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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn, 1968), pp. 5-14

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344792>

Accessed: 11/02/2012 09:10

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Towards a Poetics of Fiction

3) An Approach through Narrative

BARBARA HARDY

My approach through *narrative* is set forward neither as primary nor comprehensive but as locally illuminating. My argument is that narrative, like lyric or dance, is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate, and order experience, but as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life. The novel merely heightens, isolates, and analyzes the narrative motions of human consciousness. One might say that the novelists have been more concerned with this element of fiction than the critics, and indeed the main point of this essay is to suggest that we go to novels to find out about narrative. Novelists have for a long time known enough about the narrative mode to be able to work in it, criticize it, and even play with it. Sterne juggles, shows off, and teases us in a form which draws special attention to its own nature—and ever since, novelists have been dislocating, inverting, attenuating, and analyzing narrative. The uses and dislocations exist in a pre-aesthetic state in routine acts of human consciousness, and the “analysis” is not narrowly literary but extends to the whole range of psychic narratives.

I take for granted the ways in which storytelling engages our interest, curiosity, fear, tensions, expectation, and sense of order. What concern me here are the qualities which fictional narrative shares with that inner and outer storytelling that plays a major role in our sleeping and waking lives. For we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.

I set out this long, incomplete, and highly obvious list not simply to point to the narrative structure of acts of mind but to suggest the deficiency of our commonly posited antagonism between dream and realistic vision. Educationalists still suggest that the process of maturation involves a movement out of the fantasy-life into a vision of life “as it is.” Teachers have even constructed syllabi on the assumption that we begin with fairytales and daydreams and work gradually into realistic modes. John Stuart Mill, with his feelings restored by the poetry of Wordsworth, took the love of narrative to be characteristic of the infancy of men and societies. F. R. Leavis and his followers are stern about immature and indulgent fantasy in literature. There is a widespread and, I suggest, dubious but understandable assumption on the part of wishful believers in life-enhancement that human beings begin by telling themselves fairytales and end by telling truths.

If we apply some introspection it looks rather more as if we go on oscillating between fairytale and truth, dream and waking. Fantasy-life does not come to an end at eighteen but goes on working together with the more life-orientated modes of planning, faithful remembering, and rational appraisal. We can distinguish the extremes of cut-off indulgent fantasy and faithful document, but the many intermediate states blur the distinction and are compounded of fantasy and realism. The element of dream can be sterile and dangerously in-turned; it can also penetrate deeply and accept a wide range of disturbing and irrational experience that cannot easily, if at all, be accepted, ordered, understood, or reconstructed coherently and dispassionately. Dream can debilitate, but its subversive discontents are vital for personal and social development. It can provide escape or a look at the unwished-for worst. It lends imagination to the otherwise limited motions of faithful memory and rational planning. It acts on future, joining it with past. It creates, maintains, and transforms our relationships: we come to know each other by telling, untelling, believing, and disbelieving stories about each other's pasts, futures, and identities. Dream probes and questions what can be the static and overly rational stories about past, future, and identity, and is in the process itself steadied and rationally eroded. We tell stories in order to escape from the stubbornness of identity, as Randall Jarrell reminds us:

*What some escape to, some escape: if we find Swann's
Way better than our own, and trudge on at the back
Of the north wind to—to—somewhere east
Of the sun, west of the moon, it is because we live*

*By trading another's sorrow for our own; another's
Impossibilities, still unbelieved in, for our own. . . .
'I am myself still?' For a little while, forget:
The world's selves cure that short disease, myself,
And we see bending to us, dewy-eyed, the great
CHANGE, dear to all things not to themselves endeared.*

Here, in "Children Selecting Books in a Library," he argues the paradox that to be mature involves escape, or rehearses a non-attachment to self which is perfected in death. Thus we may be engaged in telling ourselves stories in a constant attempt to exchange identity and history, though many of us stay in love with ourselves, sufficiently self-attached to rewrite the other stories for our own purposes. But "escaping" and "escaping to" form only a part of narrative activity and function. We tell stories in order to change, remaking the past in a constant and not always barren *esprit d'escalier*. The polarity between fantasy and reality is another instance of convenient fiction: we look back to go forward or to stay in a past-centered obsession. Like most works of fiction, personal history is made up of fantasy and realism, production and idling.

