

Econarrative: ethics, ecology and the search for new narratives to live by.

Chapter 1 (Accepted Version)

1. Introduction

Robin Wall Kimmerer starts her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* at the beginning, with a Haudenosaunee story about the creation of the Earth. In this Native American narrative, Skywoman falls from the Skyworld into the embrace of geese, who lower her gently onto the back of a turtle. At great personal sacrifice, other animals dive to the ocean floor to find her a speck of mud. From that point:

The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals' gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home. (Kimmerer 2013, p. 4)

The recounting of this creation tale signals that Kimmerer's book will convey a different perspective from the dominant stories of industrial civilisation. The Earth is not just passively created by an external power but comes about through the cooperation and effort of different kinds of beings. Other species are not just resources passively awaiting exploitation by humans but have lives and interests of their own. And the relationship with other species is one of gratitude rather than domination or ownership.

Of course, it would be possible to describe in plain language how anthropocentric ideologies of domination, ownership and exploitation of nature have placed industrial civilisation on a path towards ecological collapse and how it is now necessary to move towards an attitude of gratitude towards all those species whose interaction holds together the ecosystems that life depends on. But Skywoman dancing on the back of a turtle, weaving the Earth itself from gratitude towards the actions of animals, is concise, vivid, evocative and memorable. This is the power of econarrative.

<Image 1.1: Image 1.1: Detail of Sky Woman, Ernest Smith, 1936>

Narrative is not just something that is spoken or read, it is how we understand the world, or rather 'our world'. Our world, in this sense, is our locus of concern, embracing our family, friends, our local environment, other people and places that are salient to us in some way, and stretching into the past as far back as is relevant for us, and as far into the future as we have the imagination to care about. The universe itself is 14 billion years old and 93 billion light-years wide, so from this perspective our sphere of concern is tiny. But from the perspective of our minds, our world is enormous, with unlimited numbers of beings and objects interacting in such a complex state of flux that it would be impossible to grasp it in its fullness. It is therefore natural and, indeed, essential that we simplify our world into

straightforward structures that we can grasp – structures that are simple enough to use in our reasoning patterns as a basis for decisions.

Narrative is, therefore, a means of structuring the world, of ordering the complex flux of the world into a sequence of logically connected events involving a cast of characters and a location. As Dahlstrom (2014, p. 13615) points out, narratives offer benefits in ‘motivation and interest, allocating cognitive resources, elaboration, and transfer into long-term memory. As such, narrative cognition is thought to represent the default mode of human thought, providing structure to reality’. While narratives have benefits for cognition, indeed they are the basis for cognition, they are also necessarily partial, and important details can be left out. Mackenzie (2022) provides an example of this concerning the coronavirus pandemic:

All big experiences in our lives have two realities. There is what really happened. And there is the narrative, the story we tell ourselves and each other about what happened ... We must see through yet another misleading story: an “outbreak narrative” that portrays pandemics as primarily a sudden and unexpected battle between microbe and hero scientists seeking the cure. This cuts out the long backstory of deforestation, wildlife trade or risky farming that makes it more likely germs will jump from animals to us in the first place.

MacKenzie here is assuming a real world beyond words, and a simplified version of that reality in narrative. However, narrative does more than just represent a pre-existing reality in more or less accurate ways. It is also a force which creates worlds. As Halliday (2001, p. 197) describes, ‘language does not passively reflect reality, but actively creates reality’. This is most evident in fiction, where an unlimited number of possible storyworlds are brought into being (Bell and Ryan 2019), but many aspects of the everyday world around us can also be seen as having been brought into being through narrative and other kinds of story. What is money, a university degree, a marriage, a monarch, a government, a country, or a corporation other than a story we tell ourselves about how the world is? The Tewa author and scholar Gregory Cajete calls this ‘the creative “storying” of the world by humans’ (in Smyth 2022). McGilchrist (2021) usefully talks about ‘the world we know’, which he says ‘cannot be wholly mind-independent, and it cannot be wholly mind-dependent’. The world we know arises from a complex interaction of sensory experience with the world ‘out there’ and narrative constructions.

Narratives exist deep in our minds where they can influence how we think, talk and act. While these structures themselves are cognitive (Herman 2000, 2003), they can arise from and are spread by language and images in the form of oral stories, novels, films, newspapers, advertisements, histories, myths, letters, anecdotes, jokes and many other forms (Cohan and Shires 1988, p. 53). Despite their strong influence on how we and others in the society around us view the world, we often fail to notice the key narratives and stories that surround us in our culture. Through routine repetition they become commonplace and seen as just the ‘way things are’ rather than just as one particular possible way of structuring the world among other ways. Sometimes, though, we come across a narrative in a speech, film, or novel which challenges the conventional stories in the society around us and opens up intriguing new possibilities to rethink ourselves and the world.

