

## Abstract

**Rhetorica**Scandinavica, ISBN 1397-0534

No 78, 2018, pp 32-40

Publisher: Retorikförlaget AB

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**Title** "Nonfictionality, Function, and Salience: Or, Affect, Ethics, Aesthetics and Huntington's Disease in *Saturday* and *Inside the O'Briens*".

**Abstract** Focusing on different treatments of the same nonfictional entity, Huntington's disease, in two global fictions, Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Lisa Genova's *Inside the O'Briens* (2015), this paper seeks to understand the affective, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of crucial problematic moments in each. It deploys the concepts of status (fictional, nonfictional, or a blurring of the two), function (how does the particular element contribute to the larger narrative purpose) and salience (how significant is that function for that larger purpose) in order to unpack the rhetorical logic of those passages. This unpacking leads to a more positive view of McEwan's construction of *Saturday* than the one offered by many of McEwan's previous critics as well as a general defense of Genova's construction of *Inside the O'Briens*. More generally, the essay offers new insights into the interaction of local nonfiction and global fiction.

**Keywords** fictionality, nonfictionality, status, function, salience, *Saturday*, *Inside the O'Briens*.

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James Phelan:

## Nonfictionality, Function, and Salience

### Or, Affect, Ethics, Aesthetics and Huntington's Disease in *Saturday* and *Inside the O'Briens*

Focusing on different treatments of the same nonfictional entity, Huntington's disease, in two global fictions, Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Lisa Genova's *Inside the O'Briens* (2015), this paper seeks to understand the affective, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of crucial problematic moments in each. It deploys the concepts of status (fictional, nonfictional, or a blurring of the two), function (how does the particular element contribute to the larger narrative purpose) and salience (how significant is that function for that larger purpose) in order to unpack the rhetorical logic of those passages. This unpacking leads to a more positive view of McEwan's construction of *Saturday* than the one offered by many of McEwan's previous critics as well as a general defense of Genova's construction of *Inside the O'Briens*. More generally, the essay offers new insights into the interaction of local nonfiction and global fiction.

In this essay, I seek to understand the affective and ethical dimensions of two crucial problematic moments in fictional narratives by placing them within a larger account of the relationships between fictionality and nonfictionality. More specifically, I will focus on different treatments of the same nonfictional entity, Huntington's disease (HD), in two twenty-first century novels: Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Lisa Genova's *Inside the O'Briens* (2015). Furthermore, I propose to come to terms with the problematic passages by means of the concepts of status, function and salience. Status refers to whether a given element of a narrative is fictional or nonfictional. Function refers to the role(s) that each author assigns to any element of a narrative. Salience refers to the prominence and significance of those role(s), in relation to the larger purposes of each novel. My analysis is not desig-

ned to explain away the problems, but it is designed to unpack the rhetorical logic that gives rise to them, and, thus to offer some useful insight into their affective and ethical dimensions and into the ways fictionality and nonfictionality work together—or don't.

In *Saturday*, McEwan recounts a day in the life of London neurosurgeon Henry Perowne—February 15, 2003. This day is historically significant because it marks the occasion of a massive protest in London against the coming Iraq War, and it is personally significant because of Perowne's multiple encounters with a street criminal, Baxter. Early in the day Perowne and Baxter are in a minor traffic accident, which leads to a confrontation in which Baxter, along with two cronies, is about to pummel the neurosurgeon. Perowne, however, notices signs of HD in Baxter and begins diagnosing him and talking about clinical trials. This tactic works: although Baxter is skeptical, he backs off and Perowne escapes. But the tactic also means that Baxter loses face in front of his subordinates, motivating him to get revenge on Perowne. That night Baxter and one of his subordinates, Nigel, invade Perowne's home during a family celebration for the publication of his daughter's first book of poetry. Baxter orders Daisy to strip in apparent preparation for rape. But Daisy's stripping reveals her pregnancy, a revelation that disconcerts Baxter, and he orders her to read a poem from her book. Daisy instead recites Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," thereby triggering a major mood swing in Baxter. He is transported by the poem's beauty, gives up the idea of assaulting Daisy, and tells Perowne he wants more information about the clinical trials Perowne had mentioned earlier. Nigel, disgusted by Baxter's change of direction, exits the scene. Baxter's mood swing makes it possible for Perowne and his son Theo to overpower and seriously injure Baxter. In a final twist, Baxter is taken to Perowne's hospital, and Perowne is called in to do the emergency surgery on him.