We often tend to see the novel as competing with the world of happenings. I should prefer to see it as the continuation, in disguising and isolating art, of the remembering, dreaming, and planning that is in life imposed on the uncertain,

attenuated, interrupted, and unpredictable or meaningless flow of happenings. Real life may have the disjointedness of a series of short stories, told by someone like Katherine Mansfield, but seldom has the continuity of a novel. Recollection of happenings, which removes certain parts for various conscious and unconscious motives, is the best life-model for the novel. We do not grow out of telling stories.

What consequences are involved in seeing fictional narrative as continuous with narrative action and reaction? One might be the erosion of our favorite distinction between fantasy and reality. The best fantasists, as we know from introspection or from *Emma*, work in starkly realistic terms, staying in the drawing-room, using the minutiae of everyday dress and dialogue. Another consequence would be an increased attentiveness to the combination of reminiscence and anticipation, interpenetrating each other and complicating the temporal relations of beginning, middle, and end as they do indeed in our play of consciousness, which is more like the loose-leaf novel than the Aristotelian progress. Another consequence would be the recognition that while twentieth-century interior monologues are more realistic in form than their Victorian predecessors, earlier novelists represent or symbolize the inner narrative in indirect and less mimetically accurate modes. Joyce and Proust and Beckett use the stream of consciousness in ways which force us to acknowledge the continuities of narrative I have spoken of, but eighteenth and nineteenth-century novelists use the multiple plot, the shifting point of view, the combined impersonal and personal narrative, the person-centered third-person novel, and so on, to represent the same confused and complex fluency of recording. Such earlier novels mime the sheer variety of mental narration, often most explicitly.

Out of many such interests, I take the self-conscious representation of narrative as a starting-point. Art-forms frequently and unsurprisingly discuss and explore the subject of their own mode. Narratives and dramas are often *about* making up stories and playing roles. The novel is introverted in this sense, not because novels tend to be about novels, but because they tend to be about the larger narrative structure of consciousness, and the value and dangers involved in narrative modes of invention, dream, causal projection, and so on. Sterne shows this introversion in a highly literary way, and his play, like most, is based on certainties, or at all events starts off from theories which are locally or temporarily entertained as exploratory hypotheses. When in *Tristram Shandy* he plays with the complexities of authorial voice, generality, omniscience, completion, chronological order, and biography, he reveals the complexities of such conventions by exaggeration, distortion, suspension, and isolation. Our attention is engaged with such narrative means in a play which temporarily and wittily presents them as ends. In order to perform such virtuoso acts of distortion and separation Sterne has had to identify, judge, and analyze as persistently and closely as any Hypercritic. Narrative—analyzed and judged in the chronological displacements—is revealed as a coherence and a solicitation of curiosity, a movement towards completion. The very incoherence, the tantalizing, and the incompleteness unbare characteristics of narrative and also mime the complexity of the process in the primary act of consciousness. Tristram is both a novelist and an informal presenter, his medium close to the medium of interior monologue. He “unrealistically” interrupts his story over

and over again, refuses to let us read straight through, frustrates and plays with our desire to learn, know, keep to the point, and come to a conclusion. The form is only unrealistic or artificial when contrasted with other narratives; set beside the multiplicity and complexity of psychic narration it is close to life. Unrealistic, rather, is the story that has its say for good long stretches, the story that is isolated, the story that gets finished. One characteristic of most novels is the sheer number of narratives they contain, and *Tristram Shandy's* many anecdotes, stories, tall tales, travelogues, and so forth are small and artificial conventional stories that draw attention to the fidelity of the main wayward stream.

