate more than clarify. Repeatedly in the scientific studies on reading, it is the unsettling capabilities of round characters through their more realistic humanity that merit attention. They bring "information to us in a human fashion, eschewing the presentation of ideas without reference."³³ They are harder to classify and are "category-resistant." As a result, a round character often "disrupts our expectations" and "defamiliarizes its readers."³⁴ In their "socio-cognitive complexity, or roundness of characters," they force us "to make, adjust, and consider multiple interpretations of characters' mental states." In these studies, literary fiction as a genre begins to take on the characteristics of its round characters, tending "to challenge social categories" more than affirm them.³⁵

The intellectual benefits of engaging with a round character are enormous, these studies find. They pay particular attention to social cognitive abilities and a person's Theory of Mind (ToM). People with high ToM are better able to represent and anticipate the mental states of others, among other things, and account for different perspectives.³⁶ Through neuroimaging, these studies are proving that reading fiction with round characters can develop ToM and, through an improved ToM, can then be linked to all sorts of positive attributes. Reading fiction "positively predict[s] measures of social ability"; leads to the strongest overall "social cognition performance"; and also helps us understand "others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference."³⁷ "Leave it to science," quipped the acclaimed writer Louise Erdrich, "to prove true the intangible benefits of literary fiction." "Thank god," she continued, "the research didn't find that novels increased tooth decay or blocked up our arteries."³⁸

What This Means for the U.S. Survey

What does this mean for the survey then? Do survey courses currently have some dilemmas in common with the novel? I think they do. The renowned author Rachel Cusk, an admirer of Knausgaard and harsh critic of narrative fiction's contemporary relevance, has called it the problem of "summing up." In the words of one of her characters:

As soon as something was summed up, it was to all intents and purposes dead, a sitting duck, and she could go no further with it. Why go to the trouble to write a great long play about jealousy when *jealousy* just about summed it up?³⁹

Is summing things up not an accurate way to think about the survey? And what about being flat? Is that often a fair characterization as well? Of course it is. We are a Charles Dickens novel on steroids, as even he would be impressed with how much ground we cover. In the ToM studies, we would quickly be classified as genre fiction. The call of uncoverage, then, to go in depth or go home, like Knausgaard's detailed autofiction, makes total sense and is a compelling, important, and exciting response to this problem. But Busnel, Saunders, and the ToM studies offer an alternative option—one that is not nearly so hostile to broad coverage and, in the end, some “flatness.”

For as important as round characters are in fiction, they need expectations to defy and rules to break, but rarely are they the ones best suited to create those expectations. That is more often the work of flat characters. Flat characters exist so that round characters may live, in other words. The literary scholar Paul Pickrel cites George Elliot's *Middlemarch* as an example of how this works. A social schema is set up, he notes, through the novel's flat characters, only to watch a round character (Lydgate, in this case) struggle within this world as a fully formed individual, ultimately complicating the world and the categories that had been established earlier. It is this interplay between flat and round that he contends constitutes a major part of the novel's greatness. In Pickrel's terminology, flat characters are “schema-reinforcing” and round characters are “schema-refreshing.” Their relationship is interdependent.⁴⁰ Critics struggle, in fact, to come up with any obvious examples of a great book without flat characters. Almost all literary fiction has both. Even in Proust, Forster notes, you will find “numerous flat characters.”⁴¹

Crucially then, for our purposes, it is the presence of a round character, not the absence of all flat characters, that makes the difference. This, I believe, is what Saunders and Busnel were getting at as well and opens up a new possibility for the survey. Broad coverage and the flat treatment of topics, like flat characters, do not have to be completely excised. They can stay as long as we have the round characters to disrupt them.

Assigning Narrative Fiction in the History Classroom

Fostering “schema disruption” has become an important organizing principle of my classes, which has led to many changes, but not a complete overhaul, as uncoverage seems to require. Many of my old lectures remain, in fact, as they now establish the schema for the class. The major change has been in the readings I assign alongside those lectures. Instead of primary documents that often reinforce the schema from class and look for points of debate deep within the already established narrative, I now frequently assign historical fiction full of round characters, who I hope will do the same thing for my classes that they do for the novel—challenging and complicating ideas from the class in more fundamental ways.

