TALES TALL AND TRUE:
JOHN WOODS ON TRUTH IN FICTION

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Truth in Fiction (2018) is a sequel of sorts to John Woods's much earlier *The Logic of Fiction* (1974). In that book, after canvassing a series of approaches to the semantics of fiction drawn from different areas of nonclassical logic, Woods eventually advocates a system of quantified modal logic which, as he now puts it, "appl[ied] to literary theory the refreshment of a well-understood and rigorously organized instrument of analysis" (125).[1] However, the present book reflects the major turn Woods's thinking has taken over recent decades away from the formalization of informal reasoning and towards a naturalized logic. Elsewhere he has revisited his early work applying formal logic to the understanding of the fallacies in the light of this naturalistic turn (for example, Woods, 2013); here he revisits his early work on fiction. Woods now argues that formal approaches to everyday reasoning lose "sight of an important trichotomy which marks the difference between consequence-*having* and consequence-*spotting* and ... consequence-*drawing*" (14). Whereas formal logic acquits itself well in accounting for the first of these activities, since the latter two take place "in the psychological spaces of human beings, the need for an empirically sensitive naturalized logic is unmissable" (218).

1. Taking Stories Seriously

Woods rightly avers that "One of the worst mistakes a philosopher can make about fiction, especially popular fiction, is to hold that since it is meant mainly for entertainment ... fiction's not of much interest to anything as serious as philosophy" (104). *Truth in Fiction* is true to this admirable maxim, and pays due heed not just to fiction in general, but also to many of its idiosyncrasies. Woods complains that other philosophical accounts of fiction often display

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[1]This and all subsequent unqualified page references are to (Woods, 2018).

"alienation from the home-thinking and home-speakings of stories" (217). Specifically, Woods attributes to many rival theorists of fiction five "Basic Laws of Fiction":

    I *The something law:* Everything whatever is something or other.
   II *The existence law:* Reference and quantification are existentially loaded.
  III *The truth law:* No sentence violating the existence law can be true.
  IV *The fiction law:* The sentences of fiction fail to refer and they fail to be true.
   V *The inference law:* Inferences from and within fiction operate, if at all, in a much more circumscribed way than natural language in referentially stable inferences (35).

All but the first of these laws Woods repudiates as "an irretrievably lost cause for fiction" (149). He reasons as follows. Fiction plays a large part in many people's lives. They talk about fictional characters in much the same way that they talk about non-fictional characters. Hence we should not adhere to the Basic Laws, lest we conclude that in so doing the consumers of fiction are profoundly confused. Consider, for example, betting.

    Dick Van Dyke, as the eponymous protagonist of the justly neglected romantic comedy *Fitzwilly* (1967), makes a bar bet over who cut off Samson's hair. Everyone knows that it was Delilah, but, at least according to the King James Bible, everyone is wrong: "she called for a man, and she caused *him* to shave off the seven locks" (Judges 16:19, emphasis added). Van Dyke's character wins his bet. But, according to some theologians, the King James Bible has it wrong: the Hebrew text of Judges 16 should be read as implying that Delilah called out (perhaps to Samson, to check he is sound asleep) but then cut off his hair herself (Sasson, 1988). The Anchor Bible, for example, follows this reading. Had this been the Bible in the bar, Fitzwilly would have lost his bet. However, on either account, the doings of Delilah are what Woods calls "bet-sensitive" (105; Woods, 1974, 13): bets can be made about them and settled to the satisfaction of all parties. The outcome of the bet does not alter the bet-sensitivity of the issue; rather, it is because the bet has an outcome that the question is bet-sensitive. Nor does any part of the transaction hinge on whether Delilah was historical or fictional: the bet was on what the Bible says, not whether it was historically accurate. Subtle questions of higher criticism are seldom resolved in saloons. But if Fitzwilly and his drinking companions had bet

on who cut the hair from the present king of France, the bet would be irresoluble. In 1967, as in 1905, the present king of France was neither historical nor fictional. He was in Woods's terminology a "nonesuch" (105).

Not much counts as a nonesuch. It might be thought that nonesuches would include the postulates of failed theories, such as phlogiston and caloric and the suppositious planet Vulcan (the one intended to explain the anomaly in the perihelion of Mercury, not the unambiguously fictional homeworld of Mr Spock). However, for Woods, Vulcan "was an existential error, but not a referential one" (154). The astronomers who postulated its existence turned out to be wrong, but they had no difficulty in talking about it, both before and after this setback—and nor do we when we recount the story. What they were talking about, it transpired, was a non-existent planet.

