“Man is the Story-Telling Animal”: Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, Ecocriticism and Narratology

But man—let me offer you a definition—is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right.

(*Waterland*, Graham Swift 62–63)

Graham Swift’s 1983 novel *Waterland* was one of the first British novels that ecocritics read as an example of postmodern fiction that can also yield a productive ecocritical reading. The novel can also be analyzed from another critical intersection that as yet has been unexplored: that of ecocriticism and narratology. A narratology-inflected ecocriticism foregrounds the shaping role that narratives and narrativity play in shaping our perceptions of the nonhuman natural world. With its emphasis on the natural landscape on the one hand and storytelling on the other, *Waterland* especially invites such an approach.

*Waterland* is narrated by Tom Crick, a middle-aged London history teacher. Faced with early retirement, he departs from the set curriculum and, instead of teaching his pupils about the French Revolution, tells them his own history and that of the region he grew up in, the Fens in eastern England. While his professional and personal life crumbles—Crick’s wife is admitted to a mental hospital after kidnapping a baby...
from a supermarket—he recalls the events of his youth. These are alternated with stories of his beer-brewing forefathers, the Atkinsons, and tales of natural history about the landscape of the Fens and its nonhuman inhabitants such as the eel.

In one of the most extensive ecocritical analyses of the novel, Karla Armbruster provides an overview of mainly non-ecocritical responses to the work, and advocates treating “the land/waterscape [in Waterland] in its own right” (20), rather than approaching the Fenland setting as merely metaphor. She cites Michael Gorra’s interpretation of the novel as an example of such a metaphorical approach: “The Fens are the physical embodiment of a history in which all progress is chimerical” (Gorra 393). Likewise emphasizing the metaphorical dimension of the landscape, Evelyn Cobley remarks that “the Fens function both literally as geographical location and figuratively as metaphor for the ways in which the narrator and his characters seek to make sense of what they experience” (277). Ecocriticism, Armbruster argues, is taken out of its “comfort zone” (24) by Waterland which demonstrates that the cultural constructedness of the concept of nature does not necessarily deny the existence of a physical reality outside of a text (21). Postmodern concepts, she proposes, can “challenge ecocriticism to question some of its basic assumptions, including the idea that the solutions to our environmental problems can be based on unchanging truths or standards found in nature as well as the notion that literature can give us simple access to such truths” (23).

Other scholars as well have explored Waterland primarily as an illustration for the ways in which ecocriticism and postmodernism meet and intersect. Serpil Oppermann, for instance, presents a reading of the novel from the perspective of what she terms postmodern ecocriticism. The “postmodern ecocritical theory” (119) she applies to the novel has three main features: it questions hierarchical, dualistic systems (118), examines the presence or absence of constructions of nature in the discourses that literary works employ (121–22), and draws attention to the linguistic strategies underlying definitions of nature (117). The ecocritical study of much contemporary fiction is indeed, as Oppermann suggests, long overdue, and a particular subset of contemporary literature that she calls “ecological postmodern fictions” proves to be particularly valuable for ecocritical analysis. While the term “ecological postmodern fictions” may be unfortunate in limiting analysis to a relatively small portion of contemporary literature, Oppermann’s suggestion that these fictions “raise the issues of how reality is discursively constructed and sustained, how discourse shapes our world, and how it governs the way we think about reality” (248) holds true for these works as well as those that are not ecological
postmodern fictions. Indeed, the discursivity that Oppermann emphasizes is, as I shall discuss in more detail below, a key part of all texts, and its analysis should therefore not be limited to postmodern literature alone.

Yet critics such as Armbruster and Oppermann have so far not critically examined the part played by storytelling in the depiction of the nonhuman natural environment. The full significance of the natural world in Waterland, however, is not revealed until attention is paid to not only what is described, but also how literary and narratological form shape representations of the Fenlands. In what follows I explore this dimension by discussing how the combination of the framework narrative and the fairy tale genre provide an environmental layer to the novel. This layer emphasizes the instability of the landscape, the role of stories in achieving a sense of environmental care, and a transcorporeal awareness of human–nature relations. To provide a setting for this reading I will first discuss at more length the importance of narratives to Waterland in general, particularly that of stories about the nonhuman natural world.