McEwan uses the sequence of events once Baxter invades Perowne's home to take not just his characters but also his audience on an intense emotional journey. Baxter's threat of sexual violence arouses pity and fear, and his response to "Dover Beach" generates both wonder and relief. The audience's own mood swing continues with the feelings of triumph generated by Perowne's driving the invader from his home. This emotional trajectory is accompanied by a trajectory of ethical response, as McEwan's audience moves from the harsh negative judgments of Baxter to more positive ones as his mood swings in response to his appreciation of "Dover Beach." Nevertheless, the audience takes some ethical satisfaction in Perowne's triumph over Baxter.

The problem, however, is that the basis for the turning point in the scene, Daisy's recitation of "Dover Beach," seems insufficient at best and preposterous at worst. Everything changes, it seems, not because of a mimetic logic of cause and effect but because McEwan wants to make a case for the power of Arnold's poem and by extension of literature in general. The ethics and aesthetics of McEwan's telling seems flawed in a way that undermines the affective dimensions of the scene. Amy Elias puts the objection bluntly: McEwan "implies that a good poem read well can turn the hearts of men from violence to fraternity, a wishful thesis about terror in

our time”<sup>1</sup> John Banville makes a similar objection with a more specific reference to Baxter: “Even allowing for the fact that Baxter is suffering from a debilitating neural disorder, this is a remarkable response from the kind of thug he is portrayed as being.”<sup>2</sup> Elaine Hadley assesses the turn this way: “Incredible and surely repulsive if proffered merely as a rape prevention technique, as deployed in this way Arnold’s poem dramatizes a powerful fantasy, a Victorian fantasy that still entices us.”<sup>3</sup>

Elias, Banville, and Hadley certainly make good points, but none of them goes deep into the narrative logic underlying McEwan’s construction. What is it about that construction that would lead this accomplished novelist to write the scene that way? I propose to answer through an analysis of the relations among the status, function, and salience of HD in the novel. Before conducting that analysis, however, I want to bring in the constructive problem in *Inside the O’Briens*.

In her novel, Genova recounts the discovery by Joe O’Brien, a middle-aged Boston police officer, that he has HD and then explores the complex effects of that discovery on Joe, his wife, and their four children, each of whom has a fifty-fifty chance of carrying the genes for HD. Genova chooses to end her novel with a variation of the Lady-or-the-Tiger motif, as she stops the narrative at the moment when Joe’s daughter Katie, the other focal character in the novel, is about to learn whether she carries the genes for HD. Here’s the problem: after having invited her audience to invest emotionally in Katie, Genova should reward that investment by revealing the outcome of the test results. By failing to do so, Genova treats the audience capriciously and mars the ethics and aesthetics of her narrative. Again, however, I want to consider this objection in relation to the underlying narrative logic of Genova’s construction.

## Status: Fictionality, Nonfictionality, and Cross-Border Traffic

Status refers to whether a discourse, or a part of that discourse, is an instance of fictionality or nonfictionality. I define and consider the relation between these two modes in the following claims.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 Amy Elias, “The Tipping Point of Badness,” *American Book Review* (January-February 2010): 5.
  - 2 John Banville, “A Day in the Life,” *New York Review of Books* 52, no. 9 (May 26, 2005): 16.
  - 3 Elaine Hadley, “On a Darkling Plain: Victorian Liberalism and the Fantasy of Agency,” *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2005): 96.
  - 4 This approach has its roots in Richard Walsh, *A Rhetoric of Fictionality* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007). For more see Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh, “Ten Theses about Fictionality,” *Narrative* 23 (2015b), and “Fictionality as Rhetoric: A Response to Paul Dawson,” *Narrative* 23 (2015a); Phelan, “Local Fictionality within Global Nonfiction: Roz Chast’s *Can’t We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*” *Entymema* 16 (December 2016); and Phelan and Nielsen, “Why There Are No One-to-One Correspondences among Fictionality, Narrative, and Techniques: A Response to Mari Hatavari and Jarmila Mildorf,” *Narrative* 25 (2017). Several of my seven claims overlap with the “Ten Theses.” See also Paul Dawson, “Ten Theses against Fictionality,” *Narrative* 23 (2015), and Mari Hatavari and Jarmila Mildorf, “Hybrid Fictionality and Vicarious Narrative Experience,” *Narrative* 25 (2017), who propose “hybrid fictionality.”