Beckett is perhaps the novelist closest to Sterne in his marvelous combination of anecdote with discontinuous, self-defeating story. Joyce seems to me to mime the life-narrative much less well, and to impose too great a control on fluency and incompleteness, though I know this is open to argument. But all three provide us with lucid criticism of narrative as well as with great narratives. They have analyzed well enough to play. Less realistic novelists, like the Victorians, seem to be caught between the assured conventionality of an earlier age of fiction and the assured brave dislocations of the next. They too are sufficiently in touch with the forms of narrative in consciousness, using them implicitly and analyzing them explicitly, to be worth a look in this context. Fielding and Sterne, in their individual ways, contrast the neatness of artistic narrative with the flux and fits and starts, the untidiness and incompleteness of inner action. The Brontës, Thackeray, early Dickens, George Eliot, and even Henry James, tend to divide action evenly between many stories, and to avoid an encapsulated model of artificial narrative like Sterne's anecdotes or the comic epic or the inset story. Their interest in narrative tends to show itself in discussion. But there may be less obvious connections between their narrative forms and narrative acts of mind. Charlotte and Emily Brontë sometimes drive a lyric wedge between the narrative parts of their novels, and their use of different narrators or points of view shows some reflection of the tension between dream and actual vision, between wishing or praying, and accepting events. The socially directed novels of Thackeray, Mrs. Gaskell, and Dickens show an insistence on the connections and collisions between separate stories, though this is sometimes blurred by the Providential pattern. George Eliot and Henry James, for all their differences in intensity, can combine a deep central core of complex inner narrative—Dorothea's or Rowland Mallett's—with a briefer treatment of another opposing or antagonistic story. James of course differs from all the others I have mentioned in the way he centers the narrative on one register of consciousness while avoiding a first-person novel. Charlotte Brontë and Dickens are especially attached to narrative based on memory; George Eliot and Henry James to the reports of immediate apprehension. Taking in the present might be said to be the basic stance in their major novels. But all the novelists I have mentioned not only reflect narrative forms but also discuss them.

James likes to show the working of sensibility and intelligence in the present happening, but as he so often centers the interest in a spectator, he can show and

exploit a slight but subtle and important gap between happening and interpretation: the narrative contains a narrative of what happens counterpointed on a narrative of what seems to be happening, or what the spectator tells himself is happening. The gap is also present but on an enormous scale and with vast irony in *Tom Jones* and *Wuthering Heights*. One of James's great achievements is to narrow the gap so that many readers never see it at all, and all readers have to work uncomfortably hard to see it. One of his major themes is the relation between what happened and what was reported, expected, believed, dreamed, and falsified. The self-contemplating narrative of fiction is nowhere subtler and more explicit than in *The Ambassadors*.

Let us begin with the *locus classicus*, Strether by the river:

What he saw was exactly the right thing—a boat advancing round the bend and containing a man who held the paddles and a lady, at the stern, with a pink parasol. It was suddenly as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day, and had now drifted into sight, with the slow current, on purpose to fill up the measure. They came down slowly, floating down, evidently directed to the landing-place near their spectator and presenting themselves to him not less clearly as the two persons for whom his hostess was already preparing a meal. For two very happy persons he found himself straightway taking them—a young man in shirt-sleeves, a young woman easy and fair, who had pulled pleasantly up from some other place, and being acquainted with the neighborhood, had known what this particular retreat could offer them. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent—that this wouldn't at all events be the first time.

David Lodge, in *Language of Fiction*, quotes Wittgenstein's saying, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." Mediated through the limits of James's language are the limits of his narrative, but he is explicitly aware of such limitations, and they form at least a major part of his subject. Our narratives are of course limited by our sensibility, inhibitions, language, history, intelligence, inclinations to wish, hope, believe, dream. *The Ambassadors*, like most great novels, is concerned with the powers and limitations of narrative, and so Strether is shown here, as elsewhere, as seeing and telling. He has been seeing these same characters and telling himself stories about them for a long time, and here he is, seeing them for the first time with the truly alienated vision of the stranger. He is therefore made to show his sensibilities as narrator. We are about to see—not for the last time, indeed, in this novel that goes on moving—a climactic collision between what he wants to tell and what he has to see. We see his impulse to order and his impulse to praise, first in the pure form of a vision of people who mean nothing to him. The imagery is pictorial and even impressionistic, deriving as it does from the generalized imagery of painters, painting, and aesthetic vision, and from the localized context of the remembered unbought Lambinet. But this is the

