

Narrative Agency, Metanarrativity and Bibliotherapy: The Potential of Reading Metanarrative Fiction

We would like to propose a session in which we explore the key issues of our research project *Identity Work: Narrative Agency, Metanarrativity and Bibliotherapy* (PI Hanna Meretoja, part of the consortium *Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory*”, Academy of Finland, 2018–2022). The project focuses on the uses and abuses of narrative in the construction of lives and identities. Over the past few decades, the notion of “finding one’s own narrative” has pervaded the culture at large. In response, contemporary narrative fiction has increasingly come to reflect on the problematic uses of narrative in identity work. Our team brings into dialogue contemporary metanarrative fiction and the broader uses of narrative in contemporary consumer culture in which narrative identity is often understood in narrow, limiting, and commercially motivated ways. Our proposed session consists of three parts.

First, Hanna Meretoja will present the overall aims and hypotheses of the project. She will explicate how contemporary metanarrative fiction self-reflexively thematizes the significance and functions of cultural narrative models in our lives. She discusses how such fiction explores the roles of cultural narrative models in storying lives and the problematic ways in which stories are used for manipulative purposes. She will outline the hypothesis that such fiction can amplify narrative agency and that this insight can be developed into a new approach to therapeutic and non-therapeutic reading in reading group settings.

Second, Päivi Kosonen and Eevastiina Kinnunen will present “Narrative, Reading and Wellbeing”, which is a sub-project of our Academy of Finland project. In the last few years there has been an increasing amount of research on the benefits of reading. While the humanist and phenomenological approach has focused on literary art as a source of wisdom, as a vehicle of personal development and compassion (Gregory 2009; Pettersson T., 2009), some recent research has focused on collective reading practices (Brewster, 2010, 2016). In Britain for instance Josie Billington (2010, 2017) and her colleagues have developed a literature-based method of “Shared Reading”, which has reportedly had positive effects on people who suffer from depression and chronic pain. Our project aims to map different collective reading practices, and hopes to add some new methods and models to this area of research. In the first stage of the project we train literature students to facilitate different kinds of reading groups. At the centre of our project are creative reading groups, in which people read and write, and shared reading groups, where people meet to read books together and to share experiences. We will also develop metanarrative versions of these groups where discussion is facilitated towards themes around narrativity and identity. We are interested in the participants’ experiences and wellbeing and will use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (including interviews, questionnaires, self-reflective texts written by both facilitators and participants). Central to our approach are issues of narrative agency, future-oriented hope, and a “sense of the possible” (Meretoja 2018).

Third, we would like to give a demonstration of one kind of reading group session and test particularly the new method informed by metanarrativity that we are developing in the project. During the workshop the participants will read a metanarrative short story, write and discuss in the facilitated session. This demonstration provides a great opportunity for us to test our method and get feedback from the participants of the conference.

Bios

Hanna Meretoja is Professor of Comparative Literature, Director of *SELMA: Centre for the Study of Storytelling, Experientiality and Memory*, and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Turku (Finland). Her research is mainly in the fields of critical theory, narrative studies, hermeneutics and narrative ethics. Her publications include *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory* (2014, Palgrave Macmillan), *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (co-edited, 2018, Routledge), and *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (2018, Oxford University Press). She is the PI of the Turku-based team of the consortium *Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory* (Academy of Finland, 2018-2022).

Päivi Kosonen, PhD, senior researcher of comparative literature (School of History, Culture and Arts Studies), and trained bibliotherapist and bibliotherapeutic educator. Member of SELMA (Centre for the Study of Storytelling, Experientiality and Memory) and part of the Turku-based team in the Academy of Finland consortium (2018–2022) *Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory*.

Eevastiina Kinnunen works as a research assistant in comparative literature at the University of Turku, and is currently finalising her Master's thesis in comparative literature. I am interested in the question of truth in literature and in the different ways that reading and writing can shape our narrative understanding. I am a member of the Turku-based team in the project “Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory”, which is funded by the Academy of Finland. I also work as a bibliotherapist and creative writing instructor.