1. Fictionality is intentionally communicated invention in discourse. “Intentionally communicated” reflects the rhetorical orientation toward a speaker’s purpose, and helps distinguish fictionality from lying, which seeks to hide its invention and deceive its audience. “Invention” indicates fictionality’s essential characteristic, the one that most distinguishes it from nonfictionality (see point #4 below). “In discourse” indicates the broad domain in which fictionality occurs.
2. Generic fictions such as the novel, the short story, and the fiction film or play constitute a subcategory of fictionality. All generic fictions are instances of fictionality, but not all instances of fictionality are generic fictions.
3. Fictionality is pervasive throughout nonfictional discourse. Think of all the times we invent scenarios about what will happen if we do X or Y. Think of all the times we say “what if?” or “I wish that.” Fictionality is also a key tool in multiple disciplines—via thought experiments, models, hypotheses, and so on.
4. Nonfictionality is intentionally communicated discourse that directly addresses actual states of affairs, whether through describing, reporting, interpreting, evaluating, questioning, or another mode of engaging with them.
5. Nonfictionality is pervasive throughout generic fictions and it can even become prominent. Genova, for example, begins *Inside the O’Briens* with this nonfictional description of HD:

*Huntington’s disease (HD) is an inherited neurodegenerative disease characterized by a progressive loss of voluntary motor control and an increase in involuntary movements. Initial physical symptoms may include a loss of balance, reduced dexterity, falling, chorea, slurred speech, and difficulty swallowing. The disease is diagnosed through neurological exam, based on these disturbances in movement and can be confirmed through genetic testing, as a single genetic mutation causes this disease...<sup>5</sup>*

Someone might want to quarrel with aspects of the description (by noting, for example, that genetic testing isn’t always definitive), but that very impulse points to its nonfictional status.

6. Fictionality is not an escape from the actual world but an indirect way of engaging with it. This claim applies both to local fictionality within global nonfictions and to generic fictions themselves. Thus, generic fictions and generic nonfictions have the common goal of intervening in some way in the actual world, even as they ultimately deploy different means to do so—and even as they frequently rely on cross-border traffic.
7. There are degrees of indirectness within fictionality, which is another way of saying that different uses of fictionality seek to engage with the actual world in different ways.

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5 Lisa Genova, *Inside the O’Briens* (New York: Gallery Books, 2015): 1 (her emphasis).

## Function and Salience

To determine function, a rhetorical critic analyzes how the author deploys the element in the overall construction of the narrative and how it contributes to (or detracts from) the author's purposes. Consider, for example, Genova's choice to set the action of her novel in the nonfictional location of Charlestown, Massachusetts. This choice serves two main functions: (1) it heightens the mimetic illusion, that is, the illusion that Genova is not constructing the whole narrative but rather giving her audience access to the autonomous actions of actual people in the real world; (2) it helps her characterize the O'Brien family as recognizable types: they are Irish Catholics from Boston. In general terms, both functions reduce the degree of indirection of Genova's effort to intervene with the actual world; in specific terms, both functions serve her larger purpose of connecting her invention of the O'Brien family to the realities of HD.

To determine the salience of a given function, a rhetorical critic analyzes its prominence and significance relative to the functions of other elements of the narrative and to the overall purposes of the novel. Authors reveal their purposes through their management of the narrative progression,<sup>6</sup> including their direction of the audience's interests in the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of the narrative. By the mimetic component, I mean the authorial shaping of readerly interests in and responses to the narrative's imitations of—or references to—the actual world, including such matters as characters functioning as possible people or being representations of actual people. By the thematic component, I mean the authorial shaping of readerly interests in and responses to the ideational, ideological, and ethical dimensions of the narrative, a shaping that can include giving individual characters a representative function. By the synthetic component, I mean the authorial shaping of readerly interests in and responses to a narrative's constructedness. Furthermore, some narratives make one of these components dominant, others make two dominant, and still others will make all three prominent.

Consider, for example, the relative salience of time in *Saturday* and *Inside the O'Briens*. McEwan and Genova deploy the standard Western system of time: sixty minutes in an hour, twenty-four hours in a day, seven days in a week, approximately four weeks in a month, and so on. In this respect, time has nonfictional status in both novels, and both authors use it for the standard functions of organizing experiences into recognizable chunks.