This is a book about econarratives, which are narratives that involve not only humans but also other species and the physical environment in interaction with each other. At this time in history, when human activity is destroying the ecosystems that life depends on, we need econarratives that can help us rethink the basis of our culture, society, and economic systems and our relationships with other species and the physical environment. In fact, we need econarratives to help us rethink *all* aspects of life. As Naomi Klein declares as the title of her book about climate change: *This Changes Everything* (Klein 2014).

Narrative

Narrative could be given a fairly straightforward definition along the lines of ‘an account of events, sequenced over time and space’ (Reinsborough and Canning 2017, p. 122). However, like most linguistic terms, the more narratives are probed, the more complex they reveal themselves to be. We can begin to examine the deeper levels of narrative by asking not just ‘what are narratives?’ but ‘*where* are narratives?’. Given our simple starting definition, they can be seen in books, oral stories, conversations, plays, films, TV programs and other texts. But we can readily observe multiple texts which have the same (or very similar) underlying structure. Take for example, the Genesis creation narrative where the same underlying story of God creating the world in six days appears in countless translations and versions of the Bible as well as plays, films and picture books.

It therefore becomes necessary to separate the underlying structure of a narrative from the texts that this structure manifests itself in. In this book I call the underlying structures *narrative structures*, and the texts they manifest in the *narrative texts*. But where do narrative structures exist? One answer is in the minds of individuals who ‘know the story’. There are very few people who can remember the exact words of a particular text, but most people can produce a version of a familiar story through knowledge of its underlying structure. Indeed, it is the human ability to hear a narrative text, reduce it to its underlying structure, remember that structure, and then produce an approximate version of the original text which makes narrative such a powerful device for memory and cultural transmission. Narrative therefore, is something cognitive, in people’s minds: ‘a fundamental cognitive structuring process for the human mind to make meaning and relate with the world’ (Reinsborough and Canning 2017, p. 122). Different people will remember narrative structures somewhat differently – they may forget particular events and characters or add new ones in. However, a narrative structure can exist as an *aggregate* across the minds of multiple people across society, in what van Dijk (2009, p. 19) calls *social cognition*, rather than just in the minds of separate individuals. Narrative structures therefore also exist within particular cultures, shaping and defining those cultures.

Narrative structures come to the surface, are manifested, in particular narrative texts. For example, Kimmerer’s (2013, p. 4) rendering of *Skywoman Falling* is a self-contained text with a beginning (‘She fell like a maple seed ... ’), a sequence of events, and an ending (‘And now that the animals, too, had plenty to eat, many came to live with her on Turtle Island’). There are many other narrative texts which tell the ‘same story’ of *Skywoman Falling*, based on the same narrative structure but with variations in expression. The following are depictions of the same event in three different versions of *Skywoman Falling*:

- Two loons flying over the water saw her falling. They flew under her, close together, making a pillow for her to sit on. (Hamilton 1988, p. 59)
- The geese nodded at one another and rose together from the water in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath to break her fall. Far from the only home she'd ever known, she caught her breath at the warm embrace of soft feathers as they carried her downward. And so it began. (Kimmerer 2013, p. 4)
- Far below several loons were winging their way over the water and as they gazed up they saw a ball of light coming swiftly towards them from the Sky. "Oooh ... Oooh," they cried, linking their outspread wings to catch what they thought was a falling star. (North 2009, p. 14)

This illustrates the diverse ways that what is essentially the same event can be captured in different textual manifestations. In one, the birds are geese, in the other, loons. One is from the perspective of Skywoman who catches her breath; another is from the perspective of the birds who thought she was a falling star. These details add richness and specificity to the event of Skywoman being saved by the birds but without changing its fundamental nature.

It is important to point out that different theorists use terms such as 'narrative', 'text', 'structure', 'story', 'fabula' and 'syuzhet' in different ways. Mieke Bal (2017, p. 5), in her seminal introduction to narrative theory, uses the term 'fabula' ('a series of logically and chronically related events that are caused or experienced by actors') to refer to what I am calling 'narrative structure', and has an additional level of the 'story' which is the manifestation of the fabula in a narrative text. Abbott (2008, p. 16) uses 'story' to refer to the sequence of events and 'narrative discourse' to refer to how the story is conveyed. The disadvantage of using 'story' in a restrictive sense, however, is that it goes against the common use of the term, which can refer to a narrative structure ('know a story'), a narrative text ('read a story') or a more general worldview ('stories that society is based on'). I therefore use the terms 'narrative structure' and 'narrative text' to make it clear which of the two aspects I am referring to. I use 'narrative' to refer more generally to both the underlying structure and its manifestations, and 'story' in any of its conventional senses. Table 1.1 provides a list of terms used in the book, and Image 1.2 is a diagrammatic representation of these terms. I will discuss metanarratives later on in this introduction.