**Storytelling as Place-Making**

The significance of the Fens to Waterland is illustrated early on in the novel by a lengthy chapter on the region, which provides a setting for Crick’s narratives that is both “palpable and unreal” (8). These stories are the primary strategy by which the Fens are constructed as more than mere background or metaphor in the novel, but as a unique place: a space that is physically distinct and humanly meaningful. The way in which this is achieved echoes ecocritical and bioregional thought in which narratives of place—whether about people or nature, public or private histories—are seen as means of passing on information of a region, as well as expressing and contributing to place-attachment.4

The Fens, Crick tells his pupils, are a “fairy-tale land” (18) which for centuries has invited stories. The Cricks’ knack for storytelling sets them apart from the financially more successful Atkinsons, Tom Crick’s maternal ancestors: “While the Atkinsons made history, the Cricks spun yarns” (17). Crick’s father, for example, tells stories to explain natural phenomena to his sons, such as the stubborn flatness of the Fens themselves: “Why are the Fens flat? To which my father replied, first letting his face take on a wondering and vexed expression and letting his lips form for a moment the shape of an ‘O’: ‘Why are the Fens flat? So God has a clear view . . . ’” (13–14). Narratives are also the means by which the Cricks come to terms with the world around them and the experiences of their own lives. For instance, the stories that
Crick tells his London students help him make sense of his own past—and troubled present. Moreover, stories told and heard in *Waterland* may also be interpreted as means of escaping reality: as Ronald McKinney puts it, “either we are bored with the dullness of reality or we are overwhelmed at its savage capacity to upset all our fictive quests for order, in which case, we invent new ‘histories’ to recover our serenity” (826). Similarly, George Landow proposes that stories are the Fenlanders’ way of assuaging their fear (201). However, while Landow suggests that *Waterland* is consequently “suspicious of all story-telling” (203), I would argue that both Crick and the novel as a whole employ and emphasize stories to demonstrate the interplay of narratological form and content in the textual formation of landscape. To put it differently, *Waterland* is not so much suspicious of storytelling as that it acknowledges the inescapability of narrativization in representing and making sense of the world. Rather than fighting this, the novel embraces storytelling by combining a wide variety of stories and genres.

Crick specifically uses stories as part of a larger strategy of including and excluding often employed in place-making: that which is believed to belong to a certain area is included and emphasized, and as such replaces the stories, histories and values of that which is excluded. This technique is not only employed to reinforce the power of the center—recall the phrase “if you’re not with us, you’re against us”—but can also be employed to advocate the region and regional identity, as Crick does. His lessons consequently illustrate the postmodern preference for small narratives rather than grand narratives, for pluriformity rather than homogeneity, for multiple truths rather than one truth. In *Waterland* this typically postmodern technique is used to create and strengthen the kind of place attachment and general attention to the natural environment that environmentalists have argued leads to environmental conservation.

Instead of just ignoring official history altogether, Crick time and again places events from the Fens next to national and global wars and revolutions. This tactic emphasizes his critique of grand narratives, particularly because he favors the small and local over the grand and global every single time. For example, he juxtaposes the development of the Atkinson emporium and another empire, that of Napoleon: “While Napoleon made his lightning marches against the Austrians, Prussians and Russians, Thomas Atkinson got bogged down in protracted litigation and labyrinthine wrangles over navigation rights, land tenure and the constitution of drainage boards” (70). A while later, the fates have turned: “In 1813, while Napoleon, whose army once advanced so proudly in the opposite direction, retreats from Leipzig to
the Rhine, Thomas Atkinson begins building the maltings in Kessling” (71). The contrast between local and global events is emphasized by the contrary movements described in these passages: when Napoleon advances, Atkinson struggles, and when Napoleon retreats, Atkinson thrives. At the same time, the Atkinsons are also continually likened and connected to the British Empire: not only through the special ales that they produce to commemorate historic events, but also through the development and demise of both empires. Both experience their glory days in the nineteenth century, and for both the First World War is the beginning of the end.