The first place I look for opportunities to do this is within my own ideological bias. As historians like Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Dunn well understand, objectivity is always a goal, never a reality. I rarely rely on a textbook in my classes. The narratives that I construct in class are almost always my own, and my beliefs and personal perspectives of course will affect how I construct and present knowledge to the class, however unintentionally. For me, this means my classes will frequently lean towards what in the U.S. would be considered a liberal political perspective. Lynn Cheney from the 1990s History Standards controversy, for instance, would certainly find my treatment of European colonization in class far too “grim and gloomy.” A more conservative professor could justifiably treat the topic differently. The presence of some professorial bias in my classes though—which I long considered to be a flaw to be wrestled with but never fully overcome—has now, with schema disruption, gained a more productive pedagogical purpose.

“Crow” and Joseph Boyden’s The Orenda (2016)

On the topic of European colonization, for instance, I now assign selections from Joseph Boyden’s novel, *The Orenda*.⁴² I originally assigned the reading for its Native American narrators. Historical fiction, I have found, can be a wonderful tool in the history classroom to give a more human shape to individuals and cultures badly underrepresented in the historical record. For the purposes of

schema disruption in my classes, though, it is a European narrator in this text who does the most work. His name is Crow, and he is a Jesuit priest and willing agent of the French empire, who at the same time seems to mean well and suffers mightily throughout the book. In this way, his character creates some tension with my in-class narrative, which my students almost always seem interested in resolving. They want to discuss this character, and it has little to do, as far as I can tell, with their ideological preferences. It is the intellectual appeal of dealing with a disrupted schema that seems to draw them in.

“Abeeku” and Yaa Gyasi’s Homegoing (2016)

The other area where I look for opportunities to challenge elements of my lectures is when I have relied on broad categories of individuals or sharp divisions between people. In this, the scope of a conventional survey offers a plethora of opportunities. My current lecture on the Atlantic Slave trade, I imagine, is quite conventional. I talk about sugar production, how it worked, and how it spread from India, through the Mediterranean, and finally to the Americas. I repeatedly treat huge complex cultures as if they were single individuals, frequently finding it useful to say things like “this is what the Portuguese are looking for” or “this is what the people of Benin are interested in.” The lecture is unquestionably “flat,” as it has to be to cover a complex global event so quickly, which also—as with my own ideological biases—creates a clear opportunity for schema disruption.

The reading that I now assign with my lecture on the rise of the Atlantic Slave Trade is the opening chapter from *Homegoing*, a recent novel by the author Yaa Gyasi.⁴³ Like *The Orenda*, *Homegoing* brings to light numerous stories and perspectives that are too often left untold or unrepresented. This particular chapter is set in Ghana and follows the lead character, Effia. Her stepmother treats her poorly, tricking her into an eventual marriage with a European slave trader, in part because of the higher dowry that would come from that match. The stepmother, at the same time, is a victim of patriarchal society and is often abused by her husband, Effia’s doting father. The man Effia wants to marry is Abeeku, the chief of the village, who returns her affections and would have

married her, if not for the evil machinations of Effia's stepmother. Abeeke, at the same time, is leading his tribe towards an increased involvement in the slave trade by launching more raids on the interior. This is a political power play that he thinks will benefit his people at the expense of rival groups in the area. It is a fantastically interesting chapter on its own. My students always have quite a bit to say about Effia and her evil stepmother.

The characters in this chapter, however, are mostly flat in my view. There are no drastic changes in any of the dispositions of the characters; most act in accordance with who they are presented to be throughout the chapter. The schema disruption for my students comes more from the categories that I have set up in class and the Abeeke character in particular. From our lecture on the burgeoning slave trade and with full knowledge, in hindsight, of what it would ultimately develop into across the Atlantic, my students understandably take an extremely negative view of any African complicity with the trade. This is predictable and seems, after a broad overview of these developments, to be an uncomplicated moral position to take. In this light, Abeeke is a character that my students struggle with. Gyasi does not depict him as evil—far from it—and yet he is eager to participate in the slave trade.

My lecture had set up these issues from the top-down; Abeeke's character pushes my students to rethink things from the bottom-up. For some, he only solidifies their indictment of this behavior. For them, Abeeke tests their views and they hold. Abeeke's actions were wrong, they say, even considering the particularities of his situation. For others, it mitigates what was a sweeping indictment. They sympathize with Abeeke's aims, even as they disagree with the means. At its best moments, a discussion on Abeeke becomes a larger conversation about self-preservation on one hand and individual morality on the other, with no easy or unanimous answers to these new considerations. My students start the discussion from a place of abstraction and moral clarity, but Abeeke complicates things. This exposure to his character can work in all directions ideologically, but the students who engage in this discussion always depart with a more nuanced and thoughtful opinion than the one they held at the beginning of class. If Abeeke does not technically qualify as a round character in the story, he certainly operates as one in my class.