Narrative structure	A cognitive structure consisting of a sequence of logically connected events involving characters and locations.
Narrative text	A linguistic or visual text which describes a sequence of logically connected events involving characters and locations.
Narrative	A cognitive structure or text which involves a sequence of logically connected events involving characters and locations
Metanarrative	A general worldview that is held across the minds of multiple people within a culture as a cognitive structure and manifested in particular texts.
Story	A narrative or metanarrative.
Econarrative	A narrative that involves not only humans but also other species and the physical environment in interaction with each other.

Table 1.1: Narratology terms used in this book

<Image 1.2: A diagrammatic representation of narratology terms used in this book>

The construction of a narrative is partly about imposing a structure on the complex flux of pre-existing reality. Places, happenings, and beings are selected and turned into characters, locations, and a sequence of logically connected events. That is the structuring function of narrative. There is also the creative function, where new locations, characters and events are brought into being, with the end result being the creation of a new storyworld. All narratives, I would claim, combine structuring and creation to bring into being storyworlds that are based to differing extents on pre-existing reality.

There are clearly complex ontological and epistemological issues about the correspondence between narratives and what could be called 'objective reality'. For the purposes of this book, however, I will just note that fiction always draws from 'objective reality' and non-fiction always involves creative aspects. A fictional story of an environmental refugee draws to some extent from the reality of people forced to leave their devastated homes, and can influence how those who hear the story think about actual refugees. At the same time, a non-fiction documentary about refugees necessarily imposes a narrative on the 'objective reality' in its selection of particular characters and events to focus on, the particular ways it represents the characters (whether the refugee is shown stealing something or caring for a child), and the logical connections it imposes between events. Both are creating a 'storyworld' (James 2015), while drawing from the sensuous reality of the world beyond words to do so.

The characteristics of narrative

Narratives come in many forms, and any attempt to draw a firm line around what is or is not a narrative is doomed to failure. There will undoubtedly be an example within the line which does not really seem like a narrative, and something outside the line which actually does seem like one. A compromise is 'to regard narrative as a fuzzy set defined at the centre by a solid core of properties, but accepting various degrees of membership depending on which properties a candidate displays' (Ryan 2010, p. 345). Herman (2009, p. 15) proposes a series of characteristic properties of narrative and similarly describes them as a 'gradient (i.e., they operate by degrees)'. Toolan (2001, p. 4) likewise gives a set of 'typical characteristics of narratives', as does Abbott (2008, p. 25).

There are four main properties which can be drawn from these various lists to form a 'solid core of properties' that are particularly useful for studies of econarrative. The first is that narratives describe, construe or construct a 'version' of reality, which is not necessarily false, but is only one version among other possibilities. The second property is that narrative organises the complex flux of real or imaginary worlds into characters who participate in a sequence of logically connected events that occur over time in particular locations. The third property is that narrative represents events and experiences in vivid ways that allow readers or hearers to vicariously experience them for themselves (Herman 2009, p. 14). The final property is that there are certain messages, or *narrative entailments*, that readers can draw out of the narrative and, if they find they resonate with them, draw into their own lives. That is, narratives have a 'point' or several 'points' that they can potentially convey.

The first property of being one version among many holds for any kind of semiotic representation since all representation involves choices. Even the most factual of scientific

narratives must choose which events to focus on and which aspects of those events are selected as being worthy of being brought to the attention of readers. For example, there is a narrative, *From Big Bang to Civilisation*, which appears on the science education website *LiveScience* (Briggs 2013). This is a scientific narrative of the origins of the universe, starting with the big bang then describing a series of events which include: the birth of stars; the formation of the solar system; the beginning of life; the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction; the emergence of homo sapiens; and the advent of civilisation. There is nothing untrue about the narrative, but it covers a time period of 14 billion years and an area 93 billion light-years wide, so necessarily has to be selective. The narrative could have chosen any solar system to focus on but chose 'the' solar system, which is really 'our' solar system. It could have ended with the evolution of any species that currently exists in the world rather than humans. Or it could have ended with the mass extinction event that is currently underway rather than choosing to end with human civilisation.

The second property is that a *prototypical* narrative has characters, multiple events, a temporal sequence, logical connections and a location. In some cases, there may be something missing (perhaps there is only one event, or perhaps the location is unspecified), but even so we may want to treat them as narrative since they have so much in common with other narratives. The third property, too, is a matter of degree – some narratives will create rich and vivid descriptions that enable the reader to feel that they are experiencing the events themselves, while others are more expository.

The fourth property, the conveying of narrative entailments, needs explanation. Many narratives, from fairy tales to anecdotes in speeches, are intended to convey particular messages to the audience – they have points that the reader is expected to take away with them and apply to their life. Sometimes the point is drawn out explicitly at the end of the narrative text. The fairy tale *The Hare and the Hedgehog* concludes by stating 'The moral of this story is ... that no one, no matter how great he may be, should permit himself to jest at anyone beneath him' (Grimm 2011, p. 764). Often, however, the entailment is implicit, with hints and clues about messages that readers should be taking away with them.