Crick’s family history is not the only small narrative he draws on: particularly significant in the context of this article is the way he places grand narratives next to stories that are not about people at all, but about nature. The chapter “About the Ouse”, for instance, relates history from the perspective of one of the rivers running through the Fens. When telling his pupils about the invaders who came to Britain before 1066, Crick wonders how the river experienced these events: “how the Ouse regarded . . . these two-legged intruders who by daring to transmute things into sound were unconsciously forging the phenomenon known as History, we can say readily: with indifference. For what did such a new-fangled invention matter to a river which flowed on, oozed on, just as before” (143). Nature, Crick proposes, is indifferent to humans and history, because unlike them, it always continues. The Ouse subsequently serves to illustrate Crick’s alternative theory of history—he does not believe in history as linear and/or progressive, but presents it as cyclical: “How it repeats itself, how it goes back on itself, no matter how we try to straighten it out. How it twists and turns. How it goes in circles and brings us back to the same place” (142)—much as the water of the river Ouse always returns, by way of the sea, condensation and rainfall, to the river.

Crick’s stories of natural history, and his alternative view of history, are also a corrective to official history’s marginalization of nature, or, as Gerhard Haefner writes, to “history’s turn against nature and people alike” (219). Of course, using nature’s perspective as a corrective to history is also suspect, since Crick essentially gives his perspective on nature’s perspective. What the river might have thought—if it is even sentient—can never be known. Nature’s stories, then, are every bit as human as history is, as William Cronon also suggests: “When we choose a plot to order our environmental histories, we give them a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly” (1349). However, Crick’s tales are problematic not only because he seems to be speaking for nature: Waterland’s framework narrative, and the disappearance of the Fenlands as Crick describes them, pose problems to the
reader as well, and particularly to the ecocritic. If ecocritics focus on the relationship between the text and nature, how are they to approach the textual landscapes of *Waterland*, which through narrativization as well as temporal and spatial distance resist a one-on-one connection to the extratextual—“real” and physical—landscape? A narratological approach to the novel, which focuses particularly on the framework narrative—and, related to that, the use of the fairy tale genre—can offer some solutions in this respect. After first discussing the benefits of a narratologically-inflected ecocriticism below, I will place two different readings of *Waterland* side-by-side, the first being the more conventional—and in line with existing scholarship—and the second more innovative and productive in foregrounding the novel’s environmental dimensions. As I’ll demonstrate, only by reading the textual landscape in its own right can we fully understand its relation to, and significance for, the extratextual world.

## Towards a Narratologically-Inflected Ecocriticism

Over the past few years, several scholars have begun exploring the intersections of ecocriticism and narratology, hereby focusing on the construction of the textual landscape in addition to ecocriticism’s traditional concern with the textual landscape as a reflection of a physical, “real” counterpart.8 “Econarratology,” as Erin James terms it, “maintains an interest in studying the relationship between literature and the physical environment, but does so with sensitivity to the literary structures and devices that we use to communicate representations of the physical environment to each other via narratives” (23). This project entails analyzing particularly how the nonhuman world is described—in addition to what—since a textual, novelistic landscape is never just a representation, but always determined by the literary and narratological elements that shape it—just as extratextual landscapes are the product of their historical, political, cultural and environmental circumstances. Nonetheless, this approach has been slow to develop. Both James and Markku Lehtimäki note the initial incompatibility of ecocriticism and narratology. James suggests that ecocriticism developed “in part as a reaction against the dominance of discursivity emerging from structuralism,” while narratology “helped to secure that dominance in the first place” (4). In narratology the emphasis tends to be on “fictional minds and imaginary storyworlds” (Lehtimäki 119), while ecocriticism “is too often preoccupied with the domain of nature to linger on the specific affordances that fictional narratives provide when it comes to imagining and situating oneself within suprahuman ecologies” (Lehtimäki 120). Yet a criticism which
focuses more on form than ecocriticism has hitherto done does not necessarily result in less emphasis on the depiction of nature, as Bonnie Costello suggests: “a [rhetorically oriented] criticism can involve real-world concerns in that it reveals the entanglement of nature and culture, the interplay between our desires, our concepts, and our perceptions, and possibilities for renewal and vitality within that entanglement” (14). An ecocriticism subsequently emerges which does not necessarily value the real over the imaginary or evaluate these in terms of each other. Ecritical engagement with any kind of fiction, including postmodern and/or contemporary novels, will rather embrace imaginative landscapes as well as non-textual spaces and the possibilities that both hold for a foregrounding of nature—whether in respect to an external landscape, or not. When, as ecocritics, we study the ways in which humans perceive and represent nature, we are essentially concerned with the ways in which the natural world is narratologically conceived—while never losing sight, of course, of the fact that this world externally exists. We consequently need to explore how these narratives shape our views of nature, and in turn, what this implies about our ways of thinking about the environment and our role in it.