Woods's commitment to take seriously the idiosyncrasies of (popular) fiction leads him to vexed questions of the interaction between fictional and nonfictional objects and between multiple authors engaging with the same fictions. Here he lightly revises a series of theses introduced in his earlier book (Woods, 1974, 44):

The history-constitutivity thesis: A sentence S is history constitutive of a real entity x if and only if S is true, S is about x, and it is not the case that S is true solely in virtue of its utterer's sayso.

The fictionalization thesis: S is a fictionalization of a real entity x if and only if S is true, S is about x and S could not have been true of x without the sayso of its author.

The history-constitutivity of fictional entities thesis: S is history-constitutive of a fictional entity x if and only if S is true, is about x and is true simply by its author's sayso, and the author whose sayso makes S true is the creator of x.

The fictionalization of the fictional thesis: S is a fictionalization of a fictional entity x if and only if S is true and about x, and could not have been true of x in the absence of its author's sayso, and the author in question is not the creator of x (100).

These theses permit items from the real world to turn up in works of fiction and fictional items from one fiction to turn up in other fictions, as in pastiche or fanfiction, something many philosophical treatments of fiction overlook. Woods concedes that his theses as presented "aren't quite up to managing the facts presently in view" (102). I discuss some possible avenues for their revision in §4 below.

2. Taking Inconsistencies Lightly

A consequence of Woods's determination to take ordinary talk about fiction seriously is that much such talk must be, at least facially, both true and false. It is true that Fitzwilly made a bet in a bar—we can see it on screen. It is also false that Fitzwilly made a bet in a bar—because there is no such person and never was. If Woods's approach is to succeed he must acknowledge this apparent inconsistency and also accommodate the insouciance with which it is typically received. He takes a two-pronged approach to this problem, as he summarizes in the following two theses:

The no-contradiction thesis: The systemic inconsistencies of fiction are logical inconsistencies but not logical contradictions.

The no-bother thesis: In the circumstances of irremovable absolute inconsistency, closure constraints on consequence-drawing inoculate speakers and reasoners against cognitive collapse (16).

In other words, the appearance of inconsistency is mostly removable (first prong) and, even when it isn't, it causes much less trouble than logicians might expect (second prong).

Woods finds a solution to "fiction's systemic inconsistency problem" in Aristotle (130). In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states the Law of Non-Contradiction in several distinct ways. The most verbose of these statements reads as follows: "It is impossible that the same thing belong and not belong to the same thing at the same time. And *in the same respect*" (1005b 19–20, emphasis added). This provides a well-trodden path to inconsistency avoidance: what the paraconsistent logicians Richard Routley and Robert Meyer refer to dismissively as a "difference-of-respect procedure", remarking that it "goes back to the Socratic dialogues" (Routley and Meyer, 1976, 19).[2] For example, William Empson employs this approach, observing that it is often feasible to "make the contradiction into two statements; thus 'p and $-p$' may mean: 'If $a = a_1$, then p; if $a = a_2$, then $-p$'" (Empson, 1947, 196). Woods adopts a similar approach, in terms of what he calls "the sitedness of truth" (130). He asserts that "the sites primitive" reflects "empirically discernible worldwide linguistic and doxastic behaviour" (191). Hence, to adapt Empson's terms, the a_i would be sites, resolving the apparent inconsistency above by making a_1 the real world and a_2 the fiction of *Fitzwilly*:

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[2]Woods, in his present naturalistic stance, is naturally unpersuaded by Routley and Meyer's favoured approach: "Paraconsistent logics describe how formal logistic systems, not flesh-and-blood people, manage to spare themselves the perceived chaos of absolute inconsistency" (178).

"We read the text knowing that the story it tells is not true *in situ* the world, and we also know that indeed it is true *in situ* the story" (140). Sites are less complete than the worlds of modal semantics and not necessarily consistent, thereby distancing Woods's account of fiction from accounts based in possible world semantics, such as that of David Lewis (1978).

