Unreliable Narrators?

Upon encountering a character that struggles with understanding pragmatics and body language, I might be inclined to consider their testimony unreliable, after all, they are likely to miss the subtext or even misunderstand the whole situation. Similar to the other topics in this chapter, there is a whole discourse hidden behind the innocent term 'unreliable narrator', which was first coined by Wayne C. Booth in 1961. For this section, I will refer to Ansgar Nünning's *Unreliable, compared to what?* (1999), an essay in which he concludes that it is ultimately "not so much a character trait of a narrator as it is an interpretive strategy of the reader" (Nünning, "Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches" 94–95). In other words, conceptualising the narrator as unreliable can be seen as a "strategy by which the reader naturalizes textual inconsistencies that might otherwise remain unassimilable" (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 69). Thus, according to Nünning,

> [t]he term ›unreliable narrator‹ does not designate a structural or semantic feature of texts, but a pragmatic phenomenon that cannot fully be grasped without taking into account the conceptual premises that readers and critics bring to texts. (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 66)

I have previously established that pragmatics work according to the Cooperative Principle, i.e. the assumption that others are operating according to the same rules on which we base our utterances (Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction* 62). In essence, then, a narrator becomes unreliable when I – as a reader – realise that they are indeed not abiding by our Cooperative Principle, or, in Nünning's words, when there is a "distance that separates the narrator's view of the worlds from the reader's or critic's world-model and standards of normalcy" (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 61). Thus, I have re-entered the discourse of normality, if ever I really left.

When contrasting (un-)reliability to the reader's understanding of 'normal', it is unsurprising that I have to discard textual 'proof', at least to a certain extent. After all, "'normal moral standards', 'basic common sense' and 'human decency'" (64) do not have as solid a core as one would perhaps like or theorise them to have (see Chapter 4.2, flexible normalism). Consider the following dialogue from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*:

> The policewoman put her arms round Mrs Shears and led her back towards the house.
> I lifted my head off the grass.
> The policeman squatted down beside me and said, 'Would you like to tell me what's going on here, young man?'
> I sat up and said, 'The dog is dead.'
> 'I'd got that far,' he said.
> I said, 'I think someone killed the dog.'
> 'How old are you?' he asked.
> I replied, 'I am 15 years and 3 months and 2 days.' (7)

In her study, Semino reasons that Christopher's breaches of the maxims of Quantity and Relation render him deviant:

> Competent readers … are likely to infer, … that the character's/ narrator's communicative behaviour reflects a cognitive impairment that they may identify as high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome. At the level of character–character communication, however, the characters' responses are sometimes perceived to be puzzling or deliberately uncooperative, resulting in misunderstanding and/or conflict. (Semino 147)

I cannot simply agree with this. For one thing, 'identify' suggests that this 'inferred cognitive impairment' is some idiosyncrasy of autism portrayals. And secondly, it disregards the primacy effect of framing a portrayal as an autism narrative. Indeed, I would argue it is the latter that allows the reader to reframe the character's behaviour instead of puzzling over it, such as Semino suggests for character-character relations.

If Christopher and the police officer were considered on par, one could equally accuse the police officer of not catering to Christopher's utterance. If one were to take that primacy effect away by taking the dialogue out of the context of this story (I am aware of the irony), one would have a police officer talking to a teenage boy who is coiled up on the ground next to a dead dog. Upon being asked what is going on, the boy states 'the dog is dead', an utterance one could very well attribute to disbelief, desperation, or grief. Equally, if Christopher were six years old or a non-native speaker, the officer likely would have reacted less confused (and possibly more compassionate). In other words, Semino attributes the 'failure' of this dialogue to Christopher alone, both in his role as hearer and speaker, because she has already established his 'cognitive impairment' and yet it is but a conviction without a trial. I also argue that the dialogue enforces Christopher's 'impairment' when the officer reacts confused and asks Christopher's age, indicating a discrepancy between his appearance and his utterances.

Obviously, Semino aims at the fact that the police officer is asking for information about the progression of events under the false assumption that Christopher knows more about it or even killed the dog. Semino's findings operate under the same Cooperative Principle (CP) as the police officer's, who could be considered representative of the CP under which other characters in the novel operate. Perceived breaches of the maxims outline the CP ex negativo, simultaneously cementing Christopher's deviance. Thus, when Semino states a breach of a maxim, I conclude that Christopher's reaction fails to cater to her CP. In her eyes, as well as the police officer's, for that matter, Christopher's account is unreliable, in that he would be considered old enough to understand what the officer is asking for and could consequently offer more information on the situation (e.g. how he found the dog, that he is innocent, etc.).

However, when the dialogue continues, it becomes clear how Christopher's conversational principles differ:

> 'And what, precisely, were you doing in the garden?' he [the officer] asked.
> 'I was holding the dog,' I replied.