For Genova, time has medium but subordinate salience. On the one hand, the issues of how fast HD progresses and how long someone with HD can be expected to live are important aspects of her exposition of HD. In addition, the twenty-two year old Katie needs to decide by a certain date whether to move from Boston to Portland, Oregon with her boyfriend Felix, a decision that Genova ties to Katie's

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6 For more on narrative progression, see James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007); and *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017).

wavering about whether to get the results of the genetic test. On the other hand, it is not time itself to which Genova directs her audience's attention. Instead, she focuses on the ways HD influences the significance of time in one's life. In that sense, Genova's attention to time is a subsidiary part of her mimetic and thematic exploration of HD and its consequences for families that carry the gene. This point becomes clearer when we compare time's salience to another nonfictional element of the narrative: the existence of the genetic testing for HD. Genova gives this element far greater salience by making Katie's decisions related to it central to the progression.

For McEwan, time has a greater salience than for Genova but it is still less salient than many other mimetic and thematic issues. McEwan gives time salience in part through his synthetic choice to write a day-in-the-life novel. In addition, he frequently makes Perowne (and thus his audience) aware of time's passing, both within this day and within the larger trajectory of his life. Indeed, McEwan positions this day-in-the-life within a larger awareness of the life course of a family. He devotes one section of the novel to Perowne's visit to his elderly mother, a former champion swimmer now suffering from dementia, and he adds considerable tension to the climactic scenes with the revelation that Daisy is pregnant. Furthermore, with the nonfictional anti-war protest as background for the action, McEwan invites his audience to see Perowne's day within the larger context of contemporary history, including the 9/11 attacks and their consequences. But McEwan does not directly tie the instabilities, complications, and resolution of the progression to this exploration of time, choosing instead to tie them to other thematic issues: medical ethics, national and personal security in the post-9/11 world, the relations between the sciences and the humanities, and the potential power of literature.

### The Salience of HD in *Inside the O'Briens*

For Genova, the nature of HD and its consequences are the most salient features of the narrative. She signals that prominence by opening the narrative with the nonfictional account of HD and then reinforces it with an opening chapter that depicts Joe O'Brien, at age thirty-six, exhibiting the prodromal symptoms of memory impairment and sudden rage. More generally, Genova divides the book into three parts, each organized around her exposition of HD and its consequences. She frames each part with a nonfictional report of some aspect of the disease, and then uses the fictionality of the characters and events to exemplify and give texture to the details of that frame. In Part One, after her framing report on HD, Genova recounts, via narration focalized through Joe, his movement from the prodromal stage of HD to its full onset and diagnosis. She frames Part Two with a summary of the genetic mutation associated with HD and a brief discussion of the availability of genetic testing, including the statistic that 90 percent of people at risk have chosen not to learn whether they carry the mutation. She ends Part Two with Katie's decision to be tested. Genova frames Part Three with a summary of the typical progress of the disease, a reminder that there are no effective treatments, and a characterization of

it as a family disease. Genova follows this frame by bringing the separate tracks of Part One and Part Two together, as she both returns to Joe's story and continues with Katie's and her decision about getting her test results. As I noted above, Genova ends the novel with her variation on the "Lady or the Tiger?" motif.

This analysis suggests that Genova's novel belongs to a genre that I call "the fiction of exposition." In this genre, an author gives some nonfictional phenomena the greatest salience, and, in so doing, makes the indirections of fictionality far less pronounced than in most other genres of fiction, with the possible exception of allegory. That feature of the genre supports an additional claim: *the greater the salience of one or more nonfictional elements in a generic fiction the more directly the fiction connects with the actual world.*

Furthermore, in fictions of exposition, the thematic component is dominant and the mimetic is developed for its capacity to increase the audience's affective and ethical responses to the characters and their situations. In other words, the author uses the audience's engagement with the mimetic component to make the abstract concrete—as Genova does when she moves from the descriptions that frame the three parts of her novel to the exemplification of their main points in the lives of the O'Briens.

In assessing Genova's ending, I note, first, that she resolves the instability of Katie's immediate future: she has decided to move to Portland with Felix regardless of the outcome of the test. This resolution fits with Genova's purpose of modeling positive responses to HD. Because Katie moves away from thinking that her decision should be contingent on the outcome of the test—if negative, she'll go; if positive, she won't—she is not defined by her HD status. Similarly, Genova uses Katie to give Joe the advice he needs for the next phase of his life: Katie tells Joe that his children need him to be the model of how to live with HD.

