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## The Unnatural and Unnatural Narrative Theory: An Interview with Professor Brian Richardson\*

Wang Changcai

**Abstract:** Brian Richardson, a professor in the English department of the University of Maryland, is the leading scholar of Unnatural Narratology, which is one of the most influential branches of post-classical Narratology. He has served as the Vice President and President of the International Society for the Study of Narrative (2009—2012) as well as the Vice President and President of the Joseph Conrad Society of America (2006—2012). He is the author of *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative* (1997), *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006, the 2006 Perkins Prize winner for the best book in narrative studies) and *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (2015). He also co-authored *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* (2012, “Outstanding academic title” for 2012 by *Choice*) and edited and co-edited several anthologies, including *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* (2013, with Jan Alber and Henrik Skov Nielsen). Prof. Richardson’s primary fields of interest are narrative theory, postmodern fiction, international modernism, and the history of the novel. In this interview,

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Prof. Richardson reiterates his ideas on unnatural narrative theory, explains the differences among members of unnatural narrative group, and responds to criticism and misunderstanding of unnatural narrative theory. He also introduces his present work and puts forward some suggestions for the further development of unnatural narrative theory.

**Keywords:** Brian Richardson, the unnatural, unnatural narrative, unnatural narratology, unnatural narrative theory

## 非自然与非自然叙述理论：布莱恩·理查森教授访谈录

王长才

**摘要：**马里兰大学英文系教授布莱恩·理查森为后经典叙述学中最有影响的分支之一非自然叙述学的领军学者，曾担任国际叙述研究学会（2009—2012）和美国约瑟夫·康拉德学会（2006—2012）的副会长和会长。著作有《不可能的故事：因果性和现代叙述的本质》（1997）、《非自然声音：现当代小说中的极端叙述》（2006，获得珀金斯叙述研究最佳图书奖）以及《非自然叙述：理论，历史与实践》（2015）、《叙述理论：核心概念与批评性争论》（2012，合著，《选择》杂志2012年“杰出学术著作”）等，编辑《非自然诗学》（2013，合编）等选集。理查森教授研究兴趣集中在叙述理论、后现代小说、国际性现代主义以及小说史。在这篇访谈中，理查森教授重申他对非自然叙述理论的看法，解释非自然叙述研究团体中成员之间的差异，并对非自然叙述受到的批评和误解进行了回应。他还介绍了正在进行的研究，并对非自然叙述理论的进一步发展提出了建议。

**关键词：**布莱恩·理查森，非自然，非自然叙述，非自然叙述学，非自然叙述理论

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**Changcai Wang (hereafter as Wang):** In your first book *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative* (University of Delaware Press, 1997), you have already focused on outrageous, experimental, extreme,

alternative narratives like Beckett's works. Can you briefly introduce this book, as well as its relationship with "unnatural narrative theory"?

**Brian Richardson (hereafter as Richardson):** *Unlikely Stories* focuses on fictional worlds, in particular, characters' (and readers') interpretations of the events around them and the storyworlds they inhabit. I made it a point to include many of the impossible worlds found in postmodern narratives in this study. At that time, the idea of a fictional world that was not logically possible was generally dismissed by the theorists in that field (e. g. Doležel, Eco, Pavel). I discuss what I call "metafictional" causal laws that can be altered by the narrator.

**Wang:** In the acclaimed *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Ohio State University Press, 2006), you have discussed second person narration, "We" narration, multi-person narration, etc. intensively, which have not been sufficiently studied before. It has received enthusiastic responses from the academia, and won the Perkins Prize awarded by the International Society for the Study of Narrative. How would you evaluate this book ten years later?

**Richardson:** I have been very pleased with the success of this book and am happy to observe that made of my formulations have proven useful, either as they were articulated then or in revised forms by other theorists. I am pleased by the proliferation of many new works of fiction that experiment with the kinds of narration I discuss in the book, in particular "we" narration, which has continued to be popular, both among novelists and among narrative theorists who have produced new studies of this interesting form of narration. I still think we need more done on "hypothetical" second-person fiction and various kinds of impossible narration, such as those I grouped together under the name, "postmodern unreliability".

**Wang:** "Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models" (*Narrative*, 2010), an essay published by Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen and you, advocates unnatural narratology more explicitly. Could it be regarded as a manifesto of unnatural narratology? Could you please tell us something about the background and the process of this essay?

