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Review: Carolin Gebauer, *Making Time: World Construction in the Present-Tense Novel*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, 378 pp., ISBN 9783110708028, h/bk €99,95, p/bk €24.95, e-book €99.95

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This is a book review of Carolin Gebauer, *Making Time: World Construction in the Present-Tense Novel*. DeGruyter, 2021.

When German literary theorist Käte Hamburger's *Die Logik der Dichtung* [*The Logic of Literature*] was first published in 1962, Roy Pascal's review of the book noted that it 'stirred up considerable discussion in Germany' (1) about the usage of tense in narrative prose fiction. According to Hamburger, the past tense is the 'standard form of fiction,' and gives 'fiction its special character as fiction' (Kalin, 124), while the present tense is highly 'ambiguous': 'It can indicate a unique action taking place now; a repeated or customary action; a future action ('the plane leaves next Tuesday'); it is used for generalizations, without reference to time,' which make the present-tense is a 'clumsy instrument for an extended tale' (Pascal 1962: 10).

Carolin Gebauer's 2021 *Making Time: World Constructions in the Present-Tense Novel,* haunted by Hamburger's 'outdated' (25) but influential scrutiny of the tense usage in narrative fiction, seems to respond to Hamburger's skepticism by showing how the use of present-tense in narrative fiction plays a crucial role in the world making of contemporary novel.

Gebauer's goal is an ambitious one. After all, the past tense has long been hailed as 'the tense of fictional narration' (Hamburger quoted in John Harvey, 74). As Gebauer notes in the epigraph, Thomas Mann insists in his foreword to *The Magic Mountain* that 'Since histories must be in the past, then the more past the better, it would seem, for them in their character as histories, and for him, the teller of them, rounding wizard of times gone by' (1).

To Mann's chagrin, however, present-tense narration has been used by writers for centuries. It can be detected in some nineteenth-century novels (think *Bleak House* and *Jane Eyre*). But it has certainly been making a more frequent and persistent appearance in contemporary fiction, garnering scholarly attention. In his 2006 article 'Fiction in the Present Tense' John Harvey, for one, made a shortlist of novels in the present-tense: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Life A User's Manual (La Vie mode d'emploi)* by Georges Perec (1978), *The Piano Teacher (Die Klavierspielerin)* by Elfriede Jelinek (1983), *Ghosts* by Paul Auster (1985), *Independence Day by Richard Ford* (1995). To Harvey's list we can add, Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night Traveller*, J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello,* and Carlos Fuentes's harrowing novella *Aura.*

Making Time is based on Gebauer's 2019 PhD dissertation. Since its publication in 2021, it has already won numerous prestigious awards such as the Barbara Perkins and George Perkins Prize of the International Society for the Study of Narrative (2023), the ESSE Book Award for Junior Scholars in the field of Literatures in the English Language (2022). Across fourteen chapters, Gebauer develops a systematic narratological model of present-tense usage in contemporary narrative fiction, arguing against what she calls grammatical fallacy. With a reminder that 'tense

usage operates differently in fiction, from the way it does in non-fictional discourse' (53), Gebauer argues that 'the present tense, in 'combination with other narrative strategies…brings about a specific textual and readerly effect' (57–8). The first six chapters offer an intensely systematic theoretical framework and literature review of the research field that span linguistic, narratological, and philosophical studies of tense usage in narrative fiction. The remaining chapters are devoted to close readings of case studies.

One important contribution of Gebauer's research is her take on what she calls 'grammatical fallacy.' Gebauer notes that the key distinction between grammatical tense and fictional tense is where grammatical tense is 'the linguistic category that enables us to indicate in ordinary communication whether we are referring to past, present, or future,' the fictional tense is the narrative device that 'helps authors to bring about specific textual as well as readerly effects in narrative fiction' (61). 'When used as a fictional narrative strategy,' she adds, 'tense can express a temporal relation between the narrative events and the act of narration and may also fulfill various other, non-temporal functions' (61). Thus, Gebauer contends that we need to go 'beyond grammatical and temporal categories' and redefine 'fictional tense as a proper narratological category' to change our 'understanding of the phenomenon of present-tense narration' (61).