“Jacob” and Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008)

The Toni Morrison novel, *A Mercy*, set in the early Chesapeake region during the seventeenth century, offers a similar opportunity for schema disruption in my classes.⁴⁴ In a novel teeming with wonderful teaching opportunities in general (like *The Orenda* and *Homegoing*), there is one character that works particularly well for the purposes of schema disruption. His name is Jacob and he is a white Protestant banker who has come to the Chesapeake region on business. He was born a poor orphan, but has come a long way when the reader first meets him. He is an up-and-comer, who also appears to be a good person. Chief among his motivations to acquire wealth is the desire to provide for his family. He detests slavery—he says so repeatedly throughout the chapter—and also shows an atypical compassion for animals, going out of his way at one point to save an injured raccoon. His business in Maryland is to collect a debt from a Catholic slaveowner and all-around bad guy, D’Ortega. Jacob detests D’Ortega for many reasons, not least of which is his ownership of slaves. Eventually and reluctantly, Jacob accepts a slave as payment from D’Ortega (he sees it, reasonably so in the context of the story, as saving that slave from an even worse situation). Through the first half of the story, D’Ortega and Jacob exist in complete opposition to each other.

The distance between Jacob and D’Ortega all but disappears by the end of the chapter, however. In the chapter’s closing passages, the reader follows Jacob as he leaves D’Ortega’s plantation and heads back to the coast for his departure. He stops at a tavern for the night, where he has a conversation with a stranger about the staggering profitability of sugar production in the Caribbean. Jacob is skeptical at first, but slowly warms to the idea. He starts to equivocate morally about his opposition to slavery, distinguishing between owning slaves where you live, like D’Ortega, and investing, at a distance, in a faraway slave plantation. The chapter closes, tellingly, with Jacob asleep, dreaming of a big house, much like D’Ortega’s. Just before this, Morrison has also revealed to the reader that D’Ortega had not been born wealthy either. His upbringing had been much like Jacob’s, but he had beaten the odds and amassed a fortune. The means of his unlikely economic ascent had been the slave trade and its immense profits—the very

opportunity that has now just presented itself to Jacob. A new possibility arises for the reader, then, in the chapter's closing sentences. The distinction between the two characters has all but collapsed. D'Ortega, once Jacob's foil, has now become his future.

Jacob is a round character, so the text does a good bit of intellectual work on its own, of course, but as with Gyasi's Abeeke character, the class accentuates these possibilities. In the lecture that precedes this reading, I discuss the rise of slavery in Virginia. It is also a big picture lecture. We talk about indentured servants, Anthony Johnson (a free black landowner), plantation economics, the House of Burgesses, and the various laws passed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that began to bring slavery and race together in new ways. The development and racialization of slavery during this period is a terrible story, as is what happens to Native Americans in the region during the same period. It lends itself, when told with a high level of abstraction, to broad categories of villains and victims. I do not know any way to lecture on the creation of these laws without generating and then reifying these categories. Morrison, though, through the character of Jacob, explodes these easy formulations. Jacob is characterized as a good person—who is about to own slaves. When I ask my students to confront that fact, our discussions in class change. What seemed simple has become much more complex. What was flat has become round.

Conclusion

The discussions on characters like Crow, Abeeke, and Jacob are now highlights of my classes. Watching students start with an idea as it was presented in class, engage with a complicating individual story, and then return to the original idea, now potentially in need of revising, is exactly what the Theory of Mind studies identify as so important.⁴⁵ The process is also full of surprises. Sometimes, my students are more influenced by schema disruption. At other times, they bounce back to the schema, having refined their understanding a bit. But the most important thing has been that students, few of whom have read George Saunders or the latest Theory of Mind study, seem to find in schema disruption intellectual work that is relevant and engaging, far more so than memorizing a static and

ostensibly objective narrative in a thoroughly subjective modern world.⁴⁶ They read more, participate more, and engage more than ever before, and I, for my part, still get to do some measure of broad coverage, which now plays an important part in the larger pedagogical approach of these classes.

Whether it is the post-truth age or the Internet itself, we are teaching the surveys in drastically different circumstances now. We need as many options for major adaptations as possible. Uncoverage is one. I think schema disruption may offer another, appealing more to teachers like myself, who are hesitant to give up the ghost completely on historical literacy. The only thing off the table, as far as I am concerned—and in this I am in full agreement with the proponents of “uncoverage”—is for little to change.

Notes

1. Jesse Goodman, Sarah Montgomery and Connie Ables, “Rorty’s Social Theory and the Narrative of U.S. History Curriculum,” *Education and Culture* 26, no. 1 (2010): 3-22.

2. Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), Chapter 1, available at <<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/n/nash-history.html>>.

3. Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, 11.

4. For a discussion on the challenges of employing narrative in the classroom, see Peter Mandler, Sean Lang, and Ted Vallance, “Debates: Narrative in School History,” *Teaching History* 145 (December 2011): 22-31.

5. From more details, see Lynne Cheney’s op-ed, “The End of History,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 October 1994, available at <<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mlassite/discussions261/cheney.html>>.

6. Video of Cheney’s interview (also featuring Alan Brinkley) is available at “National Standards of History: A Debate with Professor Alan Brinkley and Lynne Cheney,” *Charlie Rose*, 27 January 1995, <<https://www.charlierose.com/videos/12176>>.

7. “National Standards of History: A Debate”; Cheney, “The End of History.”

8. Alex Rosenberg, *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

9. Rosenberg, *How History Gets Things Wrong*, 250.

10. For one recent brief discussion on the death of consensus, see An Xiao Mina, “The Death of Consensus, Not the Death of Truth,” NiemanLab, December 2018, <<https://www.niemanlab.org/2018/12/the-death-of-consensus-not-the-death-of-truth/>>.

11. Reports indicate that declining student interest in the humanities is increasingly common. Some recent articles include: Steven Conn, “How the Crisis of the Humanities is Like the Greek Economy,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 November 2015; Ella Delany, “Humanities Studies Under Strain Around the Globe,” *The New York Times*, 1 December 2013; and Tamar Lewin, “As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry,” *The New York Times*, 30 October 2013. Explanations vary, as do recommendations of what to do about it. See Heidi Tworek, “The Real Reason the Humanities are ‘in Crisis,’” *The Atlantic*, 18 December 2013; and Paul Yachnin, “The Crisis in the Humanities—What would Shakespeare do?” *Humanities* 5, no. 31 (June 2016). For a counter view, see Peter Mandler, “Rise of the Humanities,” *Aeon*, 17 December 2015.

12. Lendol Calder, “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey,” *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1358-1370.

13. On “historically thinking,” see Sam Wineburg’s *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001) and his more recent *Why Learn History (When It’s Already on your Phone)* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018). See also, Wineburg’s “Crazy for History,” *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 4 (March 2004): 1401-1414. The concept has been enormously influential, particularly the contributions of Calder, as well as Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker, “The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model,” *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 1050-1066. For some recent examples, beyond Calder and Sipress and Voelker, of articles that build on or at least invoke Wineburg and his pedagogical writings, see Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does it Mean to Think Historically?” *Perspectives on History* 45, no. 1 (January 2007); Peter Burkholder, “A Content Means to a Critical Thinking End: Group Quizzing in History Surveys,” *The History Teacher* 47, no. 4 (August 2014): 551-578; Adele Nye, Marnie Hughes-Warrington, Jill Roe, Penny Russell, Desley Deacon, and Paul Kiem, “Exploring Historical Thinking and Agency with Undergraduate History Students,” *Studies in Higher Education* 36, no. 7 (November 2011): 763-780; Nancy Quam-Wickham, “Reimagining the Introductory U.S. History Course,” *The History Teacher* 49, no. 4 (August 2016), 519-546; and Brent J. Ruswick, “Teaching Historical Skills through JSTOR: An Online Research Project for Survey Courses,” *The History Teacher* 44, no. 2 (February 2011): 285-296.

14. For sample discussions about the issue of narratives in novels, see Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 90-113; and Michael Conway, “The Problem with History Classes,” *The Atlantic*, 16 March 2015.

15. Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book 2: A Man in Love*, trans. Don Bartlett (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago, 2013), as quoted in Rachel Cusk's review, "A Man in Love by Karl Ove Knausgaard - Review," *The Guardian*, 12 April 2013. In praise of Knausgaard's autofiction, she writes in that review: "Instead, he shows us, by the route of life, that there is no story, and in so doing he finds, at last, authenticity. For that alone, this deserves to be called perhaps the most significant literary enterprise of our times."

16. Knausgaard, as quoted in Cusk, "A Man in Love."

17. Liesl Schillinger, "His Peers' Views are in the Details," *The New York Times*, 21 May 2014.

18. The "Supermarket Sweep" description of Knausgaard's style comes from Britt Peterson's review of Rachel Cusk: "Mommy Meanest: Can the Most Hated Novelist in Britain Redeem Herself?" *The New Republic*, 3 February 2015.