As part of an ecocriticism more attuned to literary and narratological form, a list of questions can be devised which form the narratological–ecocritical counterpart of the questions asked by Cheryll Glotfelty in her introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader (xviii–ix). For instance, how does genre shape and determine a text’s representation of the natural nonhuman world, or its depiction of environmental crisis? As I will discuss in the next section, in Waterland the influence of fairy tales on Crick’s Fenland stories emphasizes, among other things, the geological instability of the landscape, whereas another genre, such as the detective novel, may foreground the David-vs-Goliath rhetoric characteristic of much environmental discourse. In her discussion of species extinction narratives Ursula Heise also highlights the role of genre in depictions of the nonhuman natural world. She argues that elegy and tragedy prevent the environmentalist imagination from envisioning a possible future for nature and instead focus on its end (69). Another question asked by a narratologically-inflected ecocriticism is how specific literary elements and conventions stress or undermine any environmental messages expressed in the novel. What is the role of a work’s structure in the way in which it portrays nature? And what is the effect of using narratological devices such as the framework narrative? Furthermore, how do focalization and narrative perspective work together to achieve a certain view of nature, or juxtapose and contrast it? Does the narrator, for example, challenge or confirm ideas
about the natural world expressed by focalizing characters? And what is the role of the narrative’s rhythm and pace? The meandering stories and relatively slow pace of Waterland, for instance, underline the oozing and meandering nature of one of its most important nonhuman characters: the river Ouse. Also, how successful is the author in his or her use of literary elements, and what is the effect of this on the text’s representation of the natural world? And how do a medium’s specific characteristics influence its depiction of nature? Similar questions are asked by James and Lehtimäki, including “[h]ow can narratives represent different scales of environmental space and time, such as geological time or planetary space?” (James 24), and “[h]ow might an author’s concern with a particular kind of ecology motivate the use of specific forms?” (Lehtimäki 137). Asking such questions leads to a fuller and more extensive ecocritical analysis that emphasizes the effects that different ways of telling—or framing—stories have on our narratives of nonhuman natural environments.

In the next sections I illustrate such an approach by focusing especially on Waterland as a framework narrative. The traditional reading of Waterland, I will show, is problematic as it sees the stories Crick tells as narratologically subordinate to the overarching Greenwich-narrative of Crick’s present. Though common, this analysis plays down the significance of the landscape in the novel, which is presented as essentially a landscape of the mind with little bearing on the real world. Hence I present another reading, one that is more extensively informed by narratology and which frames the entire novel as a fairy tale. This reading foregrounds the novel’s as yet unexplored environmental dimensions.

Stories Within Stories: Waterland’s Framework Narrative

Waterland is a framework narrative, consisting of an overarching—or extradiegetic—narrative, and several narratives that are told in the context of this larger narrative. The most conventional reading of the novel holds that the frame narrative is the historically most contemporary narrative, in which Crick is about to be retired from his job. The other narratives, such as Crick’s family history, the natural history of the Fens and his childhood experiences, are all told within this frame narrative, and are as such subordinate to it. Yet even though storytelling in Waterland has been discussed by several scholars,12 little attention has been paid to the potentially problematic nature of this reading, in which the subordinate narratives are the primary means by which a sense of place is established.
In the context of his classes at a London school, Crick tells his stories several decades, if not centuries, after the events took place. Nowhere does the novel suggest that he returned to the area after the 1947 flood and his father’s death. In fact, by the time he tells his stories to his students in the early 1980s, he has been a Londoner longer than he lived in the Fens. Crick is not only spatially removed from the Fens, but the landscape and people as he depicts them no longer exist: his childhood surroundings were literally lost in the 1947 flood and his father, brother and childhood friend Freddie have all died. In other words, he is making a place out of what is now a temporal and spatial void. At the same time, while emphasizing the margins in his stories, Crick has become part of the center, even more so since he lives in Greenwich, by which, Hanne Tange remarks, *Waterland* “plays on the contrast between Greenwich as a national centre, full of historical connotations, and the empty margins of the Fens” (84). Greenwich does not only carry connotations of being “a national centre”, it is also quite literally the 0-point of time. The establishment of the Greenwich meridian as the prime meridian in 1884 placed Greenwich—London—at both the spatial and temporal center of the world: from Greenwich all time is calculated, and its time zone has become the standard. Even more so, as a symbol of Victorian ideas of progress and Empire, Greenwich symbolizes exactly that which Crick aims to critique: a linear view of history. Crick’s current home and his regular walks to the Greenwich observatory as such undermine the ways in which he earlier used his stories about the Fens to destabilize official history. Consequently, the “Greenwich-framework” challenges the value of his stories about his family and the Fens. It also questions the function of these stories: within this framework, are they just the memories of a middle-aged man about to retire from the profession that shaped his life for so many years? Or does the temporal and spatial distance provide him with a particularly clear view of the Fens?13

