Hiding The Data: The Narrative Effects of Deferred Information in Contemporary Science Novels

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Since the 1980s, authors of popular fiction have turned to depicting the world of science. In order to captivate their audiences, scientists-turned-authors as well as known fiction writers frequently integrate financial struggles, resulting mental health concerns, and ethical dilemmas into their stories. The specter of research misconduct looms large in so-called "science novels" (Schaffeld 121) and often gives cause for investigation, allowing the reader to think along with the depicted characters. The main questions then become: has misconduct actually happened? And if so, who is to blame? By intentionally delaying the answers to these questions, authors create gaps which keep their audience engaged. Only at the end is key information revealed, so that "the audience can finally look back at a completed action and read it fully" (Roberts 137). I argue that in narratives centering around research misconduct, missing information not only maintains suspense, but also delays judgement of character. Two prominent examples of this dynamic include Allegra Goodman's 'Intuition' (2006) and Pernille Rørth's 'Raw Data' (2016), which I propose to present in this paper. In both cases, a focalized character has in fact committed research misconduct, but denies their actions until the end of the novel. Consequently, readers must negotiate two possible versions of events at the same time, as well as two interpretations of causal relations. This complicates their judgement of what has happened and who is to blame. On a narrative level, 'Intuition' and 'Raw Data' allow one to explore the effects of self-delusion and the intentional withholding of information, since knowledge of what has happened would be readily available to the reader, if only characters chose to share it. In my paper, I thus intend to answer the questions of 'how untold events affect our understanding of narrative' and 'what role gaps play in reading and mental imagery'. Situated in a contemporary U.S. American context, 'Intuition' and 'Raw Data' introduce the reader to a world of science which has become increasingly competitive. Ultimately, I therefore posit that deferred information (cf. Kafalenos 34) provides sufficient time for readers to sympathize with scientist characters who commit misconduct as fellow human beings - with all their potential, and their limitations.