**Richardson:** The four of us realized that we were working on similar projects from a similar perspective, so we decided to present our work together at a conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative in Austin, Texas in April 2008. These talks fit together so well that we decided to combine them into a single essay, which was published in *Narrative* in May, 2010. We also started a website and produced “Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology”. Together, these form a manifesto of the beginning of the movement.

**Wang:** This essay became a target for many scholars who were interested in unnatural narrative theory, such as Monika Fludernik, (“How Natural Is Unnatural Narratology”; or, “What Is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?” *Narrative*, 20, 3, pp. 357–370) and Tobias Klauk and Tilmann Köppe (“Reassessing Unnatural Narratology: Problems and Prospects”, *Storyworlds*, Vol. 5, 2013). In your joint response, the differences among members of unnatural narrative group were specifically disclosed. What do you think of these divergences?

**Richardson:** We all have different ways of conceiving of our project; each gives it a slightly different area of coverage, framework and flavor. This is to be expected in any new model or paradigm and we feel it is a sign of health; we are all content to see which particular conception the community of narrative theorists will ultimately find most useful. I believe my own conceptions are more precise and circumscribed than those of Alber and Nielsen, which I find too broad (see *Unnatural Narrative*, pp. 13, 19–20). I greatly admire the precision and acuity of Iversen.

**Wang:** In *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (The Ohio State University Press, 2015), you explain unnatural narrative theory comprehensively, responding to some misunderstandings and doubts. Impressively, you reinforce the definition of “unnatural narrative” as antimimetic and exclude some kinds of works such as classical science fiction, supernatural fiction, works of fantasy, etc., which belong to unnatural narratives from Jan Alber’s cognitive perspective. In my opinion, the definition of Jan Alber is to some extent so loose that it evokes unnecessary confusion and misunderstanding. Have you ever discussed this with Jan Alber?

**Richardson:** Yes, we are colleagues and friends and have discussed this a few times. He is quite content with his definition, which provides exemplary clarity, though he admits that it cannot include many of the works of Beckett. As I have mentioned, I feel it includes too many largely dissimilar works to be as useful as it could be.

**Wang:** As you said, unnatural narrative theory focuses on a certain type of texts, not all of the texts. But you also said: “They are everywhere.” (Richardson, 2015, p. xiii) “ [M]ost narratives can be situated on two parallel and occasionally intersecting spectra.” (Richardson, 2015, p. 6) Natural narratives and extreme unnatural narratives are at opposite ends, and narratives with different degrees of the unnatural are in the middle. Could you please explain further the relationship of unnatural elements and unnatural narratives? Should we apply different strategies to those different degrees of the unnatural?

**Richardson:** In the storyworld, unnatural elements may be present as events, figures, settings, and frames. These individual units are the primary locations of the unnatural. It is probably most accurate to speak of an unnatural space, and unnatural character, or an unnatural event, rather than an unnatural narrative per se. However, when there are numerous antimimetic entities or events or an antimimetic frame, one may legitimately speak of an unnatural narrative even though one technically means only the unnatural elements throughout the narrative. The unnatural, that is to say, may be local, intermittent, predominant, or global. And of course, the more unnatural elements there are, the weaker the mimetic component will be.

**Wang:** As you observed, the phenomenon of the unnatural narratives has already existed since ancient time. Most earlier scholars usually attributed them to author’s negligence or mistakes. Even those modern or postmodern works violating the convention of realism deliberately were discussed by the concepts based on mimetic narratives. Unnatural narrative theory seeks to offer additional conceptual categories and theoretical tools to mainstream narrative studies. Can you further explain the necessity and significance of unnatural narrative theory?

**Richardson:** Before unnatural narratology, what we had was an incomplete

narrative theory that was content to ignore the many antimimetic works which could not situate within its models. What unnatural narrative theory allows us to do is to provide a much more comprehensive narrative theory that can embrace a much greater number of narratives—and, more importantly—types of narratives. This allows us to see a full history of antimimetic practices stretching back to Aristophanes, to find unnatural moments in nineteenth century and early modernist works, and to observe them in many works of popular culture from cartoons to advertisements.

**Wang:** Brian McHale, a distinguished scholar who has been focusing on postmodern literature for many years, once said, “In unnatural narrative where there is no or hardly something classical narratological tools exist that cannot be described.” He agrees with Maria Mäkelä, a young Finnish scholar, who considers unnatural narratology a new “app” of classical narrative theory. (Shang, 2014, p. 170) Could you delineate the specific differences between you and Brian McHale? Compared to the previous interpretation, what new contributions could unnatural narrative theory make?

