

Narrative Anchors

Processes of story construction in
Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*

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Style in Fiction (Leech & Short 1981)

- Language and the fictional world
 - Chronological sequencing
 - Psychological sequencing
 - Presentational sequencing
- Mind style

The narrative: basic concepts

- story *versus* text / discourse (Chatman 1978)
- sequence of events
- author/narrator/unreliable narrator

Questions:

- What is the cognitive status of the 'story'?
- What is its relationship to the 'text'?

...and more questions:

- How is the 'sequence of events' constructed?
- Is the 'sequence of events' the main aspect of narrative structure?
- To what extent does an 'author' or 'narrator' matter for the story?

Mental Spaces (Fauconnier 1984/1995)

Language doesn't carry meaning, it guides it.

Mental space: a cognitive domain activated or set up by the use of linguistic forms for the purposes of on-line meaning construction;

- not part of language itself, or
- a hidden level of representation, but
- indispensable in the construction of meaning.

Aspects of mental space structure

- space builders
next year, in the picture, if, he thinks...
- viewpoint and focus
My ex-husband was Greek.
- space topology and framing
Bush's Vietnam
- construction of meaning

Mental space embedding

- *If I'd seen the machete, I'd have handled it differently.* (Headline, Vancouver Sun, June 6, 2001)
 - *We chatted another few minutes about his private life. No, he'd never married. Never met the right woman, he guessed.* (S. Paretsky 'Hard Time')
- (Sweetser 1996, Dancygier & Sweetser 2005)

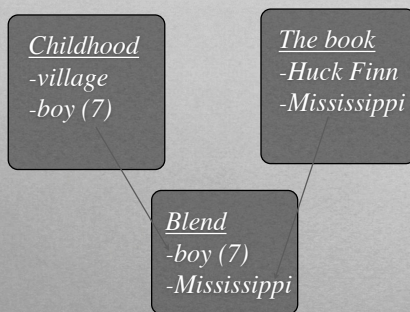
Blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002)

- Input spaces
- Selective projection
- Blended space
- Emergent structure
- Backward projection

I was living inside the book.

(J. Raban 1981)

Blending - an example



I was living inside the book

The blend's contribution to meaning

Blend
-boy (7)
-Mississippi

Emergent structure

- experience of 'Huck Finn'
- adventure
- reality and fiction

Backward projection

- life in the village is enriched
(projection into the Childhood space)

Story construction in *The Blind Assassin* (BA)

Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove her car off a bridge.



How does the sentence structure the space being set up?

- ➔ *drove*
- ➔ agenthood (Laura is responsible)
- ➔ suicide
- ➔ viewpoint 1 (Mrs. Griffen; 1st person)
- ➔ *why?*

Narrative spaces

- A narrative space is a **cognitive domain** activated or set up by the use of linguistic forms, for the purposes of on-line story construction.
- A narrative space, once set up, is maintained throughout the story and **serves as input** to blends which will be constructed.
- The final ‘story’ (with its sequential organization, cause-effect organization, characterization, etc.) results from subsequent **blending** of lower level narrative spaces.

Narrative spaces (cont.)

The emergent story

- relies on selective projection from lower level spaces, but
- creates narrative structure of its own (roughly equivalent to a generic reader’s version of ‘what happened’);
- projects new structure back to its input narrative spaces, thus enriching their content with new topology (especially, new cause-effect relations).

Narrative spaces (cont.)

- Narrative spaces follow the primary principle of mental space embedding:

A narrative space embedded in a higher space **inherits the higher viewpoint** (even if the viewpoint is not formally marked by grammatical forms such as pronouns or tense forms).

- What linguistic forms function as narrative space-builders?

Story construction in *BA* (cont.)

◆ Space 1: Laura’s suicide

Characters: Laura’s sister, Mrs. Griffen;
Richard Griffen

the stack of cheap school exercise books that she must have hidden that very morning [...], knowing I would be the one to find them.

- What is the content of the notebooks?
- What is the role of the expression in prompting mental space set-up?

Story construction in *BA* (cont.)

▲ Space 2: ‘The notebooks’

The expression prompts a setting up of a “**place-holder**” for a mental space which cannot be fully set up at this point in the narrative.

It is expected to be elaborated in the ensuing narrative and is presented as contributing to the topology or framing of the space currently being elaborated - the ‘suicide’ space.

Story construction in *BA* (cont.)

Such a ‘place-holder’ expression can be called a **narrative anchor**.

Narrative anchors:

- set up spaces to be elaborated later;
- build cross-mappings to link different narrative spaces and add structure to them;
- prompt projections which set up subsequent levels of narrative blends.

Story construction in *BA* (cont.)

Spaces set up so far:

- ◆ ‘suicide’ space
- ▲ ‘notebooks’ space

The two spaces are marked with **different viewpoint**.

The ‘suicide’ space is anchored to Iris, the ‘notebooks’ space to Laura.

Story construction in *BA* (cont.)

● Space 3: Clippings

*accidental death of Miss Laura Chase
her car swerved*

Space 3 is marked as an ‘official’ viewpoint space.

(There are five Clippings before the reader gets to the crucial space, Space 6. All represent the same viewpoint.)

Story construction in *BA* (cont.)

★ Space 4: *The Blind Assassin*, by Laura Chase (BA1)

She has a single photograph of him. She tucked it into a brown envelope [...] between the pages of Perennials for the Rock Garden, where no one else would ever look. (Prologue)

Anchors set up:

- ‘she/he’ (no proper names!)
- ‘Perennials...’
- the photograph

★ Space 4: BA1 anchors (cont.)

