

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 212 pp. \$US 25.00 hardcover (978-0-226-26013-6)

Letting *Stories Breathe* explores how sociologists might account for stories as resources that “connect people into collectivities and coordinate actions among people who share the expectation that life will unfold according to certain plots.” Illustrating the importance of both the content and the effects of stories, Frank offers a compelling sketch of socio-narratology and its methodological complement, dialogical narrative analysis. Critical of approaches that conceptualize method as a nonnegotiable series of steps ensuring the production of “legitimate” research findings, Frank orients dialogical narrative analysis as a set of questions that encourage “movement of thought” rather than prescriptive rule-following. This, coupled with Frank’s ability to tell the story of storytelling in a manner that puts socio-narratology into practice makes *Letting Stories Breathe* an important book for those keen to extend the promise of narrative inquiry.

Premised on the assertion that stories open and foreclose ways of thinking and being, *Letting Stories Breathe* extends the literary study of narratology to include the storied quality of everyday life. The central question that Frank seeks to answer is: what distinguishes stories from other forms of narrative? For Frank, it is the capacity of stories to act that sets them apart. Arguing that we must learn to live in greater companionship with stories, Frank theorizes stories as material semiotic companions. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s conceptualization of companion species, Frank’s socio-narratology recognizes that people and stories evolve alongside and shape one another, and that stories always unfold in relationship with tellers and listeners. Accounting for stories as material semiotic companions challenges mimetic understandings of narrative and demonstrates that stories are embodied. Frank writes,

whether the story tells what has happened or imagines some happening, the body of the storyteller must create the body of the story so that experience can be — or more accurately, so that a human body’s experience can be — materialized in the body of the story.

The embodiment of stories as material semiotic companions reveals not only that people think about stories, but also that we think with stories. Thinking with stories relies on the use of tacit knowledge and makes some social phenomena visible while masking others. This recognition is a key contribution of Frank's socio-narratology to larger bodies of literature on narrative. Frank suggests that stories come to shape our lives through the process of interpellation and the development of narrative habitus. The application of Louis Althusser's interpellation and Pierre Bourdieu's habitus to narrative analysis opens space for sociologists to explore the relationship between the content of stories and their potential consequences. Frank argues that stories call upon their characters to become particular selves and call upon listeners to see themselves in particular characters. Responding to this call over time results in narrative habitus. Narrative habitus demonstrates that our ability to draw on narrative resources is often tied to social location. The stories that we come to embody and the dispositions that we hold allow us to draw on a repertoire of stories, display competence in telling and responding to stories, and lead us to predict how stories will end. As socio-narratology's methodological complement, dialogical analysis works to uncover and understand story in these and other capacities.

As a series of questions, dialogical analysis attends not only to the aspects of story that narrative analysis is often keen to celebrate, but also to its sinister thematics and consequences. Frank reminds us that stories reflect and generate fear and desire, permit us to remember and create individual and collective histories, and amplify some voices while silencing others. Asking what experiences and possibilities stories make narratable is crucial to mapping their limits and transformative capacities. The questions advanced by dialogical analysis allow us to trace how stories "instigate and articulate," and to better understand "what is at stake for whom." Cautioning against the use and understanding of interpretation as final, dialogical analysis encourages us to enter into ongoing dialogue with stories. Doing so reveals that stories are performative rather than mimetic, and that stories make truths narratable. Interpreting stories in this manner demands that we ask how stories call upon us to see things differently "based on an ethical will to understand what is not immediately accessible to the self but matters crucially to others." This ethical openness holds great transformational promise and comes with great responsibility. It is our responsibility as researchers tasked with telling the story of stories to remember that "no one — especially the researcher — ever has 'the whole story,' whether the story is told around a campfire, or in an interview, or in a published book." Instead, in both theory and practice, socio-narratology calls upon us to participate "in the

ongoing work of reassembling what will never be a whole story.” Armed with Frank’s considerable contribution to the field, we are well prepared to heed this call.

Frank’s book offers an entry from which we can begin to craft narrative analyses that do work in their own right: let stories breathe. Inviting us to explore the storied complexity of everyday life, *Letting Stories Breathe* rigorously outlines not only how sociologists might best approach stories, but also why we must: “human praxis consists in making our world, and stories are both what is made and a means of making.” Required reading for anyone who likes a good, and maybe even a dangerous, story.

University of Victoria

Jessica Miles

Jessica Miles is a Ph.D candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. Review articles and creative non-fiction have appeared in *The Canadian Review of Sociology* and *CuiZine: The Journal of Canadian Food Cultures*.

jmiles@uvic.ca