Crick’s memories are problematic, as he acknowledges when he says to his pupils: “How we yearn—how you may one day yearn—to return to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong. How we yearn even for the gold of a July evening on which, though things had already gone wrong, things had not gone as wrong as they were going to. How we pine for Paradise. For mother’s milk. To draw back the curtain of events that has fallen between us and the Golden Age” (136). By expressing this Rousseauian desire to return to a time before history, Crick presents official history itself as a postlapsarian space, situating his stories in a time and space outside of it: they are set “before things went wrong” (emphasis mine)—i.e. before Freddie’s death, Mary’s abortion and Dick’s disappearance. This is a
time of innocence and childhood, but also explicitly a time in which what matters is the local, the natural, and the small—all of the things that Crick juxtaposes with the official history of the curriculum.

As stories within a larger extradiegetic narrative—which is haunted by the Cold War and fear of nuclear disaster—Crick’s Fenland tales may easily be seen as escapist. Nonetheless, as ecocritics and environmental thinkers have suggested, such nostalgia or escapism can also be made productive. Scott Slovic points to nature writing—especially the more idealizing kind—as providing “places to turn [to] for solace and inspiration” (5) that are much needed in a time of environmental crisis. Likewise, Kate Soper emphasizes the importance of looking back to vanished or vanishing times and spaces. Such a form of nostalgia, she claims, can connect us to past experiences and traditions which allow us to imagine—and create—the future: reflecting on past experiences can “highlight what is pre-empted by contemporary forms of consumption, and thereby stimulate desire for a future that will be at once less environmentally destructive and more sensually gratifying” (24). Nonetheless, the question remains whether imaginary and essentially non-existent landscapes such as those in Waterland can fulfill the same purpose. In other words, does it matter that the Fens in the novel are a wholly textual place, inaccessible to both Crick and the reader, embellished under the influence of time and nostalgia? To the general reader, it most likely does not matter: as Swift has remarked, his portrayal of the Fens in Waterland is apparently so realistic that many readers recognize it and are even surprised to find out that Swift never lived there himself.14 But what about the ecocritic, who is typically also concerned with the landscape outside the text, “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii), as Glotfelty phrases it? What, to put it differently, is the relevance of the imaginary landscape for the real world outside of the novel?

In his ecocritical reading of Waterland, Dominic Head suggests that the work can function as a vehicle for a Green agenda (72), whereas Armbruster notes that the flooding that recurs throughout the novel echoes contemporary concerns about the effects of climate change—especially topical after the severe flooding of large parts of England in the 2010s. The environmental dimension of Waterland, however, I’d argue, is far more extensive than this, and is achieved particularly through its fairy tale elements. At first reading these elements may seem oblique. Yet an alternative reading of the framework, a reading that is attuned particularly to the role and possibilities of the fairy tale genre, leads to a foregrounding of the environmental aspects of Waterland that have hitherto been left unexplored.
Fairy Tale Words in a Fairy Tale Place

While conventional readings hold that the Greenwich-narrative in which Crick tells his stories to his pupils is the extradiegetic narrative, my second analysis proposes that the overarching narrative is shaped by the fairy tale elements of the novel. This reversal is achieved by focusing on the structure of the novel, rather than the narrative, or story, itself. In narratological terms, this means emphasizing Waterland’s *syuzhet*—its narrative structure—rather than its *fabula*, the story itself. Whereas the analysis I presented above ignored the structure of the novel, and focused on merely what is told, rather than in what order, this reading emphasizes the order in which the story is told. Seen in this way, the novel is framed as a fairy tale: it begins with a chapter that explicitly and implicitly references the genre, and ends with Dick’s disappearance and transformation—a stock feature of fairy tales—into a fish or marine creature. All the other stories told between the first and last chapter consequently become subordinate to the fairy tale; or in narratological terms, they come to function at the diegetic or even hypodiegetic level. More than just a reversal on the narratological level, this analysis has three specific effects that foreground Waterland’s environmental dimension: it shows how the fairy tale genre emphasizes the physical instability of the Fens; it proposes an ethics of care; and, finally, it expresses a trans-corporeal awareness through the many transformations that take place in the novel.