Readers may or may not draw out the intended entailments themselves, or they may draw out entailments that the author was not expecting them to. As an example, the story *Tom the Scout-Cub* by Enid Blyton (1968) concludes with an explicit entailment for the reader to take away with them: 'If a thing's worth doing at all, it's worth doing *well!*'. The protagonist, Tom, learned this directly through losing out on payments because he did not do his jobs thoroughly enough. For example, instead of cleaning out a chicken house he just put new straw on top of the dirty old straw, without realising that his payment was hidden in the old straw. In addition to the intended entailment about doing jobs well, a reader could draw out the presumably unintended entailment that the purpose of doing jobs well lies in financial rewards, rather than because doing them well can benefit the lives of others and doing them badly can harm others. The chickens, for example, could be harmed by dirty straw, and that provides an ethical reason for doing the job properly above financial gain. Texts which focus on extrinsic goals (self-serving goals like profit, fame or status) have been shown to erode 'our environmental concern, our long-term thinking, our civic motivation and even our wellbeing' (Blackmore and Holmes 2013, p. 13). So Blyton's story could be criticised on the basis of possible entailments a reader *could* draw out.

If readers draw out entailments then that does not mean that they automatically accept them and absorb them into their mindsets. Readers are critical and can reject

entailments that do not resonate. However, if a particular narrative is very common within a culture, then it could influence a large number of individuals and have an effect in aggregate on the culture as a whole. As Merchant (2014, p. 78) points out, 'imagery found in a culture's literature can play a normative role within the culture. Controlling images operate as ethical restraints or as ethical sanctions – as subtle "oughts" or "ought nots"'.

There are also many other properties of narrative that could be mentioned in addition to these four, including the following:

- Events are associated with mental states and structures such as emotions, goals and plans that give coherence to the narrative (Ryan 2010)
- Narratives have a trajectory, with development and a resolution or conclusion at the end (Toolan 2001, p. 4)
- Narratives have a narrator who conveys the narrative, which could be one of the characters, a background voice, or merely an implied teller (Toolan 2001, p. 5, Bal 2021, p. 24)
- Narratives are based around some form of disruption to a state of equilibrium (Herman 2009, p. 14)

Narratives will exhibit a mixture of these properties and the more properties they show, the more prototypical they are.

Metanarrative

In this book I use the term 'narrative' to refer to texts and cognitive structures that involve a sequence of logically and temporally connected events. However, the term is also widely used in a different sense, to mean a more general belief system or worldview that is shared widely by a group. It is commonplace to hear criticism of a 'dominant narrative' (in the sense of a widespread belief system) as being problematic in some sense. The two uses are not completely unrelated, however. Ryan (2010, p. 348) describes, for example, how the general idea of a 'narrative of white superiority' was derived from actual narratives in literature before becoming detached from them:

What happens here is that the label *narrative* has been metonymically transferred from the stories propagated by colonialist literature or party-controlled media to the a-temporal propositions that form their ideological message. The label remains attached to the ideological statement even after its emancipation from particular stories.

The following is an example of the use of the term 'narrative' in this general sense of 'worldview'. It is from the campaign organisation Animal Think Tank:

The old narrative – of individualism, competition, extraction and 'progress' – has failed us. It's been fractured by the pandemic, the climate crisis and increasing inequality. Right now, we are in between narratives. We're living in a time where new narratives can begin to take root in the void. We are at a crucial point in our history when the

stories we tell matter now more than ever. People are primed for a different, more hopeful story – one of love, connection, cooperation and unity. (ATT 2022)

This description uses both the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ in a general sense to present a contrast between an undesirable set of current worldviews (individualism, competition, etc.) and a desirable set of future worldviews (love, connection, etc.).

As well as the terms ‘story’ and ‘narrative’, other terms that are often used for this general concept of worldview are ‘grand narratives’, ‘metanarratives’, ‘masterplots’, ‘master narratives’, ‘big stories’, ‘stories we live by’, and ‘myths we live by’. The concept dates back to Lyotard (1984) who characterised postmodernism as a movement away from unquestioned belief in modernist ‘grand narratives’ such as Progress, Enlightenment, Emancipation, and Marxism, towards multiple, more diverse, localised narratives or *petits récits*.

Mead (2014, p. 22) critiques the ‘big stories’ of ‘limitless growth’, ‘the idea of progress’, and ‘unearned privilege’ (the story that some people should be privileged due to race or gender). He states that ‘our view and experience of the world only change as we question the prevailing “big stories” and imagine new possibilities’ (p. 26). Midgley (2011, p. 1) uses the term ‘myths we live by’ to mean ‘imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world’, such as progress, the self-interested individual, nature as a machine, and social atomism. Macy and Johnstone (2012, p. 15) describe the ‘business-as-usual’ story that sees economic growth and technological development as the way forward for society, stating that ‘when you’re living in the middle of this story, it’s easy to think of it as just the way things are’. This correlates with Barthes’ (1972, p. 132) concept of naturalisation where ‘myths’ become so entrenched in society that they become assumed to be just the way things are.

