

Fiction in Fiction

Gerald Marsh

0. Introduction

Since David Lewis's paper "Truth in Fiction," a number of philosophers have become interested in the alleged phenomenon of something's being true in a fiction or true in a story (Lewis 1978). In this paper, I shall pose a number of problems for such a notion of truth in fiction. I shall argue that philosophers ought to reject talk about what is true in fiction. Some difficulties for the notion of truth in fiction derive from certain narratives within fictions. Such 'embedded fictions' raise issues about which characters are properly regarded as part of a story. I shall sketch a view that handles such issues, and in the course of so doing, I shall raise a puzzle related to fictions within fictions.

1. What's in the Story?

Captain Kirk is not in Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot mysteries. Captain Hastings is. A murder of Chief Inspector Japp is not in *The ABC Murders*. Mrs. Ascher's murder is. It is somehow correct to make these claims. In virtue of what are these utterances correct? The simple answer is that the Poirot stories do not say that Kirk exists, nor does *The ABC Murders* say that Japp was murdered, while the stories do say that Hastings exists and that Mrs. Ascher was murdered.¹

This answer is far from satisfying, however. For it raises other questions that are as difficult as our initial question. What does it mean for a story to say something in the relevant sense? Do stories say what they imply, or only what they explicitly state? Many philosophers have attempted to give answers to these questions. Those writing on this

issue often take themselves to be answering the question of what it is for something to be *true in a fiction*.²

I find the expression ‘true in fiction’ very odd. To my ear, it has the ring of a philosopher’s term of art. After high school English classes read *Crime and Punishment*, teachers seldom demand, ‘Now, tell me what is true in the story.’ People often ask ‘What happened in the story?’ or ‘What was that book about?’ Outside the philosophy seminar room, talk about what goes on in some story is rarely cast in terms of what is true in that story. Or at least, that is the way it seems to me.

I want to make it clear that the discourse involving the expression ‘true in fiction’ that I want to reject is not the ordinary discourse about what happens in a story or what a story is about. The former kind of talk is usually cashed out in terms of *worlds* associated with the fictions in question, while the latter kind of talk is not. It should be apparent that my main targets here are Lewisians about fiction. I do not want to suggest that ordinary speakers *never* say that things are true in fictions. Perhaps some people do say things like this. What I do claim is that talk of truth in fiction cashed out in terms of possible worlds does not capture all the claims we wish to make about what is in a story, and furthermore, such talk is likely to mislead.

Philosophers’ talk of what is true in fictions is at best misleading. There is an important sense in which nothing, or at least very little, is true in a fiction. Is it true or false in the Holmes stories that Holmes smokes a pipe? This question might mislead us. The stories *say* he smokes a pipe. Is it true, in any sense, that Holmes smokes a pipe? Surely this is not true in the sense in which it’s true that Tolkien smoked a pipe. In the following sense it is true, perhaps: according to the stories, Holmes smokes a pipe. But

why should we feel compelled to say that this is true in the stories? Consider an analogy. Hume said that beliefs were particularly lively impressions.³ He thought this was true. Accordingly, it seems that we can express something true by saying, ‘According to Hume’s view, beliefs are particularly lively impressions.’ His view *says* that beliefs are lively impressions. So far, so good. Why introduce an operator, ‘true-in-Hume’s-view’ that we can affix to the claim ‘beliefs are lively impressions’ in order to express a truth about what Hume said? Wouldn’t using such an operator only encourage confusion about whether one is saying that the imbedded sentence is *true*? Why not stick with ‘according to Hume’s view...’ or ‘Hume said that...’? The operator is otiose.

Perhaps you are not convinced. Talk of what is true in a fiction is harmless, just as talk of what is true in Hume’s view is harmless. Let us again consider the Holmes stories. Large parts of these stories are set in London. Upon reading the stories, one might wonder whether their depictions of that city are accurate. Was London really as dirty and mean as Conan Doyle made it out to be in the Holmes stories? We might wonder which parts of Doyle’s descriptions of London are *true of* London. This question seems perfectly intelligible.⁴ Moreover, it seems to be the sort of question ordinary readers have in mind when they ask (if they ever do) ‘What is true in the Holmes stories?’ When readers ask this question, they want to know what, in the stories, is true. They do not want to know what happens or what things are like according to the stories. They know the answer to this question already, for they read the story. They know what it says, they just want to know whether parts of what it says are true (compare: did Napoleon *really* do the things he’s depicted as having done in *War and Peace*, or did Tolstoy make some of it up?).

Compare again with Hume. We can ask what Hume said, and we can ask, of what Hume said, whether any of it is true. Introducing an operator ‘true-in-Hume’s-view’ or ‘true-in-the-Holmes’ stories encourages confusion between these two types of question. What, if anything, of what Conan Doyle wrote is true? What happened in the Holmes stories? In *The Speckled Band*, a Russell’s viper performs concertina movements in order to climb up and down a bell-pull (Conan Doyle 2003). An inattentive reader can ask, ‘Did a Russell’s viper climb a bell-pull?’ and we can answer him helpfully by saying, ‘yes, that happened in the story.’ A more attentive reader can allege ‘That couldn’t happen; Russell’s vipers cannot move in such a way!’ and we can credit her with the relevant herpetological knowledge.⁵ In the former case, what is of concern is what the story says happened. In the latter case, what is of concern is whether what the story says about Russell’s vipers is true. We must be careful to distinguish between these two different sorts of inquiry.