The first sentences of *Waterland* present the reader with a theme familiar to many fairy tales—that of the son going out into the world: “‘And don’t forget,’ my father would say, as if he expected me at any moment to up and leave to seek my fortune in the wide world, ‘whatever you learn about people, however bad they turn out, each one of them has a heart, and each one of them was once a tiny baby sucking his mother’s milk’” (1). These, Crick acknowledges, are “[f]airy-tale words; fairy tale advice”, which suit the place in which he grew up: “we lived in a fairy-tale place. In a lock-keeper’s cottage, by a river, in the middle of the Fens. Far away from the wide world” (1). Not only do these lines explicitly frame *Waterland* as a fairy tale, they also imply a certain view of the landscape. In fairy tales the environment exists only in service of the story: there’s neither a background nor a foreground, because only the elements that are deemed relevant to the larger tale are mentioned; in this case, the cottage, the river and the Fens. We can be sure, then, as is indeed the case, that all three spaces come to be of great significance in what follows in the novel, and are even given magical, or “miraculous” (116), attributes.
The characters that populate this fairy tale landscape are equally miraculous. There are wise men, such as Crick’s father; mythical figures such as Bill Clay, “the marsh man” (13), and Saint Gunnhilda, a Christian counterpart to pagan fairies, who, according to Fenland mythology, lived in the marshes and resisted the waters and demons (18); and even a fairy tale witch. In the tellingly-titled chapter “About the Witch” Crick relates how as teenagers he and his future wife Mary made their way to Martha Clay’s cottage, so Mary could have an abortion. It is twilight when they walk through the meadows, the “right time to arrive at a witch”, as Crick ironically notes (300-1). Once they get there, however, the witch does not look at all like witches in fairy tales: “No pointed hat, no broomstick, no grinning black cat on shoulder” (301). At the same time, by negating this typical image, Crick—not inadvertently, I’d argue—emphasizes just how much his Fenland stories are shaped by fairy tales, and Martha’s cottage is worthy of a fairy tale witch’s: “It’s hung with dead birds... It’s hung with nameless and unnameable bunches of leaves, grasses, roots, seedpods, in every stage of freshness and desiccation” (304). Eventually Martha carries out the abortion, although so badly that Mary is never able to have children. As such Martha Clay does not only echo fairy tales by fulfilling the role of witch in Crick’s stories, but also by her association with pregnancy and birth. To the women writing the first modern fairy tales in seventeenth-century France, fairies were particularly important because they often functioned as midwives in their tales. They do not only attend the birth, but also “orchestrate every stage of reproduction. They predict conception and, if angry, cast spells of infertility” (Tucker 56).

Crick’s overall project in the novel to challenge grand narratives makes the fairy tale a particularly apt framing genre. Originating in seventeenth-century French salons, the earliest fairy tales presented a topsy-turvy world that critiqued contemporary political and social circumstances. Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, who first employed the term fairy tale for her 1679 collection *Les contes des fees*, used her stories to depict powerful women at a time when women had limited power in reality (Zipes 224). Specifically d’Aulnoy wanted to present an alternative to the religious, political and societal strictures of the ancien régime and aimed to “rewrite the civilizing process through the representation of modern fairies, who strived to introduce new customs and moral behavior into narratives” (234). Like the tellers of these early fairy tales, Crick is quite literally rewriting history by favoring the local, small, history of the Fens over the national and global history of the curriculum—a task which he takes very seriously, since he acknowledges that his pupils are “[c]hildren who will inherit the earth” (7).
The fairy tale narrative is further emphasized by the Fenland landscape. As a result of centuries of drainage, the Fens are literally—geologically—an unstable landscape, as the drained land sinks and is subsequently flooded. One of the effects of the extradiegetic fairy tale narrative is hence to foreground the geological instability as well as the magical and transformative features of the Fens as a landscape that challenges the boundaries between the natural and the manmade, the real and the imaginary.

