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How Sure Are You About That?: Narratorial Uncertainty in Third Person Fiction

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## **Abstract**

In third person fiction, if the narrator makes his or her presence felt in the text, the reader may embody the narrator as part of a naturalisation process. What happens then, if a third person narrator appears unsure of the facts or events in the story world, or if it becomes unclear whether it is the narrator or a character who is telling the story? The reader must engage with some misgiving. However, if we consider the narrator that discloses their unreliability and appears to have good reason to be unreliable, the reader must first decide if the narrator is telling the story to the best of his or her ability: if s/he is being as accurate as possible and not withholding information about the story world. If the reader perceives the narrator as telling the story in the best way s/he can, then the reader is less likely to doubt the narrator.

With disclosure *and* acceptance of unreliability, the narrator continues to be unreliable but s/he can also be described as “uncertain”. In narratology, “uncertainty” constitutes a different form of unreliability. With an uncertain narrator the reader and the narrator must work together in order to uncover the truth of the story. In the case of an uncertain narrator, the reader returns to the “natural state” of trusting the narrative voice, but with the awareness that s/he may also have a role in meaning making.

This thesis hypothesises that the use of overt narratorial uncertainty in heterodiegetic fiction develops a reader-narrator relationship based on trust, rather than suspicion, as found in other types of unreliable heterodiegetic text: that is to say, the disclosure of uncertainty by the narrator, together with an awareness of narratorial uncertainty by the reader, changes the way in which the reader relates to the narrator.