Activists often call for ‘dominant narratives’ to be resisted and replaced with alternative narratives, as in the following from the environmental think tank Common Cause:

Ultimately, it is dominant narratives such as individualism and consumerism which keep the powerful in power, always at the expense of marginalised communities and our living planet. It’s long overdue that our activism builds power for alternative narratives – ones that are in support of equity and the flourishing of all life. (Taylor 2022)

While some of what are called ‘dominant narratives’, like progress, have a temporal dimension, most do not fall into the definition of narrative as a sequence of logically and temporally connected events. The ‘big story’ of *limitless growth* (that the primary goal of society is continuous and endless economic growth) does not have particular characters, a specific location, events or logical connections between events.

There is, however, one key dimension that narratives in any sense have in common. That dimension is that they are only ever *versions* of the world, and that other versions are possible. Applying terms such as *story*, *narrative* or *myth* to widespread belief systems that many people see as simply the one-and-only true way of seeing the world is a political act, designed to destabilise the belief system and open up possibilities for new ways of imagining the world to emerge.

To avoid inconsistent terminology, in this book I use the term 'narrative' in the narrow sense which involves a logically and temporally connected series of events involving characters and a location. For the more general sense of the 'big story' or 'stories we live by', I use the term 'metanarrative'. Metanarratives are cognitive since they exist in the minds of multiple people across society, but also manifest themselves linguistically and visually in particular texts.

Narratives and metanarratives are related to each other since common narratives within a culture can contribute to the creation and entrenchment of metanarratives. On the other hand, inspirational narratives can be used to challenge and resist prevailing metanarratives. To give an example, there is a metanarrative that exists in the UK and other industrialised countries that can be glossed as IMMIGRATION IS HARMFUL TO SOCIETY. This metanarrative manifests itself linguistically in texts in many ways, including newspaper articles that describe a metaphorical 'swarm', 'invasion', 'tidal wave' or 'deluge' of migrants (Hansen and Machin 2014, p. 118), and articles that represent migrants as criminals or undeserving recipients of benefits and public services. Right wing politicians also use the characteristic language of this metanarrative; for example, in 2022 a UK home secretary justified overcrowding an immigration detention centre with the words, 'The British people deserve to know which party is serious about stopping the invasion on our southern coast' (in Crerar *et al.* 2022). This presupposes that the arrival of immigrants threatens national security. These representations can promote hostile views of immigrants among the electorate, to the extent that unjust measures are taken by the government, such as the UK Government policy of sending immigrants on a one-way trip to Rwanda (UK Govt 2022). In this way, a metanarrative can insinuate itself across the minds of multiple people in a culture, propelled by tabloid newspapers and echoed by politicians, with concrete and devastating effects on people's lives. There are, however, attempts to resist destructive metanarratives of immigration. During the first coronavirus pandemic lockdown, Sachini Imbuldeniya and Darren James Smith produced a video poem called 'You Clap for Me Now' (Smith and Imbuldeniya 2020). The video begins with the following words, featuring professionals from a range of ethnicities:

So, it's finally happened. That thing you were afraid of. Something's come from overseas and taken your jobs. Made it unsafe to walk the streets. Kept you trapped in your home. A dirty disease. Your proud nation gone. But not me, or me, or me [images of various professionals]. You clap for me now, you cheer as I toil, bringing food to your family, bringing food from your soil, propping up your hospitals, not some foreign invader – delivery driver, teacher, life saver. Don't say 'go home', don't say 'not here'.

The video uses a narrative structure which cleverly echoes elements of the negative metanarrative of immigration at first, but then with a sudden twist represents the disease as the invader, not the immigrants. The migrant workers, in this narrative, are cast as heroes who are growing food, teaching, working in the health service and saving lives, while the majority of the population stays at home sheltering from the disease. The population is therefore cast as the victim, with the disease as the villain. In this way, an actual narrative with events and characters challenges the harmful metanarrative and provides a new narrative to live by, one that is respectful of people who come from overseas. This is important for environmental justice, because people are often migrating from countries

that contribute the least to ecological destruction while suffering its worst consequences, to richer countries that caused the ecological destruction in the first place.

Another example concerns the metanarrative THE GOAL OF A CORPORATION IS PROFIT. This metanarrative is woven deep within the fabric of industrial civilisation, from laws of fiduciary duty and economics textbooks to assumptions in everyday conversation. The following are manifestations of the metanarrative in two economics textbooks:

- The objective of owners – profit maximisation – has the potential to differ from that of managers. (Estrin 2012, p. 242)
- Can the owners of a firm ever be sure that their managers will pursue the business strategy most appropriate to the owner's goals (i.e., profit maximisation)? (Sloman and Jones 2011, p. 9)

Both of these examples use presupposition to express as completely taken-for-granted background information that owners of corporations have the single-minded goal of profit maximisation. In doing so, they draw from and further entrench the metanarrative that THE GOAL OF A CORPORATION IS PROFIT.