**Richardson:** I think McHale is incorrect on this point. In *Unnatural Narrative*, I discuss the many areas of narrative theory where classical conceptions are clearly inadequate. These areas include (but are not limited to) story, time, narrators, endings and sequencing (pp. 28–47). To take the case of narratime, there are no existing categories to analyze the many kinds of impossible temporalities used by postmodernism; they are not even conceivable in a framework like Genette’s. Building on traditional conceptions, we can develop and extend them to fully do the job they are intended to perform. These new tools include denarration, textual generators, multilinearity, antinomic time, and many others. Mäkelä may refer to these simply as “apps”; a more accurate designation would be “essential additions and reconceptions”.

**Wang:** It may be suggested that unnatural narratives in ancient times do not violate the conventions of mimetic representation on purpose. Should we treat them in a different way from those modern or postmodern unnatural narratives?

**Richardson:** For me, unnatural elements are deliberately placed in

narratives by authors, so accidental or unintended unnatural features would not exist. I believe that all the historical examples in *Unnatural Narrative* satisfy this requirement. This is evident from a look at the relevant texts of Aristophanes, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Diderot and etc.

**Wang:** But, “unnatural elements are deliberately placed in narratives by authors” doesn’t mean that the author deliberately chooses to violate the mimetic convention. I mean, maybe in some cases the “unnatural elements” are not as unnatural for its author as for its readers. What is the final reason for us to determine the unnatural? Is it author’s intention, textual features, or reader’s reaction?

**Richardson:** When an author creates events or characters that cannot exist in the real world, we may ask two questions: Is this a reproduction of an existing convention? And, is it possible that the author is presenting this world as somehow believable, as a supernatural world? Or, on the contrary, is this instead a deliberate (and usually comic) violation of the rules of mimesis? Thus, in Aristophanes’ play, *The Frogs*, the value of the verses of Aeschylus and Euripides is measured by placing averse from each on a scale to see whose is “weightier.” This cannot happen in real life, and everyone in the theater knows it. In some cases, I admit, it can be difficult to know whether the author intended an event to be unnatural or not, but this is very similar to a case where we are unsure whether a line is intended to be taken as comic or not.

**Wang:** You have taken Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as an example of unnatural fabula several times, in which “four days pass for the nobles in the orderly city while—at the same time—two days pass in the enchanted forest” (Richardson, 2015, p. 56). But I am uncertain whether those two “distinct, contradictory chronologies of the fabula” (Richardson, 2015, p. 56) should be called mimetic representation of a special world or not, which in my opinion is closer to the nonmimetic than the antimimetic. What do you think of it?

**Richardson:** This is a very good point. Yes, it is clear that an enchanted world may well has special features like a different temporality that is part of the conventions of its representation. What is unnatural in this case is that the characters who live in the ordinary world do not notice how much time has

passed for the others; this is especially prominent in the case of Egeus, who never stops to wonder where his rebellious daughter spent the last four nights. This contradictory temporality is staged again in the last act, where the indicators of the elapsed time do not match up at all with the time we observe to pass.

**Wang:** There is a graded time system in ancient Chinese myth, in which one year of human world equates one day of god's world. Those two kinds of chronologies in one storyworld used to be true for Chinese people. Is it possible that a narrative is unnatural for Western people and at the same time nonmimetic for Chinese people?

**Richardson:** I would say that this is simply a case of Western readers being unaware of the Chinese convention, and thus mistaking the nonmimetic for the antimimetic.

**Wang:** In various cultures, the views of the real world and the ways to represent it are different. In his *The Story of Art*, E. H. Gombrich discussed the ancient Egyptian way of painting: "Everything had to be represented from its most characteristic angle." "Accordingly, a full-face eye was planted into the side view of the face" in the representation of the human body, which looks unnatural for us. (Gombrich, 1951, p. 36) I think we have a similar situation when we discuss unnatural narrative. What is your opinion on the differences of the unnatural in various cultures?

**Richardson:** I would respond that the *content* of supernatural varies across cultures is different, but the idea of the supernatural is fairly constant. Even though gods vary in different cultures, and the idea that a deity has supernatural powers is constant. The description of the places where the dead go vary quite a bit, but they are places where the spirit of the human goes and lives forever.

