nCOGNITO
REVIEW

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Fritz Breithaupt: The Narrative Brain: The Stories our Neurons Tell. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2025, 274.p.

In the early 2020s, international literary scholarship showed intense interest in the cognitive psychology and neuroscience of storytelling. A growing number of monographs set out to explain how the human brain constructs and processes narratives, which cognitive mechanisms are essential to narrative production and reception, and in what ways narrative shapes and regulates our thinking. During this period, three seminal papers were published in the Anglo-American context within the span of just three years: Will Storr's exploration of the science of storytelling (*The Science of Storytelling*) in 2019, Paul B. Armstrong's *Stories and the Brain: The Neuroscience of Narrative*, an investigation of the neuroscientific foundations of narrative in 2020, and Christopher Comer and Ashley Taggart's work on narrative imagination (*Brain, Mind, and the Narrative Imagination*) in 2021. To this emerging body of research we may also add *The narrative brain* (2025), first published in German in 2022 (Das narrative Gehirn) by German-American scholar Fritz Breithaupt.

Of the works mentioned, Breithaupt's monograph achieves the most balanced integration of scholarly rigor and accessible exposition in my estimation. While the other three interdisciplinary undertakings seek to avoid excessive reliance on either literary-theoretical or neuroscientific terminology so as not to alienate readers from adjacent fields, Breithaupt goes a step further by explicitly aiming to make his line of reasoning comprehensible to non-specialist audiences as well. His book presents its central arguments with virtually no technical vocabulary, yet the clarity of its structure and the abundance of illustrative examples ensure that the discussion remains both coherent and intellectually persuasive. Breithaupt's central claim is that narrative constitutes the most rewarding mode of thinking for human beings, which he not only articulates clearly but also performs it by embedding his exposition in a series of scientific anecdotes, thereby rendering the reading experience engaging as well as informative.

Before turning to a detailed discussion of how the brain rewards narrative thinking, Breithaupt first revisits a question that has been posed and answered in countless forms: What is narrative? Unsurprisingly, he does not confine narrative

to the domain of fictional storytelling. In line with a central premise of cognitive theory—i.e. that the brain does not fundamentally differentiate between fiction and reality during its core processing operations—Breithaupt considers narrative to be any instance of a story being told, whether it appears in the form of a casual exchange with a neighbor, a social media blog post, an effective advertisement, a staged performance, or a novel. Rather than defining narrative primarily through structural features, he approaches it from the perspective of function. At its most basic level, he argues, narrative as a sequence of episodes facilitates orientation in the world, contributes to the categorization and segmentation of complex phenomena, and helps to structure the processes of lived experience. In accordance with the claims of literary Darwinism (or evolutionary literary theory), he understands narrative as a terrain for acquiring experience, planning, forecasting, shared emotional engagement, and creativity—all without exposure to real danger—, thereby playing a substantial role in fostering group cohesion and reinforcing ethical norms. Yet because narrative has such a wide range of functions pointing in diverging explanatory directions, Breithaupt contends that this functional plurality ultimately obscures rather than clarifies the phenomenon. He therefore proposes approaching its definition from a different angle.

At the outset, Breithaupt emphasizes that despite traditional narratology providing significant insights for cognitive approaches to narrative, he aligns with Jerome Bruner in conceiving narrative not chiefly as a textual construct but rather as a distinctive mode of thinking. Accordingly, the focus of his book is not on narrative as discourse but on the processes of the mind that generate and interpret stories. In this sense, the title "The Narrative Brain" may initially appear misleading: Breithaupt is not concerned with identifying which neural regions are activated during storytelling or reception, nor with mapping the specific neuronal structures involved in narrative processing. Rather, the title signals a shift in emphasis—away from narrative as an object on the page and toward narrative thinking as a fundamental cognitive operation. What matters for Breithaupt is not the anatomy of the brain, but the mental architecture that enables humans to construct, comprehend, and be affected by stories.

What, then, characterizes narrative thinking? To answer this question, Breithaupt designed an experiment modeled on a game similar to "telephone," in which participants were asked to read a story and then recount it to another person, who in turn retold it to a third person. With this method—adapted from the pioneering memory experiments of the American psychologist Frederic C. Bartlett—Breithaupt sought to simulate the oral transmission of stories between participants. Unlike Bartlett, however, who had his British subjects read unfamiliar Native American tales in order to eliminate the influence of prior cultural knowledge, Breithaupt deliberately selected narratives drawn from his participants'

own cultural environment. His premise was that narrative transmission in real life typically involves stories whose settings, characters, or situations are already meaningful to the listener; such familiarity, he argues, is precisely what arouses interest and motivates narrative attention. The differing experimental designs led to strikingly different conclusions. Whereas Bartlett claimed that memory is guided by preexisting cognitive schemas that rationalize incomprehensible material, Breithaupt found that the core of narrative thinking does not lie in causality but in emotional impact. In his experiments, successive retellings altered nearly every narrative detail, yet the emotional pattern remained remarkably stable. These findings suggest that narrative cognition is fundamentally emotion-driven, and that causality—long regarded as the backbone of narrative—serves primarily as a vehicle for emotional experience. Notably, emotions such as sadness and happiness proved to be most stable, which Breithaupt interprets as evidence of their evolutionary function as universal adaptive responses.