Woods appeals to sites to support the no-contradiction thesis; to support the no-bother thesis, he invokes "filters". He proposes that "the irrelevance filter is an inbuilt part of our cognitive machinery, doing what nature has designed it to do, for the most part without the distraction of conscious awareness" (187). By prioritizing our immediate concerns over the pursuit of every logical consequence of any combination of our beliefs, we are able to thrive in suboptimal epistemic environments, wherein our belief set is routinely corrupted by apparent contradiction. We succeed at resisting the temptation to draw arbitrary conclusions from inconsistent premises as the classically valid rule of *ex falso quodlibet* would permit, but we do this without formally renouncing classical logic. In other words, as Woods puts it, our inconsistent belief set "is equipped with an agenda-irrelevance filter that enables proper subsets of its deductive closure to be truth-tracking" (188). As Woods concedes, his approach exhibits a preference for "the theoretically immature over the theoretically flourishing" (192), and is ultimately a promissory note for future work in cognitive science.

Woods's robust commitment to the truth of fictional statements provides a ready solution to what has come to be known as "the paradox of fiction" (140). The paradox is that we are emotionally moved by works of fiction despite knowing that they are not real, even though reality might be thought necessary for the objects of our emotions. Woods persuasively likens fiction to flotation, since in each case, "competing causal powers are in play" (140). Just as floating objects are acted on by gravity, pulling them downwards, and buoyancy, pushing them upwards, so is the reader acted on by the emotional force of a story experienced as true (rightly, *in situ* the story) and by the knowledge that it is not true (*in situ* the world). If the story succeeds emotionally, the former outweighs the latter.

3. The Complete Sherlock Holmes

The framework set out above allows Woods to tackle a range of questions, best illustrated by example. Woods's recurring example is Sherlock Holmes, an apposite choice not only because "Sherlock

is one of the world's best known non-existent objects" (102), but also because the stories in which he occurs present problems for theories of fiction that tidier and more self-contained narratives do not. Woods asserts that, in reading a story set in a world much like our own we may, indeed must, presume many facts about that world that we know to be true of the real world but which have not been explicitly confirmed for the fiction: "fictional works inherit the world" (81). (Woods is thereby committed to what William D'Alessandro calls "implicitism" (2016, 53).) For example, there are several parts of Holmes's anatomy that Arthur Conan Doyle never discusses, but this omission should not be taken to imply their absence.[3] As Woods observes, "Sherlock's incompleteness is only an epistemic one, in just the way that Caesar's was or Vladimir Putin's is" (216). Less successfully, he tells us that "even Gregor Samsa had a spine, both before waking up and after, albeit not the same one" (81). But, at least if we follow the consensus of translators that Kafka's "*Ungeziefer*" should be rendered as something akin to "bug", then what Samsa awoke to find himself was, quite literally, invertebrate. Nonetheless, the problem here is confined to the example: for most fictional characters, spinelessness is strictly metaphorical.

The Holmes stories notoriously contain inconsistencies: Dr Watson's war wound is variously in his leg or his shoulder; only two months elapse between April and October in "The Red-Headed League", and so on (Sayers, 1946, 168). Woods observes that most readers take these lapses in their stride: "Watson's wound is in one place or the other and remains, and as is most of what is true of Holmes' faithful friend, unknown to readers" (94). Some readers, of course, are more pertinacious. Notoriously, so in the case of "Sherlockians" playing the "Great Game" of attempting to resolve apparent omissions and inconsistencies in the stories by elaborate (and often tongue-in-cheek) extrapolations from the text and relevant historical sources, on the straight-faced supposition that the stories are historically true. The accidental inspiration for the Great Game was an essay by the writer and priest Ronald Knox satirizing the more far-fetched sort of reasoning sometimes employed in Biblical criticism (Knox, 1920). (This essay seems to mark the point at which "canon", used satirically by Knox, jumped the fence from

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[3]Indeed, Woods reveals elsewhere that "the working title of *Truth in Fiction* was *Sherlock's Member: An Essay on Truth in Fiction* … I am a bit sorry now that I chickened out" (Woods, 2019, 358).

theology to literature and popular culture.) For example, in *The Sign of Four*, Doyle has Watson wed Mary Morstan, but isolated remarks in later stories suggest that he is widowed and remarries. However, any attempt at a chronology will show Watson moving in and out of Baker St on multiple occasions, which some Sherlockians have taken as evidence of further marriages. Hence Dorothy L. Sayers could complain of "a conspiracy afoot to provide Watson with as many wives as Henry VIII" (Sayers, 1946, 148).

