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# TELLING A STORY BEYOND STORYTELLING

By Netta Nakari





Kukkonen, Karin. *Storytelling Beyond Postmodernism: Fables and the Fairy Tale*. Tampere University Press, Tampere, 2010. ISBN 978-951-44-7992-2. 263 pages.

For some time now an effort has been made to find suitable routes to address under-analysed ways of storytelling, such as comics, and to incorporate these ways into literary research. Karin Kukkonen's PhD dissertation, *Storytelling Beyond Postmodernism: Fables and the Fairy Tale*, acquires a position in between post-classical narratology and cognitive linguistics, and the more particular fields of fairy tale and comics studies. Her study aims to show how Bill Willingham's comic series, *Fables*, moves beyond postmodernism, and especially subversion and self-reflexivity, which are features often associated with postmodern writing, by juxtaposing these features with tradition and mimesis. The series consists of various story arcs, each originating from fairy tales but blending them with genres such as crime fiction, heroic fantasy, war narratives, horror stories, and political fable. In other words, traditional fairy tale characters such as Snow White and the Big Bad Wolf are brought to the contemporary scene of New York and turned into ecoterrorists and detectives, for example. Kukkonen suggests that despite this blending of features and the diversity it produces, the end result is a coherent story world that at once maintains tradition and is more than a postmodern retelling of fairy tales. Kukkonen has limited her analysis to the first eleven trade paperback collections of *Fables* issues, dating from 2002 to 2008.

The study draws much of its theoretical apparatus from narratology, but relies especially on cognitive linguistics and on the assumption that it is through the reading process that the meaning of *Fables* is constructed. In Kukkonen's own words: "[t]his approach not only takes a step back behind the different semiotic channels of words, images and sequence, which comics employ, but also ties in with the poststructuralist notion of reading as structuration, i.e. readers dynamically constructing meaning" (p. 24). More particularly, the study is about "how comic texts engage the human through clues, the cognitive processes and textual effects they elicit" (p. 7). It regards the reading process as a special kind of communication in which not only coherence and causality influence the interpretation but also the experientiality, the emotions, and the cultural schemata available to the readers. Taking into account the reading process allows Kukkonen to include aspects such as cultural memory, generic frames, and intermediality in the analysis of *Fables*. This kind of multidimensional approach compliments a multimodal medium such as a fairy tale narrative dressed as a graphic novel.

The wide-ranging theoretical discussion shows the writer's learnedness in literary criticism; arguments for the application of each concept from narratology, semiotics, and cognitive linguistics as well as cultural studies are for the most part convincing. On the other hand, this



learnedness sometimes transforms into a desire to present her knowledge of Western literary criticism, thus resulting in the disintegration of the clarity of her argumentation. In the opening chapter, for example, the fairy tale itself as a genre is covered quite swiftly whereas the research on the fairy tale acquires a thorough treatment. For the sake of contextualisation, a more thorough discussion on fairy tales in general would be welcome. Regardless, the study by no means consists only of theoretical discussion. In chapter 5 on the intermediality of *Fables*, for example, the extensive presentation on Marie-Laure Ryan's transmedial narratology is a relevant addition to the discussion, but simultaneously overwhelms the reader hoping for a break from the conceptual overflow. However, the reader's hopes are fulfilled at the end of the chapter which provides an in-depth analysis of crime fiction as a mediated tradition in *Fables*. Not only does this kind of analysis prove that the writer has tremendous abilities in textual interpretation, but it also clarifies the argumentation through interpretation, in other words, by claiming that the frame of crime fiction, at first sight subversive of the fairy tale narrative frame, actually holds together the coherence and traditionality of the narrative as a whole. Mostly the close reading of *Fables* and the theoretical argumentation do juxtapose nicely both implicitly and explicitly. The study also shows promises of an even more refined way of academic writing: for example, the anecdote of the "emperor's new clothes" and his nakedness as a metaphor for the dominant but dead culture of modernism, as opposed to the postmodernist child pointing at the naked emperor, connects literary research with the Western literary tradition by being intellectually stimulating and at the same time hilariously entertaining.