19. Hari Kunzru, "Karl Ove Knausgaard: The Latest Literary Sensation," *The Guardian*, 7 March 2014. See also, Evan Hughes, "The Norwegian Government Keeps Book Publishers Alive," *The New Republic*, 11 April 2014.

20. For more, see Busnel's interview by Pierre Hedrich, "François Busnel: 'On Veut être les Mémorialistes d'une Époque,'" *L'Obs*, 15 May 2017, quotations translated by Google Translate.

21. See Clément Arbrun, "François Busnel: 'Donald Trump est un Personnage de Roman!'" *les inRocKuptibles*, 4 April 2018, quotations translated by Google Translate; and Lauren Collins, "A Magazine to Help French Readers Make Sense of the U.S." *The New Yorker*, 9 October 2017.

22. George Saunders, as quoted in an interview with Kevin Spinale, "Why Fiction Matters: An Interview with George Saunders," *America: The Jesuit Review*, 22 May 2013.

23. For some examples of just how relevant these themes can be for history teachers as well, see Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on your Phone)*. Wineburg talks about how with his experimental classes, he focused on "train[ing] students in ambiguity and build[ing] their tolerance for complexity" (p. 175). In a different section, he reminds the reader that "true historical inquiry must end where it begins: with a question mark" (p. 83).

24. For a few examples of these studies, see Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, Jacob Hirsh, Jennifer dela Paz, and Jordan B. Peterson, "Bookworms versus Nerds: Exposure to Fiction versus Non-Fiction, Divergent Associations with Social Ability, and the Simulation of Fictional Social Worlds," *Journal of Research in Personality* 40, no. 5 (October 2006): 694-712; and David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science* 342, no. 6156 (October 2013): 377-380. For a rival view, see Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, "Who Needs Theory of Mind?" in *Biological and Cultural Bases of Human Inference*, ed. Riccardo Viale, Daniel Andler, and Lawrence Hirschfeld (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 131-159.

25. On flat versus round characters, see E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1927); and Paul Pickrel, "Flat and Round

Characters Reconsidered,” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 181-198.

26. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 68.

27. Pickrel prefers the distinction of “essentialist” versus “existential” to “flat” and “round.” Pickrel, “Flat and Round Characters Reconsidered.” Jonathan Culpeper, following a different model, prefers a category- or schema-based approach to these differences in characterization. See Culpeper, *Language and Characterisation: People in Plays and Other Texts* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 93-96.

28. W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London, United Kingdom: Chatto and Windus, 1965), as quoted in Culpeper, *Language and Characterisation*, 53-54.

29. Pickrel, “Flat and Round Characters Reconsidered,” 187.

30. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 70, 79.

31. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 76, 78.

32. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 72.

33. Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley, “The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 3 (May 2008): 173-192.

34. Kidd and Castano, “Reading Literary Fiction,” 377-380.

35. Alison Flood, “Literary Fiction Readers Understand Others’ Emotions Better, Study Finds,” *The Guardian*, 23 August 2016.

36. Sometimes referred to as “mind-reading,” the most common test of Theory of Mind is the “Reading the Mind in the Eyes” test, where a person is given four emotional terms and asked to match the appropriate emotion to individuals in photographs, based on the expression on their faces.

37. Kidd and Castano, “Reading Literary Fiction”; Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley, and Mihnea C. Moldoveanu, “Reading Other Minds: Effects of Literature on Empathy,” *Scientific Study of Literature* 3, no. 1 (2013): 28-47; and Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, and Peterson, “Bookworms versus Nerds.”

38. Pam Belluck, “For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov,” *The New York Times*, 3 October 2013.

39. Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 232, as quoted in Elaine Blair, “All Told: Rachel Cusk’s Autobiographical Fictions,” *The New Yorker*, 29 December 2014.

40. Pickrel, “Flat and Round Characters Reconsidered,” 195.

41. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 68.

42. Joseph Boyden, *The Orenda* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

43. Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), “Effia” Chapter, 3-27.

44. Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), Chapter 2.

45. On the psychological idea of schema and schema disruption, see Guy William Davidson Cook, “A Theory of Discourse Deviation: The Application of Schema Theory to the Analysis of Literary Discourse” (Ph.D. diss., University of Leeds, 1990); and Catherine Emmott and Marc Alexander, “Schemata,” in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and

Wolf Schmid (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 2014). See also, Roger C. Schank and Diana M. Joseph, “Intelligent Schooling,” in *Intelligence, Instruction, and Assessment: Theory into Practice*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg and Wendy M. Williams (New York: Routledge, 1998).

46. Michael Conway elaborates on the ramifications of a faux objectivity for the survey in “The Problem with History Classes.”