The Great Game lends helpful support to one aspect of Woods's account. Woods is at pains to distance himself from the approach to fiction he terms "pretendism" (13). On this account, defended in different guises by philosophers as various as Saul Kripke, Gareth Evans, John Searle, Kendall Walton and, more recently, Bradley Armour-Garb and James Woodbridge, readers of fiction don't believe the things they read, but pretend to do so. Woods rejects pretendism as phenomenologically implausible: readers of fiction do not experience reading fiction "as pretending, play-acting or make-believing" (20). That is, however, exactly what the players of the Great Game do experience (unless they really have convinced themselves that Holmes was an historical figure). But, crucially, Sherlockians are not typical readers and playing the Great Game is not typical readerly behaviour. If pretendism succeeds as an epistemology of the Great Game, it must fail as an epistemology of everyday fiction consumption.

A deeper inconsistency concerns Holmes's death and resurrection. Doyle indulged in an early specimen of what has come to be known as retroactive continuity, or ret-conning, when in "The Empty House" he reversed the decision made a decade earlier in "The Final Problem" to kill off his most famous creation. As Woods acknowledges, problems such as this present a dilemma for his approach. The specific case is not the worst possible, since Watson's presence as potentially unreliable narrator provided Doyle with an effective line of retreat. The wider problem is that presented by serial fiction in general: "how to individuate sites when stories are elements of a series" (95). If each individual story is treated as a distinct site, the continuity of the series is destroyed. But if the series is a single site, then sites cannot help resolve any contradictions internal to the series. Woods's favoured resolution is to treat auctorial statements in serial fictions as provisional, but subject to something like a statute of limitations or "a variant of the common law for the long-gone" (96). That is, after sufficient time has elapsed, some

matters should be treated as settled, if defeasibly so, just as missing persons may eventually be declared legally dead.

Deepest of all are those "inconsistencies internal to the stories in which they inhere by narratively driven auctorial design" (192). Doyle's works would not seem to supply an example, since his stories were always at least intended to be consistent. Woods suggests Ray Bradbury's celebrated time-travel narrative "Sound of Thunder", in which the characters return to a present which has been changed by their actions in the past. Woods concludes that the no-contradiction thesis will be of no avail and resorts to the no-bother thesis: some statements may indeed be both true and false of Bradbury's 2055, ensuring by *ex falso quodlibet* that every statement is true as well, but readers are practiced at turning a blind eye to such things. Abandoning the no-contradiction thesis here may be premature—if we interpret the story in terms of Everettian space-time, the characters return to a different world from the one they left. The natural way of accommodating this to Woods's system would seem to be to treat the two 2055s as different sites. However, the broader point is that readers can tolerate outright inconsistency, although even the most tolerant of readers may eventually abandon a story as incoherent.

4. From Sayso to Fanfic

The Holmes narratives have been frequently adapted—perhaps more frequently than any other works. This presents at least two problems: the identity of the characters across the different versions and the canonicity of the adapted works. Woods provides a means of addressing both issues. His history-constitutivity of fictional entities thesis ostensibly restricts canonicity to works produced directly by the creator of an entity, rendering all adaptations noncanonical. However, Woods qualifies his theses to widen the scope to include cases where "ownership of a fictional character passes by agreement to a different author, who is then free to make further things history-constitutive of that identically the same character" (100). For Sherlock Holmes, that would appear to extend canonicity at least to authorised adaptations, from William Gillette's 1899 play onwards. Woods constrains this broad account of canonicity by his world-inheritance thesis: for example, since the later Basil Rathbone films were set in the 1940s when Holmes would have been in his nineties, as Rathbone manifestly was not, "what Hollywood borrowed in 1944 was not the person whom Doyle created

but rather the name ... and a fair bit of its connotation" (118). This applies *a fortiori* to adaptations set in the twenty-first century, such as *Sherlock* (2010–17) and *Elementary* (2012–19); conversely, adaptations set in the 1940s which do depict Holmes as nonagenarian, such as *Mr. Holmes* (2015), could still be construed as depicting the same character.