**Wang:** When you draw a distinction between unnatural narrative and postmodern narrative, you said: "[N]ot all works called postmodern are antimimetic; some postmodern works play on the level of discourse but present essentially mimetic narratives." (Richardson, 2015, p. 129) Is it possible for a narrative to be unusual on the level of discourse without this being unnatural on the level of the story?



**Richardson:** Yes, absolutely. I would say that these are two very different things. One may use very unusual discourse to describe an entirely mimetic world. In fact, I would say that it is fairly rare for the discourse to alter the storyworld in such a way as to make it antimimetic. This does happen, for example, in the case of denarration, where the narrator states that some aspect of the fictional world is not or no longer the case.

**Wang:** The 2016 No. 4 issue of *Style* is a special issue on your unnatural narrative theory, in which nearly twenty scholars expressed their views on it. Would you please make a summary of the discussion? What are your comments on this issue?

**Richardson:** It is probably not fair for me to evaluate the discussion as a whole, but I will be happy to comment on several aspects of it. The other unnatural narratologists made a number of good points, especially Stefan Iversen and his idea of “permanent defamiliarization”. Marina Grishakova and Maria Mäkelä raised important issues concerning the question of genre and the unnatural, ones which I hope to reformulate in the future. Lars Bernaerts and Leono Toker raised very good questions about the unnatural and the theory of play. I would like to see unnatural narrative theory more deeply grounded in psychology. James Phelan asked a number of important basic questions about unnatural narrative theory which I was happy to have a chance to respond to. The same is true of Roy Sommer’s and of Porter Abbott’s comments.

**Wang:** In “Rejoinders to the Respondents”, you gave a clear announcement: “The unnatural is, in my definition, the antimimetic. In a narrative, it may appear in the story, in the discourse, or in the presentation of a narrative. That means that the narration may be entirely conventional but the story-world may be impossible or contradictory, or the storyworld may be entirely mimetic while the narration or presentation of the text may be unnatural.” (Richardson, 2016, p. 492) But, I am a bit confused about these two kinds of narratives, which seem to me nonmimetic. Could you clarify this further?

**Richardson:** Let me respond by giving some examples. In a contradictory narrative, like Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie*, the storyworld is impossible because of the many contradictions in the story that cannot be resolved by

naturalistic means, such as unreliable narrators. In Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe*, the storyworld is created, negated and created again by the discourse of the text, as the weather outside is said to be first raining, then hot and sunny, and then snowy. Here, the discourse creates the storyworld in a way that is impossible in everyday life.

**Wang:** Narrative Research Lab at University of Aarhus, Denmark, has launched a project "The Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology", of which you are one of the core members. Would you please introduce your cooperation with them and the ongoing progress of the project?

**Richardson:** We all got together to produce the Dictionary as a complement to existing dictionaries of narratology by Gerald Prince, Manfred Jahn, and others whose approaches were too centered on mimetic conceptions. We are all happy with what we have assembled there. Many of the Danish members of the Lab are now concentrating on issues of fictionality and, in fact, trying to expand our conception of it.

**Wang:** Could you tell us something about your current research project?

**Richardson:** I am currently working on a book entitled, *Narrative Beginnings, Middles, Endings and Beyond: Theorizing Plot after Postmodernism*. In it I have chapters on a full range of subjects related to story and plot: the definition of narrative, beginnings, temporality, *fabula* and *sjužet*, plot and tellability, sequencing, and endings. In each chapter, I discuss mimetic and unnatural examples in order to arrive at the kind of comprehensive account of narrative that we need. With Jan Alber, I am also editing a book on *Unnatural Narratives, Critical Theory, and Cultural Studies*.

**Wang:** As the leading scholar of unnatural narrative theory, could you please make a summary of the present research situation of the unnatural narrative theory, and make a prospect for its future development?

**Richardson:** Unnatural narrative research began with and centered on postmodern fiction. In my latest book and in Jan Alber's *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*, we both extend our discussion to include drama and fiction from earlier centuries (Alber's volume ranges from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the present). New work is now appearing on

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unnatural cultural studies and on feminism and the unnatural, and other minority unnatural works are sure to be studied. I expect film will be the next big area for research into unnatural narratives and I hope that classical Asian literature will also be added to this group.

**Wang:** Thank you very much for the interview!

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