Breithaupt distinguishes three types of narrative emotions: the emotions experienced by the characters, the emotions elicited in the reader by the situation depicted in the narrative, and the reader's empathic emotions directed toward the characters. This tripartite system is useful as it draws attention to the different levels on which affective engagement can occur during narrative processing. At the same time, from the perspective of cognitive narratology—which focuses primarily on the reader's processes of understanding and interpretation—it would also be possible to conceptualize these dynamics differently. From a recipient-oriented standpoint, both the emotions of characters and the emotion-eliciting situations may be understood as textual stimuli, fundamentally distinct from the reader's empathic or emotional responses.

The characters' emotions, for instance, are accessible only insofar as the reader infers them through mentalization, forming an internal representation on the basis of verbal or behavioral cues. For this reason, an alternative dual-system model could also be viable: one that separates textual emotion cues from the reader's cognitive-emotional reactions, and distinguishes between two core mechanisms of reception—mentalization and empathy in response to characters, and basic emotion programs activated by narrative situations. While Breithaupt's tripartite distinction remains productive and illuminating, such a complementary model might offer an additional way of clarifying the relationship between stimulus and response within narrative emotion.

Overall, Breithaupt's book persuades not through terminological rigor or systematic method, but through the heuristic agility and intellectual dynamism of its argumentation. One particularly intriguing example is his connection between the concept of character and the problem of narrative identity in the chapter "Identity as Pathology." Expanding the dynamics of narrative identity beyond the Ricœurian

notion of temporal unfolding, Breithaupt foregrounds recipient creativity—the capacity to imagine what characters might do, say, or feel in possible situations—and our tendency to regard characters as beings endowed with a wide field of potential actions. He refers to this receptive attitude with a term borrowed from interactive storytelling and video-game design: *playability*. The stability of characters, by contrast, is ensured through the cognitive operation of *tracking*, that is, the capacity to recognize individuals as identical to themselves despite their varied manifestations. Drawing on Josef Perner's theory of "mental files", Breithaupt understands tracking as a cumulative process through which we gradually store information about persons in order to render them predictable. Its most significant consequence, he argues, is the very possibility of moral and legal *accountability*, which presupposes a stable and continuous identity. Finally, the mental operation of *justification* links the dynamic and static aspects of identity by reconstructing a character's inner perspective so as to explain and legitimize their behavior, integrating it into their life story. This process becomes especially crucial at narrative turning points, when a character acts against our expectations: we simultaneously grant them freedom within their field of possibilities and reinterpret the surprising action as a coherent and meaningful element of their evolving identity.

Breithaupt places the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of identity at the center of his framework, and in doing so offers one of the most compelling contributions of his book. He convincingly argues that only a flexible and open identity can become a true participant in narrative thinking. Any attempt to rigidly fix identity, he suggests, is ultimately a reductive and discriminatory act—a form of labeling that forecloses possibility, suppresses surprise, and reduces the individual to a predictable pawn. This condition, which he memorably terms the "pathology of identity," underscores the ethical and imaginative stakes of his project. Against such reduction, Breithaupt highlights the narrative mode as a vital cultural practice—one that must be cultivated and sustained—because it safeguards our capacity to envision alternative courses of action, to rethink the self, and to remain open to transformation. For him, narrative thought contains the possibility "to escape and exit from a world that is perceived as too narrow" (232) and thus emerges not merely as a cognitive habit, but as a profound resource for freedom, creativity, and humane understanding.

Although the book sets out to describe narrative thinking as a universal human cognitive capacity rather than to explore the cultural diversity of its manifestations, the most captivating chapter for me is the section in which Breithaupt, through an analysis of the Grimm tales, develops an argument about the structure of modern subjectivity. In the chapter titled "Telephone Games," he traces the emergence of a new heroic ideal in the Grimms' stories, contrasting it with earlier narrative traditions prior to the eighteenth century. Whereas earlier narratives typically centered

on unwavering, immutable characters, the Grimms introduced into Western culture a fundamentally different hero: a fragile human being whose very vulnerability exposes him to danger, yet also renders him capable of transformation. This hero does not passively endure threats, but actively responds to them learning to assess his environment in terms of its potential risks. For Breithaupt, this vulnerable protagonist provides a narrative articulation of Enlightenment ideology: the notion that the educable, transformable human being is the morally valuable one, since the very possibility of change forms the basis of education and self-perfection. Vulnerability thus becomes a moral virtue. Whereas steadfastness and invulnerability had stood as the supreme ideals prior to the mid-eighteenth century, by its end vulnerability had come to be celebrated in their place. In modern Western culture, vulnerability ultimately emerges as a fundamental precondition of narratability.

What is particularly impressive in Breithaupt's approach is that the analysis of universal features of narrative cognition and the account of its historical development are not presented as mutually exclusive frameworks. Rather, they emerge as complementary perspectives which, taken together, offer a convincing explanation for the complexity of narrative as a human phenomenon. Breithaupt's book will therefore be an engaging and enriching read for anyone interested in understanding the distinctive workings of the human mind.