All of these speculations are at odds with the established usage of "canon" in discussion of Holmes: the 56 stories and four novels published by Doyle (excluding the so-called "apocrypha"—noncanonical pieces written by Doyle—let alone any adaptations). This definition of the Holmes canon is due some deference, as it is so firmly established (and, as we have seen, marks the first use of the term outside of theology). Moreover, on this narrower interpretation, Woods's fictionalization of the fictional thesis not only provides a plausible account of Holmesian pastiche and fanfiction, it also provides an affirmative answer to Sara Uckelman's question, "Is it possible for an author to write fanfic of their own work"?[4] At least some of the apocrypha would seem to be exactly this. For example, "The Field Bazaar", written for an Edinburgh University student fund raiser in 1896, may be seen as Doyle fictionalizing his own fictional creations. This sheds doubt, for instance, on Watson's otherwise unattested status as an Edinburgh graduate. There are two questions here: did Doyle seriously intend that Watson graduated from Edinburgh; and, if so, are his extra-canonical statements to that effect history constitutive?

Woods's reliance on author's sayso requires him to take authors' intentions seriously, but there is more than one way to do this. The contrast is brought into focus by the question of Dumbledore's sexual orientation: gay according to J. K. Rowling in public comments but as yet unspecified in her novels and film scripts. Can Rowling make history constitutive statements about the fictional entities she created when talking about her work and not just when writing that work? On Woods's account of author's sayso, Rowling would seem entirely unrestricted in how she communicates history constitutive statements. (A perspective Rowling seems to share (Gendler, 2010, 152).) By contrast, we could require that author's sayso is made explicit in the text itself. A possible compromise would be that the author's sayso must be present in the text, but may be wholly implicit, provided that it was intended by the author as something that the

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[4]On Twitter, November 21, 2018. See also (Uckelman, 2018).

reader might in principle grasp (Irwin, 2015, 146). External statements such as Rowling's can then be relevant to our understanding of the text by making the implicit explicit.

Holmes adaptations present another problem for theories of fiction: they are so numerous that they may qualify as what Roy Cook defines as "massive serialized collaborative fiction" (MSCF). Cook defines "massive" as so large that it is "impossible, extremely implausible, or unlikely that a single person can, or will, experience all parts of the fiction in a manner appropriate for the interpretation, evaluation, and so on of the fiction" (Cook, 2013, 271). This is surely true of the multitudinous versions of Holmes, which are also clearly serial and collaborative, although they may exhibit less cohesion than Cook's examples of the central continuity of DC or Marvel comics. Cook makes five observations about canonicity in MSCFs: (1) "some noncanonical works are *interpretationally relevant*"; (2) "the canon versus noncanon distinction is *sensitive to medium*"; (3) "canonicity practices are, at least partially, *political* and *commercial*"; (4) "canonicity practices are *dynamic* and *negotiable*: a work is not eternally canonical"; and (5) "canonicity practices are *participatory*" (Cook, 2013, 272 f.). Each of these points suggests possible further refinements to our understanding of sayso. The first reflects the discussion above: perhaps we should favour interpretations that make Watson an Edinburgh graduate and Dumbledore gay, even if we do not have canonical author's sayso to support these claims. The second point offers a possible restriction on sayso: prioritize auctorial statements in the favoured medium. (For Doyle, this is prose: his Sherlock Holmes plays are not usually seen as canonical.) As to the third and fourth points, we have seen that Holmes's death at Reichenbach was made canonical by Doyle's sayso, but is no longer; this reflects a commercial decision: the $45,000 Doyle received from *Collier's* for bringing Holmes back to life made him the best paid author in the world. The last point suggests perhaps the most important departure from Woods's account: canon formation reflects collective decision making by the audience as much as the author, whose sayso is thereby constrained.

These factors suggest a friendly amendment: replace "is the creator of *x*" with "has canonical authority with respect to *x* and is accepted by the audience as having acted in accordance with that authority in stating S" in the history-constitutivity of fictional entities thesis and, suitably negated, the fictionalization of the fictional thesis. Creators and their assignees would ordinarily have canonical authority, but may chose not to exercise it, or may intend to exercise

it but fail to do so if they are not accepted by the audience as having done so. (Conversely, a creator may chose not to exercise canonical authority, but be (mis)interpreted by the audience as having done so. Unless the creator corrects the error, the audience's take on their sayso should stand.) The audience may revisit their acceptance or rejection. In particular, they may do so at the prompting of the creator, although they are not obliged so to do.

While there are many such details in *Truth in Fiction* with which one may take issue, and there is much left to do in the broader programme of which it is a part, it is never less than a thought-provoking and enjoyable read. Anyone interested in the semantics and pragmatics of fiction will find much of value in its pages.

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