Nevertheless, Genova's withholding Katie's test results from her audience is a bold move because it breaks the mimetic illusion and foregrounds the synthetic component of the narrative and Genova's role as constructor. "Why do I stop telling Katie's story here? Because I can." Yes, but what about the way this ending plays with the emotions of Genova's audience?

Here's the underlying narrative logic: by refusing to satisfy her audience's curiosity, Genova actually highlights the existential moment of revelation, conveying the affective dimensions of what it's like to be on the verge of knowing whether one is condemned to or liberated from the effects of HD. Conveying that heightened experience is not only consistent with but an appropriate contribution to the larger purposes of linking the experiences of the O'Briens to the actual world. In other words, evoking and nurturing her audience's affective investment in Katie and her results has never been an end in itself. It has always been a means to help Genova accomplish the ends of her fiction of exposition. Therefore, while not perfect, the ending is defensible.

## The Salience of HD in *Saturday*

In *Saturday*, HD is far less salient, as a short list of the major contrasts with Genova's novel indicates. Where Genova always put HD front and center, McEwan uses the phrase "Huntington's disease" only a handful of times, locates it not in the protagonist but in an (important) minor character, and never offers an inside view of that character's consciousness. Furthermore, McEwan focalizes everything through Perowne, who as a neurosurgeon already knows all the things that Genova painstakingly explicates. Consequently, McEwan offers minimal exposition of the disease, focusing on just its essential features: the genetic disposition, its overall progress, its main symptoms, especially its effect on sudden mood swings. Furthermore, as my discussion of McEwan's treatment of time indicates, McEwan makes other issues more salient: medical ethics, issues of national and personal security in the post-9/11 world, the relations between the sciences and the humanities, and, indeed, the potential power of literature.

As for the overall progression, Catherine Belling has pointed out that *Saturday* does not have a high degree of narrativity but proceeds through lyric revelations of Perowne's consciousness as he reflects on the events of his day: waking early and watching a burning plane in the sky; making love with his wife Rosalind; interacting with his son Theo; having his first run-in with Baxter after their car accident; playing squash with his American colleague Jay Strauss; visiting his mother in the nursing home; and so on.<sup>7</sup> Both the lyric unfolding of Perowne's consciousness and the narrative backbone provided by the encounters with Baxter allow McEwan to explore the thematic issues I have identified above. His giving greater salience to those issues is what motivates him to choose HD rather than some other neurological disease as Baxter's besetting condition. In other words, McEwan's interest in HD is not something driving the novel the way Genova's interest drives *Inside the O'Briens* but rather his other interests lead him to choose HD rather than, say, epilepsy as Baxter's illness.<sup>8</sup>

I suggest, then, that the problem with the narrative's turning point arises from the relation between the function and salience of HD. For McEwan, the primary function of Baxter's HD is to make the turning point mimetically plausible: those with HD are emotionally labile, and thus a powerful poem, especially one that reminds Baxter of his childhood, could produce his mood swing. But because McEwan makes other issues more salient, and because the mimetic premises of the narration restrict his exposition of HD, readers who don't know what Perowne (and McEwan) know about HD will miss that plausibility and react the way Elias,

7 Catherine Belling, "A Happy Doctor's Escape from Narrative: Reflection in *Saturday*," *Medical Humanities* 38, no. 1 (2012).

8 In this respect, McEwan's use of HD conforms to the model of disability-as-supplement that Mitchell and Snyder identify in their important book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). I acknowledge that one could do a sharp disability studies critique of McEwan's representation of Baxter. But I believe that attending to the relative salience of HD in *Saturday* offers a better rhetorical account of McEwan's representation of it.

Banville, and Hadley do. Indeed, for these critics what's salient in the scene itself is not that Baxter acts according to a recognizable HD script but that McEwan seems to invest so much power in "Dover Beach." Thus, if McEwan had found a way to give HD greater salience, its functionality in the turning point would likely be more prominent and the objections would either not arise or be much milder. But given all his other interests, including his commitment to the mimetic illusion, making HD more salient would be no easy task. In sum, then, I regard McEwan's choice as ultimately consistent with the logic of his narrative construction, but, given the relatively minor salience of HD itself, as virtually impossible to execute with his usual élan.

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