Deriving from her close readings of nine present-tense novels, Gebauer develops eight functions of the fictional present tense usage. Her case studies include Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2010[2009]) and *Bringing Up the Bodies* (2013 [2012]); Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2004 [2003]); Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2006 [2005]); Don Winslow's *The Power of the Dog* (2006[2005]); Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* (2016); Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010); Irvine Welsh's *Skagboys* (2012a) and *Dead Men's Trousers* (2018). The eight functions that Gebauer identifies are as follows:

1. referential function (narratorial comments or when the narrator addressed the narratee): offers readers spatiotemporal orientation within the textual world;
2. immersive function: gives readers the impression they are experiencing the events while they are actually happening;
3. metareferential function: draws the readers' attention to the fact that the narratives which yield these storyworlds are artificial construct;
4. communicative function: simulates oral or conversational storytelling;
5. synchronizing function: negation of any temporal distance between story and discourse to suggest that the narrative events and their depiction happen simultaneously;

6. thematic function: creates an illusion of narrative immediacy and concurrent narration;
7. rhetorical function: affects the process of world building by manipulating readers' narrative experience;
8. transmodal function: creates an impression that the 'voice' speaking in a narrative text does not narrate or report a story, but instead describes, argues for, explains, comments on or enacts the content of the story (81–140).

In her close readings of the novels, Gebauer shows us how these functions work as a narrative strategy. The present tense in Mantel's narratives, for instance, 'enables the readers to perceive events like contemporaries' (152). In Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers,* Gebauer argues, present-tense narration creates an effect of slowness and intercultural understanding' (216). The present-tense in Don Winslow's thriller *The Power of Dog* creates the impression of a film-script type of narrative and immerses readers in narrative action. Further, in this instance, fictional present also enables Winslow to create an 'effective interplay of suspense and surprise' (239). Narrated from the point of view of fetus, the present-tense in McEwan's *Nutshell,* evokes the sense of simultaneity by presenting the events from the narrator's here-and-now. In her reading of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Cake*, Gebauer turns her lens to a more genre-oriented analysis: posthuman space and climate change narratives. Margaret's use of the present tense, Gebauer argues, creates a sense of immediacy and 'encourages readers to mentally project themselves onto the narrative scene' (303).

On another front, the present-tense narration in Emma Donoghue's *Room*, which revolves around a boy (Jack) and his mother who are held captive in an eleven-by-eleven-foot room by a man called Old Nick, presents an intriguing case of 'linguistic idiosyncrasies' (258) The novel, narrated by Jack in the present tense, takes 'an optical function' as if things and actions are described as Jack sees them through a keyhole. Some critics have called the narrator's linguistic idiosyncrasies as the 'linguistic register of an underdeveloped five-year old (258). This idiosyncratic effect, Gebauer argues, can only be achieved by the present-tense narrative.

And lastly, Welsh's novels, Gebauer remarks, relate to the communicative function of the present-tense and employs conversational present (oral storytelling) in a way that evokes 'narrative immediacy and urgency' (302) to create a 'narrative of life' that simulates the practices of everyday storytelling' (279).

Following the close readings of the novels, Gebauer asks the same question that has troubled many scholars who have taken interest in the increasing use of present-tense

narration: why is it so widespread in contemporary fiction? Pondering this question, Gebauer cites some theories that have been proposed by other scholars: could it be, as John Harvey suggests, a reminiscent of the avant-garde novel (84), or 'the long-term consequences of postmodernism and the growing influence' of the boom of creative writing programs? Could it be due to 'social acceleration,' and relatedly, the digitization of contemporary culture, as Gebauer suggests? (313). Though Gebauer's study does not shed light on why we see an increase in present-tense narrative, by putting present-tense narrative in conversation with classical narratological traditions and perceptions of storytelling, she does shed notable light on the capacities of present-tense narration that transcends some of the classical and limited perceptions of present-tense usage that center on a sense of immediacy and simultaneity. Gebauer's study also opens the door for new research avenues of present-tense narration: memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies. She also points out what digital humanities could offer and expand the study of fictional tense by using tools like CATMA.

Gebauer's study will no doubt be of great interest not only to linguists, literary theorists, scholars of narrative theory and contemporary novel, and practitioners of close reading, but also to curious avid readers of contemporary fiction who, sometimes, might feel disoriented by the tense in which the story is told.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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