Yet fairy tales and their landscapes are not only unstable, or shapeshifting—they are also enchanting, and magical. By making the fairy tale narrative the overarching narrative, I’d propose, this same sense of enchantment with the nonhuman natural world is transferred to the Fenland landscape as a whole. Moreover, Crick’s stories—both the extradiegetic fairy tales, and the subordinate ones—transfer this enchantment to his audience. The audience plays a significant role in framework narratives which, as David Herman suggests, emulate “the process of task-directed apprenticeship (or guided participation)” that characterizes fairy tales, and that is essential for cognitive development (280). Through the framework narrative and the use of the fairy tale genre, both Crick’s pupils and the novel’s readers become apprentices taught to see the natural world differently, and see its magic as well as (potential) bleakness. In fact, for those attentive to it, framing the novel as a fairy tale stimulates the audience to develop an ethics of care towards the nonhuman natural world. Such care, Robert Pogue Harrison suggests, finds fulfillment in an attachment to the land that is intimately tied up with its history, as well as the personal and public history of those that live on it.16 Crick’s stories, which range from natural history to his own family history, function as precisely such means of instilling a sense of environmental care in his pupils—and in us, the readers.

A third way in which the fairy tale framework adds an environmental dimension to Waterland is by employing transformations as not only a stock feature of the genre, but as events that highlight the transcorporeality of both human and nonhuman actors. In the Fens, land regularly becomes water, and water, land. The inhabitants of the region consequently experience peculiar sensations, as Crick notes: “every Fenman suffers now and then the illusion that the land he walks over is not there, is floating” (13, original emphasis). Even more significant, however, are the human transformations that take place, and which blur the boundaries between the nonhuman natural and the human. In telling his family history, it soon becomes clear that Crick descends from a long line of shapeshifting people. The Cricks were initially water people who sabotaged drainage works, hunted waterfowl and
fished (10). At some point in the eighteenth century, for reasons that he cannot explain, they became land people and joined the efforts of the drainers and land-reclaimers. Or maybe, as Crick suggests, they didn’t completely become land people, but amphibians who “at their heart always knew, in spite of their land-preserving efforts, that they belonged to the old, prehistoric flood” (13). As amphibians, the Cricks belong to both water and land, just as one of Tom Crick’s ancestors from his mother’s side was both human and nonhuman. When Sarah Atkinson finally dies in 1874, after years of living in a more or less vegetative state, numerous rumors begin to circulate that she did not die at all. Instead, as one fishermen swears, the ninety-two-year-old woman escaped from the asylum and ran to the banks of the Ouse where “she dived ‘like a very mermaid’ beneath the water never to surface again” (104). Although this testimony is deemed “ludicrous” by historians—as Crick notes—this story bears an uncanny similarity to one of the most significant events in the novel, namely Dick’s disappearance in the waters of the same Ouse. When towards the end of the novel the teenage Tom Crick discovers that his brother killed Freddy Parr, Dick takes off on the sludge-barge that he works on. By the time Tom and his father arrive, he can no longer be stopped, and they can only watch as Dick dives into the water: “a fish of a man” (357). Despite keeping a watch and searching the water, they never find him again, and Tom concludes that “[t]here’ll come no answering, gurgling, rescue-me cry. He’s on his way. Obeying instinct. Returning. The Ouse flows to the sea” (357). Like his forefathers never wholly ceased to be waterpeople, Dick too switches—or returns—to his native element: water. Through Dick and other shapeshifters, then, Crick’s family history not only plays on the theme of transformation common to fairy tales, but adds a trans-corporeal and environmental awareness to the novel.

Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, Stacy Alaimo proposes, shows how “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world [and] underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (Bodily Natures 2). While Alaimo primarily draws on the example of the sea to illustrate the ways in which materials dumped in the ocean ultimately return to us—and our bodies—the fact that our bodies are largely made up of water, and that all life on earth is said to have originated in the sea17 emphasizes the role of water as one of the most pervasive agents of trans-corporeality. Similarly, the transformations that take place in Waterland—all related to water—are a particularly apt way of expressing an environmental awareness of the interconnectedness and enmeshment of human and nonhuman. As Alaimo suggests, trans-corporeality emphasizes movement across bodies—specifically,
“by underscoring that trans indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors” (Bodily Natures 2, original emphasis). Framing the novel as a fairy tale similarly opens up such a mobile space, and leads it to express and emphasize an environmental awareness that entails not only intimate knowledge of the land, but extends towards an ethics of care and an awareness of the enmeshment of human and nonhuman. Consequently, a narratologically-inflected ecocriticism leads to unexpected revelations and transformations that, like in the best fairy tales, may also transform its audience, Crick’s pupils and Swift’s readers alike.

NOTES

1. See for instance Karla Armbruster, Ronald H. McKinney and Serpil Oppermann for examples of such readings.

2. In addition to Oppermann, discussed below, see also McKinney, who has argued that postmodernism and ecocriticism meet in their shared commitment to political activism and their concern with the local (821).

3. The argument for the broadening of ecocritical practice to include more contemporary fiction is also made in “Redrawing the Boundaries of Ecocritical Practice” (Bracke).

4. See for instance Robert Thayer in LifePlace (2003), particularly page 73, and Buell who notes that “[e]cological literacy is seen as a crucial aspect of bioregional citizenship” (“Ecocriticism” 91).

5. McKinney also suggests that Crick’s stories, and storytelling in general, are not escapist, but that “it is the uneventfulness and meaningless emptiness of our experience of reality which provokes our need to tell stories” (825)—i.e. stories are not told to escape from reality, but rather to make sense of it.

6. Similar points are made by Damon Marcel DeCoste, Gerhard Haefner and Hanne Tange, who juxtapose storytelling with history. Robert K. Irish creates a similar opposition by arguing that storytelling quells fears whereas “official” history evokes terror (920; 929).


8. See, for example, Markku Lehtimäki “Natural Environments in Narrative Contexts”; Erin James, The Storyworld Accord; and Marco Caracciolo, The Experientiality of Narrative. In “Modernist Lifewriting and Nonhuman Lives: Ecologies of Experience in Virginia Woolf’s Flush,” David Herman demonstrates a cognitive narratological approach to a narrative—Flush—largely focalized through a dog. Raul Lejano, Mrill Ingram, and Helen
Ingram’s *The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks* goes some ways towards exploring the significance of narrative to our experiences of the environment, but is limited to environmental networks, and does not explore elements such as the depiction of time, as well as fictional narratives as a whole. In *Econarratology* James notes a number of other and earlier examples in which ecocriticism and narratology are combined, such as J. Scott Bryson’s *Ecopoetry* and Scott Knickerbocker’s *Ecopoetics.*

9. Similarly, James notes that “[i]f we understand ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, surely of interest to this study are the ways in which literary narratives offer up virtual representations of physical environments for their readers to inhabit and experience” (33, original emphasis).

10. Although not discussing this in terms of genre, Buell notes that in toxic discourse “moral passion [is] cast in a David versus Goliath scenario” (*Writing* 40).

11. In *The Comedy of Survival* (1974) Joseph Meeker also emphasized the significance of genre in narratives about nature, arguing that particularly comedy promotes our survival as a species and a greater awareness of our environment.

12. James Acheson proposes that “Swift endorses Crick’s belief in the importance of avoiding fairy-tale illusion in his choice of *Waterland*’s second epigraph [from *Great Expectations]*” (93). DeCoste, on the other hand, argues that “this endorsement of illusion is far from contemptible in Crick’s eyes; indeed, given the character of his ‘real,’ such escapism is a desirable, almost morally imperative, enterprise” (381). Stories, DeCoste suggests, are “consoling gestures” in Crick’s narratives (383).

13. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for making this suggestion.

14. “When I’m forced to disabuse those people who think I must have been born in the Fens, they can be surprised, disappointed, even sometimes a little suspicious, as if in setting a novel in a place I don’t come from I’ve carried out some kind of fraud” (Graham Swift, *Making an Elephant* 302).

15. For a particularly insightful analysis of how these levels work, see the chapter “Narrative Embedding and Distributed Intelligence” in David Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind* (2013).

16. See his work *Gardens.*

17. See Alaimo’s article “States of Suspension: Trans-Corporeality at Sea” for an extensive discussion.

**Works Cited**