This metanarrative is powerfully challenged by the excellent fictional story *Giantstone*, written by the Icelandic writer and filmmaker Andri Snær Magnason (Magnason 2022). This story is well worth reading, or, even better, listening to in the voice of the author (see emergencemagazine.org/fiction/giantstone). This is best done before reading the rest of this section since it contains spoilers.

The narrative of *Giantstone* is very much a sequence of logically connected events, which starts with an architect, who describes himself as 'not an extremist. I'm very ordinary', throwing a brick through the window of a Range Rover. This incongruity provides a puzzle to intrigue the reader as they gradually discover the preceding events which led up to and finally explain the puzzling act. In this story, the architect produces a sustainable design for a block of flats which would be a wonderful place to live in, with beautiful views of the mountains. However, the development company insists on making changes in order to make a bigger profit, from replacing the sustainable wood cladding with environmentally damaging concrete, losing the view to the mountains, isolating the block of flats with a road between it and nature, and exploiting the construction workers who then do a shoddy job. The end result is environmentally destructive and unappealing to live in, but the owner gets extremely rich because of it. The architect is then asked to design a super-luxury house for the owner. Reflection on the stark inequality and environmental destruction caused by the relentless pursuit of profit is the last straw that causes the architect to throw the brick through the window of the company owner's Range Rover.

The power of the narrative is in the self-reflection and emotional response of the architect as his dreams of creating sustainable housing that people love living in are crushed in the name of corporate profit:

I'd never seen my job so clearly. I was a cat's-paw, transferring quality from one person to another ... If society is based on inequality, then it's I who make inequality visible. I plunder the apartment blocks of the common people while stuffing as much luxury as I can into a 650 m² single-family residence and create an untouchable elite. (Magnason 2022)

The story provides a powerful denunciation of the metanarrative that THE GOAL OF A CORPORATION IS PROFIT and the wider economic system it is part of, while also vividly describing what a sustainable alternative would look like if society was structured in a different way.

My focus in this book is very much on narrative in the sense of a sequence of events which are logically connected in time, but in the context of how these narratives entrench or resist the wider metanarratives that shape cultures and influence how people treat the ecosystems that all life depends on.

From narrative to econarrative

The question is, why add the prefix 'eco' to narrative, and how does the resultant term, 'econarrative', differ from just plain 'narrative'? The prefix 'eco' is, of course, an abbreviation of 'ecology', a term coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel that refers to the interaction of organisms with other organisms and the physical environment. It is through this interaction that nutrients and energy cycle around ecosystems and become available for life processes to occur. In other words, ecology is the basis of the continuation of life – human life, and the lives of all other species. The term 'eco' therefore brings attention to the interactive processes that life depends on, and also brings with it an ethical imperative to protect and preserve these processes to allow life to continue. Narratives in general are likely to contain characters interacting with other characters in a location, so it could be said that there is an ecological aspect to most or all narratives. However, if the characters are all human characters, within human communities, and the location is just a built environment, then the narratives are erasing connections between humans and wider ecological systems.

The term econarrative (or eco-narrative) has been used in various ways. Soloshenko (2015, p. 148) writes that 'Eco-narrative is understood as a form of environmental writing, a text that passes ecological tenets through rhetorical, linguistic and cognitive strategies.' Heise (2010) describes econarrative as a form of environmental storytelling, including nature writing and writing which destabilises anthropocentrism through, for example, the use of an animal narrator. Donly (2017, p. 27) describes how econarratives convey a sense of ecosystem via narration. She focuses on stories that concern nonhumans, stories that 'compose *with*, not *for*, the nonhuman other'. The term *econarratology* is used by James and Morel (2020, p. 1) to mean 'the paired consideration of material environments and their representations and narrative forms of understanding'.

In this book I use the term econarrative in a general sense to mean narratives that include not only humans but other species and the physical environment among their characters and locations, and portray interactions among them. For narratives to play a role in protecting the ecosystems that life depends on they need to involve more than just the human world, which is why econarratives are so important for our future and the future of life. Collectively, and in aggregate, they are positive and to be promoted because they at least consider more than the human world. But individually, econarratives can serve ecological goals to greater or lesser extents, or even work against them, so are therefore open to criticism. Richter (2016, p. 97), for example, argues against 'declensionist narratives about the environment, with stories about extinction, degradation, contamination, deforestation, and climate change', on the grounds that the representation of the human as a destroyer cannot begin to create the kind of positive relationships with the Earth that we need. Narratives which place humans in the role of destroyer of the environment are certainly econarratives according to my definition, but not positive ones from Richter's

perspective. Richter instead proposes what he calls Georgic narratives which promote 'human beings intimately working constructively with the natural world' (p. 97).

