

---

## Volume 11 Issue 1 – 2017

---

### Book Review

**Korthals Altes, Liesbeth - *Ethos And Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation Of Values in Fiction*, University of Nebraska Press, London and Lincoln, 2014  
ISBN: 978 0 80324836 6 (hc)**

Reviewed by Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar - Avans University of Applied Sciences

---

On 18 June 2016, during the annual conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative, Liesbeth Korthals Altes was awarded the Barbara Perkins and George Perkins Prize for the best book on narrative for her publication *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* (2014, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press). The book has, indeed, much to offer and can be read as an enticing research guide for future endeavours in the study of narrative.

For many from within the field of narratology (i.e. the study of narrative), the most striking aspect of the book will be how it boldly sets out to argue that that field 'cannot and should not avoid interpretation' (50). To some, the very notion will be offensive: for them, narratology is first and foremost 'the science of storytelling', and a science does not and should not engage with anything as subjective as interpretation. Korthals Altes, however, takes issue with narratology's claims of scientific objectivity, often repeated within the field, from its structuralist beginnings to current cognitive approaches to the study of narrative.

In order to do so, a large part of the book is taken up by an incredibly thorough discussion of the history of narratology – which is, as becomes clear from Korthals Altes's discussion of it, 'a history of hybridity, always oscillating between developing general models of narrative and proposing tools and justification paths for interpretations' (91). The author points out that there is a general tendency among those who feel that narratology's main task to develop general models of narrative in order to scoff at those who instead see narratology as a 'toolkit' for analysing and interpreting stories. (By extension, one might add, it is also seen as a toolkit for actually creating better stories – but such an endeavour into what could be called *applied* narratology, i.e. using the insights of the academic study of narrative to help improve practices of storytelling, seems to be frowned upon even more, with very few scholars of narrative engaging in translating insights from their field into practical methodologies – interestingly enough, Korthals Altes' book does provide a few hints for such endeavours, for instance when she discusses the relevance of her insights for education.) Such scoffing, however, is exposed here as stemming from a lack of self-insight. Both structuralism and cognitive approaches seem to protest too much, according to the author, when claiming to 'ally narratology with the aims, rules and methods of scientific inquiry' and suggesting that this can only be down by dispatching interpretation and hermeneutics' (94).

However, as Korthals Altes convincingly argues, even such more 'scientific' approaches to the

study of narrative are, in the end, attempts 'to understand the elementary process of meaning making' and as such, deeply engaged with interpretations – both as something which they facilitate by providing the tools for it, and as an object of study. Although the author never phrases it explicitly, this makes any inquiry into narrative, its nature and its uses, a subfield of hermeneutics, whether it presents itself as scientific or scholarly. There is a difference, however, between attempting to understand the meaning of a specific narrative, and to understand how meaning making itself takes place. Korthals Altes calls this latter form of hermeneutics a 'metahermeneutics' – and that is then what narratological research in its more fundamental form becomes.

As metahermeneutics, fundamental research on narratives – including the development of general models of narrative – needs to integrate an understanding of how narrative makes meaning making happen. Within that general metahermeneutical project, Korthals Altes's own main interest lies with what she calls the negotiation of values through narrative. By this she does not only mean the ways in which stories deal with and represent ethical issues: the interpretation of these stories by actual readers is such an ethical negotiation as well. Metahermeneutics may therefore facilitate meta-ethics as well: an analysis of the process in which narratives are given ethical value by those who interpret them.

In order to fulfil this metahermeneutical and metaethical task, narratology needs to move beyond its dogged tendency to focus exclusively on the textual features of narratives, thus neglecting to take into account the conventions through which these features are invested with narrative functionality and meaning. Korthals Altes not only presents her readers with a persuasive plea to restore interpretation as a core preoccupation of narratology, she also claims this cannot be done without considering those who produce and consume narratives: readers and writers. Readers do not give meaning to texts by merely interpreting their textual features, but will both interpret these features as traces of an author's ethos and use additional information, first and foremost knowledge of the author and what kind of values he or she supposedly stands for, to come to an interpretation of the narrative.

Thus, Korthals Altes's book is not only a critical evaluation of the current state of narratology, it also offers the study of narrative a new approach that is in many ways a coming together of its different post-structural strands (integrating elements from approaches such as rhetorical narratology, cognitive approaches and classic philological hermeneutics, as well as sociological and reader-oriented approaches to the study of literature). This makes the book both thought-provoking for long-time narratologists and a great starting point for those new to the study of narrative – an admittedly slightly inaccessible one at times for real newcomers, because of the author's dense style, but those who persevere will be rewarded by the very richness from which this density seems to stem.

My only substantial criticism of this book would be its almost complete neglect of actual readers, more so because this is not an oversight on the part of the author who, in her preface, expresses the hope that others will 'feel inspired to undertake the testing of the proposed hypothesis'. That seems a bit too little in a book that foregrounds the role of the reader as much as this one does. There is much attention to reading activities: that of the author herself, of hypothetical readers and of reception documents such as literary reviews. However, one feels that the book would have gained from interdisciplinary collaboration with, as the author phrases it, scholars 'better equipped [...] for empirical research' (xiv), especially since the amount of untested hypothesis on the functioning of literature for actual readers already vastly outweigh the tested ones within the study of literature and narrative. This is certainly remedied up to a point by the author's lucid analyses of reading strategies by literary critics, such as her engaging discussion of how two snooty French critics interpreted Michel Houellebecq and his work in two completely opposing ways – as genius and as fraud – as well as the 'well argued (meta)hermeneutic reconstruction[s]' of the ways in which readers negotiate values in their act of reading. However, as the author herself admits, this is only a substitute for 'empirical research on different kinds of readers' and more is needed than that (105).

The book's almost complete focus on literary fiction is more of a justified choice than a

shortcoming. Historically, narratology has been preoccupied with literature and it is really up to others to find the relevance of these findings, for instance, for journalistic narratives. It is clear, however, that Korthals Altes's keen eye for how the posture of an author, and the ways in which texts relate to their social and ethical contexts frame narrative interpretation, has much to offer for those interested in how other types of narrative become meaningful. Narrative and storytelling are receiving a lot of attention nowadays, having become preferred forms of communication from journalism via marketing to politics. This is less true for our understanding of how narrative communication is interpreted and this, as the author points out, is problematic.

Much has been made of the fact that in our contemporary mediated society we need to train people in media savviness – the ability to understand how media are used to persuade and manipulate. Similarly, in a culture in which we are bombarded with storytelling, often meant to persuade us to buy particular products, to take particular ethical stances, and to vote for particular politicians, there is an equal need for what one could call narrative savviness. Korthals Altes's book shows how narrative fiction and literature, as catalysts of interpretative activity, can be training grounds for our capacity to interpret in such a narrative savvy way, to read stories intelligently and the possibility of a resistance to narrative. As such, it has much to offer, not only to those who want to analyse how narrative fictions and their readings function, but also to those interested in the negotiation of values through narrative in our story-saturated societies at large.

### **About the reviewer**

Dr. Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar works for the Learning and Innovation Centre of Avans University of Applied Sciences. His research focuses on applied narratology and aims to use insights from the academic study of narrative to analyse the role of storytelling and life writing in society and to develop narrative methods for improving professional storytelling practices. Recent publications on this topic include *Not Ever Absent. Storytelling in Arts, Culture and Identity Formation* (co-edited with Nicole K. Miller, 2015) and *Stories of Becoming: The Use of Storytelling in Education, Counselling and Research* (co-edited with Lynn Wood, 2017). Contact via [sjmoenandar.blogspot.com](mailto:sjmoenandar.blogspot.com) .