kind of picture the impressionists did not paint, the kind that tells a story. James, like Lawrence, seems often to write about artists so that he may and yet need not be writing about novelists. Here the implications, for all the trembling visual delicacy and radiance, are plainly narrative. The figures are "as if" wanted in the picture but they come to break down the picture's static composition, do not stay, like figures cut through by the frame, on the edge of the impressionist landscape. They continue to move, to come nearer and loom larger, they cease to be compositionally appropriate to the picture and become people. The stories Strether tells are elegant configurations, and who should know more than Strether's creator about the special temptations of aesthetic arrangement in narrative? But Strether is also moved to tell stories out of curiosity: he does not know enough, he is kept guessing, there are secrets and mysteries. He is lied to by Little Bilham and left by Maria Gostrey, who runs away rather than lie or stop telling the story. Maria says at the end that Strether has been vague. He has also, of course, been benevolent. He is more like a Dickens than a James, trying to see the best in people, wanting his characters to be moral as well as dashing. James's method is to show the special bent of Strether's vague and curious benevolence almost unobtrusively set in a routine process of consciousness. What is there in this passage that is colored by the viewpoint of Strether and his storytelling? He straightway takes the couple for "very happy persons" on the pretty slight evidence of their dress, their youth, the day, the boating, and nothing else. He sees them as having pulled "pleasantly" from somewhere else. But much of what he says and thinks is rightly inferred from what is before him. Strether is not a narrator like Emma, who projects her wishful fantasies and interpretations on to highly intransigent materials. Strether needs more malleable stuff to work in. Just as Jane Austen tells us, as well as shows us, that Emma is an imaginist, so James gives us many explicit clues, long after we might have ceased to need them. Here he tells us that Strether's inventiveness is active: "the air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations." The scene is of course created for a narrator by a narrator and the last stroke of irony is that the air was indeed quite right to thicken.

Strether is not the only narrator, only the chief one. Most novels concerned with the nature of narrative—that is, most novels—create tensions between narrators. In *To the Lighthouse* we have Mr. Ramsay, the realist who will not use fantasy and lies even to comfort a child, and Mrs. Ramsay, who will, but who also tells James the terrible fairy-story of *The Fisherman's Wife*, thus making it clear that she is no mere sentimental protector of the child. In *The Mill on the Floss* we have the narrow moralizing realism of Tom Tulliver, the narrow, powerful fantasy of Stephen's desire, and the strengths and weaknesses of dream, moral scheme, and emotional continuity, in Maggie. In *The Ambassadors* Strether's benevolently colored vagueness is contrasted with Marie's truth-telling, Little Bilham's kind lies, and Chad's dazzling evasions and omissions, which show him a master of the kind of narrative that will make him succeed in advertising. We also have within single characters the attempt to attend to what really happens and the desire to change by the pressure of wish and faith. This often takes the most subtle form of the benevo-

lent story: Strether, Isabel Archer and Dorothea Brooke do not move from selfish fantasies towards life as it really is but from self-abnegatory fantasies towards a different story. There is a conflict between the story they tell themselves—about marrying Casaubon, helping society, marrying Gilbert Osmond, not marrying Lord Warburton, living hard no matter how, and so forth—and the harder, more realistic story their author has written for them. Yet in a sense the story these heroic characters try to live does shape their lives too. The ironies are blurred and complex. Dreams are productive when they lead to productive conflicts. Stories need not be just lies.

But there are novelists who show a larger discrepancy between the inner narrative and the novel. Gissing and Hardy write about characters very like the heroic figures in James and George Eliot—but characters who do not succeed in making their fantasy in any sense productive, who indeed fail most bitterly by the imaginative energy involved in telling the story of life as they wish to lead it. Tess is a passive instance, involved and manipulated by her family's narrative, in all its socially significant and pathetic crudeness, rather than by her own energies. Jude is the classical instance of failure of imagination, since the tale he tells himself can have no substance and would have been better untold. Gissing's heroes are often like Hardy's. In *Born in Exile* the hero creates an enterprising narrative and role, explicitly and intelligently attempting to give society what it wants in order to take what he wants. Gissing shows the social impulse to lie, in the extreme inventiveness of the man who is essentially a novelist's creation, who researches for his lie, dresses for it, moves into the right environment, and acts it out, right to the point of collapse. He shows here, as in *New Grub Street*, the failure to impose and sustain a certain kind of story, though in *Born in Exile* the breakdown is weak, coming out of accidental, though probable, discovery, rather than out of socially and psychologically expressive action. Gissing diverts the interest and misses a fine opportunity, failing to finish his story properly, like his hero. Indeed, the two failures may be related. Gissing may fail because he cannot carry through a story about a man who lives a lie—or rather, about a man of such imagination and humanity. His novels are indeed full of more simplified minor characters, like some of the successful writers in *New Grub Street*, who lie successfully by finding the right formula and telling the right story to themselves and others in the right place at the right time and in the right style.