[...] the photo is of the two of them together, her and this man, on a picnic.

○ the picnic

Over to one side - you wouldn't see it at first - there's a hand, cut by the margin [...].

○ the hand / another person

★ Space 4: BA1 - another space set-up

What will it be, then? he says. Dinner jackets and romance, or shipwrecks on a barren coast? You can have your pick: jungles, tropical islands, mountains. Or another dimension of space - that's what I'm best at.

On the planet of - let's see. Not Saturn, it's too close. On the Planet Zycron, located in another dimension of space, there is a rubble-strewn plain.

◆ Space 5: *The Blind Assassin* (BA2) (Sci-Fi pulp fiction)

Anchors :

- mute girl to be sacrificed
- the blind assassin
- the king

(J. Schnepf, to appear)

Space 6: Iris remembers

Anchors from all the other spaces are gradually elaborated or cross-links are established.

Example:

☆ *His arm around her, his other hand fishing in his pocket for the cigarettes, then snapping the match with his thumbnail.*

● *Alex Thomas produced a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. [...] He lit a match with his thumb, held it for me.*

Story construction in *BA* (cont.)

However, the links projected by **two** anchors remain unstable almost to the end.

The photograph / The hand:

☆ *She has a single photograph of him. [...] the photo is of the two of them together, her and this man, on a picnic. [...] he's holding up his hand, as if to fend her off in play, or else to protect himself from the camera [...] Over to one side - you wouldn't see it at first - there's a hand, cut by the margin.*

The photograph / The hand (cont.)

● *Then he took a picture for the paper with his camera. [...] Alex Thomas raised his hand as if to fend him of.*

● *One of the pictures was of Alex Thomas, with the two of us - me to the left of him, Laura to the right, like bookends. Both of us were looking at him and smiling too, but he'd thrust his hand up in front of him [...]. The caption was, "Miss Chase and Miss Laura Chase Entertain an Out-of-Town Visitor."*

The photograph / The hand (cont.)

● *But she'd cut herself out of it - only her hand remained. (yellow)*

● *'I have another one [photograph], for me.' 'And I'm not in yours?' 'No,' she said. 'You're not. None of you but your hand.' (blue)*
This was the closest she ever came, in my hearing, to a confession of love for Alex Thomas.

The photograph / The hand (cont.)

◆ *the stack of cheap school exercise books that she must have hidden that very morning [...], knowing I would be the one to find them.*

☆ *She has a single photograph of him. She tucked it into a brown envelope [...] between the pages of *Perennials for the Rock Garden*, where no one else would ever look.*

▲
● *I rifled through the other notebooks. History was blank, except for the photograph Laura had glued into it - herself and Alex Thomas at the button factory picnic, both of them now coloured light yellow, with my detached blue hand crawling towards them across the lawn.*

Authorship / "The hand"

● *For them [the readers of BA1] I'm only an appendage; Laura's odd, extra hand, attached to no body - the hand that passed her on.*

● *[...] sometimes it seems to me that it's only my hand writing, not the rest of me; that my hand has taken on a life of its own, and will keep going even if severed from the rest of me.*

Authorship / "The hand" (cont.)

- ⬢ [...] I can't say *Laura* didn't write a word. Technically that's accurate, but in another sense - what *Laura* would have called the spiritual sense - you could say she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers.
- ⬢ *Laura* was my left hand, and I was hers. We wrote the book together. It's a left-handed book. That's why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it.

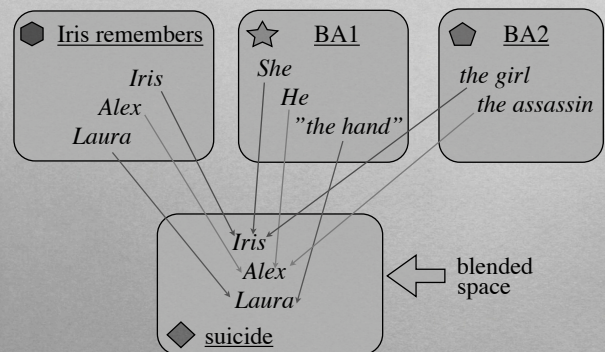
Authorship / "The hand" (cont.)

- ★ The photo has been cut; a third of it has been cut off. In the lower left corner there's a hand, scissored off at the wrist, resting on the grass. It's the hand of the other one, the one who is always in the picture, whether seen or not. The hand that will set things down. (Epilogue)

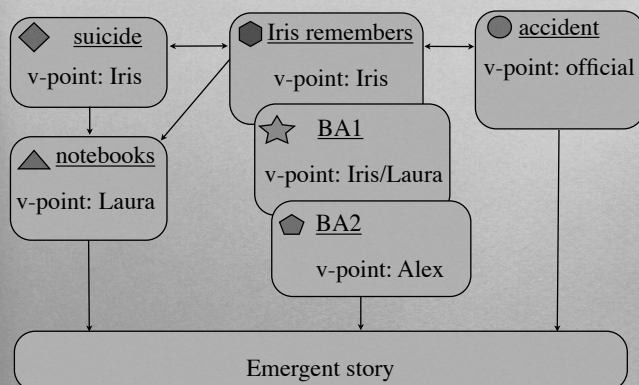
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The central blend



Constructing the emergent story



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