> 'And why were you holding the dog?' he asked.
> This was a difficult question. It was something I wanted to do. I like dogs. It made me sad to see that the dog was dead.
> I like policemen, too, and I wanted to answer the question properly, but the policeman did not give me enough time to work out the correct answer. (*Curious Incident* 7)

Christopher is struggling because he is trying to find the 'right' answer to the question. The reader learned earlier that his communication is generally dominated by the principle of honesty, to the point of being overly correct:

> I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this. (*Curious Incident* 1)

Because Christopher is so afraid of making assumptions and accidentally not telling the truth, he can only state the obvious, consequently being an obstacle to the conversation. Yet, most of Christopher's difficulties in communication can be explained by the simple principle 'truth above all', including his distaste for metaphors and lies (19f.), because he confuses truth and literal meaning. Thus, even though as a reader I might be inclined to consider him slow and rather simple-minded (based on his language), his account is not unreliable, once I am aware that he operates under certain pragmatic principles, which might differ from my own, or not. Consequently, even pragmatic competency is a matter of perspective, and its definition is a question of power. I suggest, the author counts on the reader to abide by a similar Cooperative Principle. In terms of normality and deviance, the deviant character is contrasted not to one but most or all other characters with whom they interact. These characters usually reflect common pragmatic principles (and social values, for that matter), giving them the benefit of the doubt. Consequently, a character's deviance cannot be easily renegotiated. Ironically, then, the

reader may render every narrator unreliable, if they wished to do so, although they might as well extend the courtesy of flexible normalism and, perhaps, empathy. However, finishing on such a vague note is dissatisfactory and overall rather unhelpful.

There are two more things on which I wish to elaborate. The first is that of truthfulness in a narrator's report. As Lanser suggests, "a narrator may be quite trustworthy in reporting events but not competent in interpreting them" (Lanser qtd. in Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 57). The following example was taken from *Mockingbird*, where Caitlin's classmate Rachel had a bike accident.

> Finally Rachel asks if her face looks really bad and Emma says, *Of course not. It looks totally fine.*
> Rachel says, *Really?* She looks around and her eyes stop at me.
> I look away because I wasn't staring at her like those other girls.
> *What?* She asks. Her voice is soft and shaky. *Does my face look bad?* …
> I wonder how she knows that honesty is one of my skills. *Yes*, I say. *It looks bad. It's purple and puffy and really gross.*
> Rachel starts crying and runs out of the room.
> *CAITLIN!* Emma yells. *That was so mean! Didn't anyone ever tell you how to be a friend?*
> That's when I realize that maybe I should listen to Mrs. Brook when she talks about friends. Now that Devon isn't here to tell me. (126f.)

For one thing, this is a prime example of politeness working under different pragmatic principles. Caitlin's 'I wonder how she knows that honesty is one of my skills' already forbodes drama because the reader – given they are assuming the same Cooperative Principle as Emma represents – can now anticipate Caitlin's blunder. Caitlin misunderstood Rachel's utterance as a request for the truth, while everybody else knew that Rachel was seeking reassurance. Consequently, Caitlin's honesty is perceived as brutal and uncalled for, thus Emma reprimands her for her harshness. Since this is not the reaction Caitlin expected, she re-evaluates the situation and realises that she has made a mistake, from which she then concludes that she needs Mrs Brook's help to prevent further mistakes

in the future. Indeed, I believe this is what makes Caitlin *reliable* as a narrator. Had she not reflected on her mistake even though her utterance clearly caused others to be upset, but instead considered herself to be right regardless, the reader would likely have been more cautious of future reports. In fact, because Caitlin reported this event and admitted her blunder, I know that she is not trying to hide anything from us, but lets us see her shortcomings, too. Thus, I have no reason to suspect that her account is untrustworthy in terms of reporting the events.

However, Emma's reprimand serves another function, i.e. that of voicing the background characters' opinions and consequently indicating what would be considered normal. In terms of narratology, the protagonist is contrasted against the background characters. I suggest that autistic characters are often 'equipped' with a *ficelle* as defined by Henry James. It "serves to set off, contrast with, dramatize, and engage the protagonist" (Hochman 87), although in its original sense denoted a confidant/e who "exploited as a means of providing the reader with information while avoiding direct address from the narrator" (Baldick 127).

> Because he is, so to speak, the reader's delegate within the story, the ficelle can often take on a generalized and representative value. He is so often a type because the reader needs precisely the comfortable recognition of the typical. Because of this the ficelle may often bear the weight of a good deal of symbolic value which can in various ways extend the story of the protagonist. (Harvey 67)

Without overcharging the role of the ficelle, I maintain that it is representative of a neurotypical worldview, which happens to be considered 'normal'. The protagonist will thus run many of their questions about 'how to behave normally' by them, which not only assigns them some authority on this subject but renders them into a representation of this novel's normality. In essence, the protagonist's 'unreliable' worldview is contrasted against the ficelle's reliable neurotypical perspective, allowing the autistic character to reflect on their behaviour and gain new insights. In the context of autism narratives, the ficelle is often a 'trustee'

for normalcy and usually a close friend. In Caitlin's case, her brother Devon was her most trusted friend and advisor. He put into words what other children might have grasped intuitively or done differently. Although he is dead, Caitlin refers to him several times throughout the novel, often in connection with the rules and explanations Devon made for her.