One must, however, question the advantageousness of the application of concepts conventionally used in other areas of research, such as narratology, to this extent in the analysis of *Fables*. Narratology and cognitive linguistics can naturally bring further dimensions to the analysis, but one of the aims of comics research is also to address this unique medium of storytelling. The aim is not necessarily to bring it into the realm of high culture and academia, which is perhaps a somewhat old-fashioned way to regard comics research, but to recognise all the aspects of the particular potential of comics for complex storytelling. Kukkonen's study as well as *Fables* itself could benefit from a more comics-oriented perspective. For example: The study covers the issue of genres from various perspectives: genres as developing historically, genres as frames for readers, genres as constructed media, and genres in relation to one another, for example. In the flux of genres such as the fairy tale, heroic fantasy, political fable, and crime fiction, *comics* either as an umbrella term for these various genres or as a form of expression in general, as compared to movies, for example, seems unfortunately to gain less attention. Also, the visual aspects of *Fables*, such as paneling and its resemblance to the traditional layout of the fairy tale books, for example, are mentioned on numerous occasions but how much are they actually taken advantage of when



it comes to discussing comics per se? Another example is the concept of multimodality which, despite some discussion on the relation between form and content in comics, is somewhat bypassed. The discussion concentrates on comics as communication between different media in general. Kukkonen interestingly hints that there is, in fact, surprisingly little research on comics as a multimodal medium – if this is so, it would have been complementary to her study if she had taken further steps in that direction herself.

Kukkonen states that intermediality is an essential factor in today's media culture and that it is partly through globalisation that the variety of media has become so essential in communication. Taking into account the wider social and cultural context results in the most intriguing and wide-ranging discussion in the study. The main characters of *Fables* are, in the end, public domain figures such as Snow White and Prince Charming. Because they are taken from folklore, mythology, and literature, it is not only suitable but also crucial that contextual associations be taken into consideration in addition to discussing the significance of the reading process. It is precisely chapter 4, "*Fables'* Traditions: Popular Cultural Memory and Genre", although the gratifying tendency is detectable throughout the study, that relates the narratological and cognitive approaches to culture at large and not only to literature and literary research. This is done by discussing the difference between high and low culture, or cultural memory and communicative memory in Kukkonen's words, in connection to fairy tale and comics traditions. The chapter also offers a subtle analytical reading of *Fables* by juxtaposing comics with the heroic fantasy quest and the war and horror genres.

In the final chapter of the dissertation Kukkonen discusses ideology, cognition, and general metaphors. She notes that the postmodern thinking of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the so-called "master narratives" as totalising structures imposed on the complexity of the world and suggests that the both traditional and metareferencing *Fables* is an attempt to recreate the master narrative after postmodernism. *Postmodernism* is the central concern of the study (even on the level of the title) but *tradition* is emphasised throughout the study, probably to highlight the move *beyond* postmodernism. At first sight the study seems to function on polarisations such as the centre and the margin, high and low culture, and tradition and postmodernism. Such polarisation would be paradoxical since the study also promotes the actual instances of storytelling and criticises the arbitrary binary relations of the semiotic approach. The overall aim is not to polarise but to juxtapose. For example, Kukkonen analyses the representation of gender and race in *Fables* not by concentrating on the conventional polarisation of the centre and the margin but through a careful reading of the actual instances of storytelling. Also, the differences between modernism and postmodernism are attached in Kukkonen's discussion to questions of otherness and totality, but instead of concentrating on division, the discussion is used to shed light on *Fables'* way of



representing relativism, infinite possibilities of interpretation, and the bridging between low and high culture. Similarly, the co-operation of postmodern and traditional features is what Kukkonen's analysis of *Fables* is all about, and the move *beyond* postmodernism is clarified laudably in this context. One could, nonetheless, pose some questions concerning her treatment of postmodernism, such as why she regards the two features of subversion and self-reflexivity as *the* central features of postmodernism. Is it because the two features are so crucial in the narration of *Fables*? Of course, Kukkonen may intend subversion and self-reflexivity as textual manifestations which entail other postmodern characteristics such as relativism and questioning of the canon. Also, when it comes to the contextualisation of the fairy tale and comics, again, one would perhaps have hoped for a more extensive linking of intermediality and multimodality in contemporary culture with postmodern or post-postmodern thinking.

Despite the at times overly packed theoretical discussion and some possible stances which could be clarified, Kukkonen manages to tell a convincing, balanced academic story about *Fables* beyond the theoretical, mostly narratological and semiotic boundaries of storytelling, and even beyond the conceptual boundaries she herself has set for the study, i.e. those of the fairy tale, tradition and subversion, and mimesis and self-reflexivity. The variety of linkages that Kukkonen draws between her study and literature and culture in general is admirable. The discussion introduces intriguing possibilities of applying analytical tools and concepts such as the simultaneously subversive and coherent story world and the importance of the reading process to comics as a whole but also to so-called popular genres such as science fiction or fantasy, and to various forms of self-reflexive (postmodern or post-postmodern) literature.