Ecosophy

Whether an econarrative, or any kind of narrative, is considered positive or negative depends on the worldview, goals and philosophy of the analyst – there can be no objective measure since it depends on what changes in the world the analyst would like to see. The philosopher Arne Næss's concept of *ecosophy* is useful in describing a philosophical framework that includes ecological considerations:

Etymologically, the word 'ecosophy' combines *oikos* and *sophia*, 'household' and 'wisdom'. As in 'ecology', 'eco-' has an appreciably broader meaning than the immediate family, household, and community. 'Earth household' is closer to the mark. *So an ecosophy becomes a philosophical world-view or system inspired by the conditions of life in the ecosphere.* It should then be able to serve as an individual's philosophical grounding ... (Næss 1989, p. 37, emphasis in original)

An ecosophy provides the grounding to judge whether a narrative is beneficial (e.g., promotes action to protect individual beings and the ecosystems that life depends on), destructive (e.g., promotes actions which harm individuals and ecosystems) or ambivalent (i.e., contains both beneficial and destructive aspects). I would argue that it is important for analysts to explicitly describe their ecosophy so that the reader can understand the criteria being used to judge narratives against and therefore decide whether to accept or reject the conclusions of the analysis. Arne Næss describes the details of an ecosophy as follows:

By an ecosophy I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony ... openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs ... The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only 'facts' of pollution, resources, population, etc., but also value priorities. (Næss 1995, p. 8)

More simply, an ecosophy can be thought of as a values system, grounded in evidence, which takes into consideration not only humans but other species and the physical environment. My own personal ecosophy, for example, contains *Value Priority Announcements*, which are not in need of particular evidence, such as the following:

Value priority 1: The ability of humans and other species to live their lives according to their nature with high wellbeing now and in the future!

The exclamation mark here follows Næss's terminology and is a sign that this is something to be celebrated, respected and striven for. My ecosophy also contains assumptions about the world which *do* need to be evidence-based:

Assumption 3: Current consumption levels and projected increases in future consumption make significant ecological destruction inevitable.

There is, unfortunately, a vast amount of evidence to back up this statement in environmental reports such as the Sixth Assessment Report (IPCC 2022a, 2022b), the Global Environment Outlook 6 (UNEP 2019), the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES 2019), as well as industry predictions such as the International Transport Forum Transport Outlook (ITF 2021). For example, the IPCC (2022a) describes how greenhouse gas emissions need to drop to net zero by around 2050 for a 50% chance of keeping global average temperature rise less than 1.5°C. On the other hand, the ITF (2021) predicts a 260% increase in global freight by 2050, a signal of rising consumption rather than the dramatic drop in consumption necessary for net zero.

An ecosophy is more than just a formal list of criteria for use in analysis – it is a deeper philosophy of life. A useful question is whether an analyst needs to follow their ecosophy in their private life beyond their research for it to have validity. My answer is that it would be an odd separation to use an ecosophy to judge others but not ourselves. However, it would also be a mistake to weaken an ecosophy to match the imperfections and limitations of private life. Instead, it would be much better to use the ecosophy as an aspirational target for both self and society to achieve as far as possible and as soon as possible. This is the approach taken by Robert Poole in the book *Corpus-Assisted Ecolinguistics*. Throughout the book, Poole uses his personal ecosophy to judge stories as beneficial or destructive, and then towards the end of the conclusion reflects as follows:

So often now I reflect upon whether my language use helps me cultivate and promote greater ecological awareness for myself but also for those around me. The field of my work has challenged me to see the hypocrisies of my existence: how can I write that but do this? I now ask that question with less frequency as my actions increasingly align with my personal ecosophy. Indeed, the continued reflective work required to shape and put into action a guiding ecosophy has contributed to me becoming a better steward of the physical world and all of its inhabitants. (Poole 2022, p. 168)

My own personal ecosophy, which I use throughout this book, is summarised in Table 1.2. I say ‘summarised’ because an ecosophy is something complex which changes over time and can only be partially captured in a snapshot like this. However, I believe that this is enough to make it clear why I am judging certain narratives as beneficial, ambivalent or destructive. In one word, my ecosophy is *Living!*, where the exclamation mark means ‘to be celebrated / respected / affirmed / striven for’. Further explanation is provided in Table 1.2.

Ecosophy in one word: *Living!*

Further explanation

Value Priority 1	The ability of all humans and other species to live their lives according to their nature with high wellbeing now and into the future!
Assumption 1	Living into the future is only possible if human activity remains within environmental limits, i.e., limits to greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, chemical contamination, freshwater use, etc.
Assumption 2	Only a massive reduction in overall consumption and changes in production practices can keep humanity within environmental limits.
Value Priority 2	Therefore, social and political transformation to reduce consumption of those who over-consume and to change production practices!
Value Priority 3	For social justice, an increase in consumption for those who currently cannot meet their needs even as total consumption reduces!
Assumption 3	Current consumption levels and projected increases in future consumption make significant ecological destruction inevitable.
Value Priority 4	Therefore, preparation, adaptation and resilience, particularly for the most vulnerable communities!