There are also novelists and novels who are more optimistic about the stories people tell, who show the productiveness of fantasy. In Joyce and Beckett we see the healing power or the sheer survival of mythmaking, of telling stories about past and future and identity, even in the face of a dislocation of time and identity. The nostalgias and unrealities and comfort of the dream of youth, love, and past happiness, for instance, are set against Molly Bloom's sexually obsessed repetitions—another narrative novelists did not invent—and against the harshness of infidelity and impotence and the grander nostalgias of the *Odyssey*. In Beckett the human beings tell stories in the least promising circumstances, in the mud, dragging the sacks, jabbed and jabbing: they tell the incoherent story of life as they feel its

pressures, with the odd sweet flash of what seems to be memory. The novels of Beckett are about the incorrigibility of narrative, and indeed the pessimistic novelist who wrote a story in which narrative as an act of mind had collapsed would clearly be telling lies about the relation of his own creativity to his own pessimism. Novelists are expected to show the story going on. But in Beckett the productiveness of story, joke, memory, or dream is rudimentary, spasmodic, often absurd. Narrative survives, no more.

There are novelists who are less clearly in command of the relation between the storytelling of their characters and the novel in which the stories are told and discussed. Jane Austen creates novels in which characters learn to imagine scrupulously, and feel correctly, in response to the sense of probability. Her novels might be said to describe the difference between writing a Gothic novel and a novel by Jane Austen, to reveal the assimilation of so much parody and criticism of the wrong kind of story. But Mrs. Gaskell, Dickens, and George Eliot write novels which set out to show a similar process of learning how to dispense with fantasy but which in the end succumb to fantasy after all. And here too, as in Gissing, is a kind of understandable inconsistency: they are attempting what they know, even if they fail.

In *North and South* we have a *Bildungsroman* in which Margaret Hale tells herself a story, a fable about North and South. The novel tests, corrects, and dispels this story and others. The narrative is full of supporting cases, not just of blatant and apparently deliberate instances of differences between North and South, but of people telling stories. Bessy Higgins tells the common story of Heaven, which her father sees as the sustaining fantasy she needs. Mr. Hale tells himself a story about leading a new life in the North. Mrs. Thornton tells a story about North and South too, and a more interesting and personally-colored story about her son and the marriage he may make. Margaret also tells other stories. One is about saving her brother's reputation and bringing about a family reunion. Whenever character comes up against character there is an immediate narrative reaction, and the marked social and regional contrast encourages social fable, though the significant narratives that are tried and dispelled are moral and psychological. Mrs. Gaskell is often said to be a rather mechanical and sensational plot-maker, but I have been struck by the way the heavily plotted parts of this novel (almost like sensation-novels in capsule form) eventually have the effect of showing up the falsity and sensationalism of the stories the characters tell. The story about Margaret's brother brings out not only her fantasy of rescue and reunion but also the lie that she has told herself about her own moral principles and the lie that Thornton has told himself about her moral nature. Mrs. Gaskell was clearly interested in the way we tell high moral tales about ourselves and each other. This novel takes us and the characters through the complex process of adjusting and rejecting untrue and unreal stories.

Yet it ends with the reconciliation of Margaret and Thornton which subsidizes his new liberalized attitudes and activities, with the fabulous story of the financial

failure and the legacy. The novel which criticizes sensational narrative ends with the plotting of the sensation novel, and we run up against a concluding fable after all, one which resembles the stories that have been tested and found wanting, in its falsity and its ready usability.