Finally, I wish to introduce Riggan's not-so-flattering categories of unreliable narrators (picaro, madmen, naïfs, clowns, idiot-narrators, neurotics/psychopaths). In my opinion, the category of naïfs fits the stereotype 'Childlike' rather perfectly (see Chapter 3.3). Riggan defines the naïf as

> a figure who by definition lacks experience with people and society and is thus unequipped to deal in any far-reaching manner with the moral, ethical, emotional, and intellectual questions which arise from his first ventures into the world and from his account of those ventures. (169)

Obviously, for my study I have to take into account that these characters are children or young adults, thus the observation of childlikeness is not 'stereotypical' as such; it just is. However, a character might be portrayed as stereotypically childlike to demonstrate they are less advanced than their peers. Here, I must stay cautious with terms like 'childish' or 'naïve' since they are tinged. Riggan himself uses Huck as an example, describing him as "a mere youth" (Riggan 148), his style of narration as "vividly direct and evocative without resorting to elaborate romantic conceits or to the overly contrived abstraction and metaphoric style to which Twain falls prey" (148). Instead, Huck's description of a sunrise is "simple, sense-oriented, and restricted to comparisons with his own previous experience with nature rather than delving into metaphysical reflection" (148). Casting aside that Riggan is trying to make a point about Huck's connection to nature, the 'simple', 'sense-oriented', non-metaphorical style can easily be compared to what I have previously defined as 'literal'. This is not to say that Huck is incapable of understanding utterances on a non-literal level but that he is prone to keeping it lit-

eral. Riggan also states that "[f]or the most part, Huck is … unreflective regarding the events and characters about which he narrates" (149), i.e. he does either not voice an opinion about somebody, or does not have one in the first place (149).

In a sense, this relates to honesty; the protagonist reports encounters in an un-reflected way, which is both truthful and at times unintentionally self-deprecating. Again, this is what I observed in Caitlin's report, too. Autistic characters, especially, are portrayed as very honest, usually resulting in instances of bluntness and an aversion to lies. However, their lack of pragmatic competence will at times render them 'inferior' to the average reader in terms of interpreting the events according to the Cooperative Principle proposed by the background characters. For example, whenever a character struggles with understanding figurative language, the neurotypical reader is expected to be 'in' on the joke. In other words, although Nünning discards this metaphor, there is something "going on 'behind the narrator's back'" (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 57), or, as Chatman suggests "the implied author establishes 'a secret communication with the implied reader'" (Chatman qtd. in Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 57). Giving non-autistic authors the benefit of the doubt, I will assume that any (overall positive) portrayals of autistic characters are intended to entertain and educate, without rendering them into caricatures. Based on this premise, I can discard the idea that the (implied) author wishes to communicate secretly with the (implied) reader, at least not in order to make fun of the character's shortcomings. However, continuous failure of a character to understand figurative language, jokes, or other instances of non-literal use of language might ridicule a character even if unintended by the author.

I believe, one usually assumes their opponents to operate under the same Cooperative Principle as we do. Thus, if the protagonist deviates from my expectations but is opposed by background characters who operate under the expected rules, I am more likely to align myself with them, simply because we both oppose the protagonist's principles. While I could technically deduce different pragmatic principles from evaluating the reactions of other characters, I would have had to have formed an opinion on the protagonist's competency (or lack thereof)

first, a premise on which I would base my future findings. Assuming, then, that portrayals of autistic characters are not so much guidelines for pragmatic principles (despite their schema-refreshing tendencies), I conclude that the authors of these portrayals do indeed assume pragmatic competency in their readers, and thus also a shared Cooperative Principle. Put starkly, the reader needs to be pragmatically competent or they will miss out on the 'inside jokes'. This raises the question of how entertaining such portrayals are for individuals who lack pragmatic competence, and whether they are in fact patronising to a certain degree, despite their good intentions.

For Riggan, the naïve narrator is intended to convey social critique, and again, this is perhaps what Semino termed schema-refreshment, i.e. an outside view from somebody who "has not yet entered the social world and who is largely unfamiliar with it on any direct experiential level" (Riggan 169). Personally, I do not see portrayals of autistic characters as a critique of social norms and values, but rather a way of raising awareness for a) the struggles, especially for those lacking natural pragmatic competence, b) their unique perspective, and c) the various ways these individuals are discriminated against. While the latter could be seen as a social critique in a strict sense ('there is discrimination in our society'), it is also an argument, *ex negativo*, about how (not) to treat neuroatypicals. However, returning to Nünning's question *Unreliable, compared to what?*, the answer would be 'compared to the reader's own experience, worldview, and pragmatic principles'. After all, unreliability is not so much a criterion on which I can base my analysis of autistic characters, but a way of triggering the audience to read the novel cross-eyed, i.e. from the perspective of the protagonist and their own, which often manifests itself in utterance made by background characters.

Niches, Genres, and Roles – *Trueman Bradley*

So far, this chapter discussed several narratological aspects of autism portrayals. I lastly return to the stereotype 'Genius' and how it carved out a contested niche. Rozema criticised how autistic characters are por-