Table 1.2: The ecosophy that this book is based on

This is the 'top level' of the ecosophy – each of these statements can be broken down further into sub-statements. Value priority 1 calls for the self-actualisation and wellbeing of all species, which, given the way that current industrial civilisation treats other species implies a sub-statement along the lines of 'Respecting the intrinsic worth of non-human species!'. And the focus on 'all humans' can be expanded out into social justice across gender, race, sexuality, nationality, class and so on.

One important function of an ecosophy is to bring together goals which are often pursued separately. Klein (2016) describes how movements for social justice, environmental protection and animal rights have tended to diverge, with different sets of actors pursuing different goals. Drew Lanham (2021) calls for convergence of social justice and environmental movements in particular:

The two movements would have seemed disjunct at first glance: Black people demanding equity, justice, and enfranchisement as full citizens in peaceful protest; white people demanding wilderness recognition, clean air, and protection for dwindling species in hearings and op-eds. But looking deeper, both movements, then and now, contain a prevailing desire for a better world built on sustaining good for all. Social justice and the movement to steward and protect nature rise from a similar foundation ...

Certainly, there is no point in building a perfectly equal and socially just society if it is ecologically unsustainable because it would be on a pathway towards collapse. And it would not be ethical to create a sustainable society if it was highly exploitative and people lived in miserable conditions. An ecosophy, therefore, can integrate social justice, environmental protection and the wellbeing of all species, with all goals to be pursued simultaneously.

This book

The aim of this book is to show how econarratives can be analysed using a wide range of linguistic, rhetorical and narratological techniques to reveal underlying entailments that can influence how people think, talk and act. The analysis necessarily involves value judgements – it would be an odd form of analysis if texts about the future of life were only looked at in terms of the technicalities of the language and narrative structure rather than their potential role in building a better world. I therefore analyse texts according to my own values system, or ecosophy, which I have made explicit in this chapter.

I have humility about my own ecosophy – there is no empirical test I can use to prove that the value priorities are correct in some way, although I can, of course, continue to assess the evidence that the assumptions are based on. What I can be sure of, however, is that if analysts in general use *an* ecosophy to base their research on, as opposed to a values system which excludes consideration of the more-than-human world, then the entire research enterprise will be better able to deal with overarching challenges we are facing at this moment in history – challenges which have inseparable social and ecological dimensions. My hope, therefore, is that readers take the analytic techniques described in this book, develop them, and apply them to many more texts, judging them according to their own ecosophies. And, more broadly, that readers find awareness of econarratives helpful in guiding their actions in everyday life, and guiding their actions within their sphere of influence as ethical leaders.

Each chapter in the book will explore one aspect of econarrative (Beginning, Identifying, Emplacing, Enchanting, Leading, Feeling, Persuading, and Ending) with a focus on one particular aspect of theory (activation, ecocultural identity, placefulness, wonder, ethics, emotional narrative, multimodal genres, and metaphor). And each chapter will analyse a specific text or collection of texts (creation stories, interviews, poetry, nature writing, leadership speeches, climate change documentaries, advertisements, and apocalyptic stories). The aim is to share insights into the workings of econarratives of different kinds, to emphasise their importance for how we treat the ecosystems that life depends on, and to open up paths for readers to critically evaluate the dominant narratives of the unequal and unsustainable society around them and search for new narratives to live by.

I have chosen texts which I feel are important in some way, either because they have proved successful in capturing the public imagination, or they align strongly with my ecosophy. I have not chosen novels since they are well analysed in the area of ecocriticism (Garrard 2012, 2014, Ailles 2013, Clark 2015, Bladow and Ladino 2018), although all of the techniques I describe can be applied to longer works of fiction. I have also included some texts such as meat advertisements (in Chapter 8) which use powerful narratives but in ways that starkly oppose my ecosophy. Studying destructive texts such as these can be useful in resisting them, as well as borrowing the persuasive techniques they use and employing them for different ends. In general though, this is an appreciative enquiry, a search for positive new narratives to live by.

The structure is broadly time-based. It starts with creation stories, and then explores the work of Rowen White, an indigenous Seed Keeper who draws on creation stories and the wisdom of ancestors to inspire action in the present day. The next two chapters, on haiku and enchantment, are about appreciating the present moment in an ecologically

sensitive way that brings wellbeing and connection. The next three chapters are about attempts to build a better world in the future, focusing on inspirational leadership speeches, environmental documentaries and counter-advertising. In the second last chapter I look at the imagining of the end times – times when despite all the actions taken to prevent environmental collapse the world becomes increasingly inhospitable to life. The concluding chapter does not end with a cheerfully optimistic plan to ‘solve’ the emerging and overwhelming crisis that the Earth is facing, but it does talk about reconnection with wolves, thriving as far as possible in the difficult times ahead, finding meaning, and rethinking who we are as humans.

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