Such a self-division is not a weakness peculiar to Mrs. Gaskell. We find it in Dickens and George Eliot too. They write novels about growing away from the romantic daydream into a realistic acceptance, but most of their novels—except perhaps *Middlemarch*—end with the dream-conclusion and wish-fulfillment. *David Copperfield* tells the story of a novelist who learns to discipline his heart, and though there is an interesting lack of connection between his development as a novelist and his development as a man, he certainly thinks he learns to stop dreaming by hearing other people's stories and finding the traps and dangers of his own. This is to express the course of the novel too simply and lucidly. The brilliant parodies of calf-love are anticipations, both literary and psychological, of David's blindness, and we follow him into the "real" world. Unfortunately, neither the Wordsworthian imitation of natural sublimities in Switzerland nor the saintly and rocklike qualities of Agnes act convincingly to clear the heady air, and the final harmony of financial, professional, moral, and domestic successes seems more dreamlike and unreal than anything that has gone before. Not only do we move towards a concluding dream after criticizing the dangers of dreaming, but we move further and further away from the real world, while more and more is salvaged by plot and idealized invocation. *David Copperfield* is Dickens's most divided novel, I believe, but a similar self-destructiveness and contradiction exists in most of his other books.

Dickens's attempt to criticize fantasy may often fail because of his personal dependence on sexual fantasy, and because he seems to have been caught between a fairly common Victorian antagonism between faith in the individual and despair about society. Almost the reverse might be said of George Eliot, but she too illustrates the attempt to supplant fantasy by realism, and an interestingly uncontrolled reversion to fantasy. As in Dickens, her characters tell stories to each other, to themselves, try to impose the stories, try to live by them, try to "escape or escape to." She puts an enormous energy of imagination and intelligence into a critical analysis of the stories we tell about life. There is no doubt about the life-enhancing realism she sees as her end: it is unfantastic and realistic. She speaks of gradually losing poetry and accepting prose, and all her novels explore the moral consequences of sterile dreaming and productive realism. She shows the interpenetration of many narrative modes that do not come into earlier English novels: the social myth, the literary fantasy, the sustained and culture-fed fantasy, the imaginative fantasy (Maggie's), the ethically noble fantasy (Dorothea's), and the feeble but still potent fantasy (Hetty's), and the tempting nightmare (Gwendolen's). As an analyst of narrative she stands with Stendhal and Flaubert. But in one novel she too succumbs as Mrs. Gaskell and Dickens succumb.

I neither want nor need to follow Maggie Tulliver's story through in order to

bring out the clash between analysis and *dénouement*. We follow Maggie's progress through the dreamworld of a child's fantasy-life, responding to varied deprivations, sufficiently individualized and sufficiently common. We follow her through the solicitations and failure of the fantasies of literature, myth, music, religion, and sexual desire. George Eliot not only analyzes the individual qualities of the different stories Maggie listens to and tells herself, she most subtly shows their mutual influence, correction, tension, and interpenetration. Maggie's fantasies are not knocked down like ninepins, but leave their traces even when they have been explicitly discarded: we see her giving up the nourishing fantasies of wishfulfilling childish story, Romantic poetry and Scott, and Thomas à Kempis, but eventually each is shown to be a remaining influence, both for good and evil. But at the end, after such a searching and scrupulous analysis, and after taking her heroine into a solitude few Victorian fictional characters ever know, she too falls back into fantasy: the answer to prayer, the healing flood, the return to the past, forgiveness, the brother's embrace, and—most subtle illusion—forgiveness and understanding newborn in Tom's eyes. The novel refuses the prose realities, and saves its heroine from the pains of fresh starts and conflicts by invoking the very narrative consolation it has been concerned to analyze and deny.

Are such failures Victorian weaknesses? The proximity of Providence? We might perhaps look again at Proust, Forster, Virginia Woolf, and even Joyce, and find something like the narrative solution which retreats into fantasy. How often do we as students of politics, self, or literature, make the move from realism back to fantasy again, and translate the despair and pain as stoicism, the madness as aesthetic eloquence, the disorder as a new order? It is hard to stop telling stories.