I have labored the point only because it seems to me that the distinction is not always made clear in the philosophical literature on fiction. I want now to raise a more principled reason to avoid talk of what is true in a fiction.

The White Rabbit is a character in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (2004). So too are Alice and her sister. It is tempting to think that these characters are in the book just because it is true in the story that they exist. This will not do, however. At the end of the story, Alice remarks, “Oh, I’ve had such a curious dream!” (Carroll 2004). She awakes to find that her bizarre adventures with the White Rabbit, the Queen of Hearts, and the Cheshire Cat were all merely a strange dream. None of these characters exist. Alice was asleep by a riverbank the whole time. What

does the story say? According to the story, Alice fell asleep and had a strange dream. The story does not say that the White Rabbit exists, nor does it say that Alice followed him down a rabbit hole. Of course, the *sentence* “In another moment down went Alice after it [the White Rabbit], never once considering how in the world she was to get out again,” occurs in the story (Carroll 2004). But, at the end of the story we are led to understand that this sentence occurs within the scope of an implicit ‘Alice-dreamt-that’ operator. She never *really* went down a rabbit hole, she merely dreamt that she did.

Even if philosophers could tell us what it means for something to be true in a fiction, it seems that, at least while reading about Alice’s adventures in Wonderland, we don’t really care what is true in the story. What is true in the story is quite boring. Perhaps it’s true in the story that Alice twitched once or twice in her sleep, or that her sister continued to read a book. So what? We care about what happens to Alice while she’s in Wonderland. We are interested in all the strange folk she meets there. We don’t care what she did while dreaming.

There is a deeper worry, however. It is not clear that truth in fiction talk can help us capture the sense in which the White Rabbit and other sundry denizens of Wonderland are characters in the story. For it is not true in the story that these creatures exist. In virtue of what is the White Rabbit a character in the story? Call this the White Rabbit Problem. A tempting solution is that the White Rabbit is a character because it is true in a fiction *within* the *Alice* story that the White Rabbit exists. Appearance in an imbedded fiction is enough to secure characterhood in the larger work. I find this answer dubious for several reasons. First, it is not clear that dreams, even dreams in stories, are *fictions*. But let us set this worry aside. It seems clear that, even if dreams in stories are properly

regarded as fictions, dreams do not always yield characters in the way needed to solve the White Rabbit problem. Consider a story in which a boy dreams that Pegasus flew into his bedroom at night and ate some granola.⁶ Is Pegasus a character in this (rather brief) tale? It seems not. The only character is the boy. But, Pegasus is a character in an imbedded fiction: the boy's dream.

More problematic for this solution, however, is the fact that fictional works can appear *qua* fictional in stories. Take the following example from Agatha Christie's *The ABC Murders*:

"Well?" I demanded eagerly. We were seated in a first-class carriage which we had to ourselves. The train, an express, had just drawn out of Andover.

"The crime," said Poirot, "was committed by a man of medium height with red hair and a cast in the left eye. He limps slightly on the right foot and has a mole just below the shoulder-blade."

"Poirot?" I cried.

For a moment I was completely taken in. Then the twinkle in my friend's eye undeceived me.

"Poirot!" I said again, this time in reproach.

"*Mon ami*, what will you? You fix upon me the look of doglike devotion and demand of me a pronouncement a la Sherlock Holmes! Now for the truth—I do not know what the murderer looks like, nor where he lives, nor how to set hands upon him." (1991)

It is clear from context that Poirot is referring to Sherlock Holmes *qua* fictional character.

It seems clear that the Holmes stories are in the Poirot stories and that Poirot has read at least some of them. But is Holmes a character in *The ABC Murders*? Clearly not. For if he were, Poirot would have some competition in solving the case. Poirot might run into Holmes, for the story is largely set in London. This seems absurd. But, if a character's

appearance in an imbedded fiction is sufficient for that character's appearance in the larger work, we would have to say precisely this.

It seems clear to me that whether a character is in a story cannot always be a matter of whether it is true in the story that the character exists or even true in an imbedded story that the character exists. The notion of truth in fiction is useless in determining when a fictional character is in a story. Truth in fiction is a philosopher's term of art, and it is not particularly helpful. In light of these concerns, we would do best to avoid such talk.

2. *Figuring In* a story

We have seen that there is room for a distinction between a character's being in a story and its being true in the story that a character exists. The White Rabbit is in the *Alice* story, but it is not true in the story that he exists, he is merely dreamt about. While I think that I have given reasons for being suspicious of truth in the story talk, nevertheless, it will prove useful to have a notion that allows us to talk about the existence claims a story makes. So, while I propose rejecting truth in fiction talk, I want to make use of a notion of something's *figuring in* a fiction. Readers sometimes talk about what figures in a story, what the story is about. It is important to note that I shall employ this expression as a philosopher's term of art. My use of the term will be identical to Rod Bertolet's use of the term in his *What is Said: A Theory of Indirect Speech Reports* (1990). It is the aim of this section to make the notion clear and to motivate its use.

It may appear odd, given that I have disparaged one philosopher's term of art: true in fiction, that I go on to make use of another: figuring in a fiction. My main reason for taking talk of what figures in a story to be on better footing than talk of what is true in a story is that the former kind of talk does not encourage the kinds of confusions the latter kind of talk encourages. Another reason for preferring figuring in talk is that it enables us to provide a clear solution to the White Rabbit Problem. I shall adumbrate this solution below. Since the concept of figuring in is to play a significant role, let us get clear on what figuring in amounts to and how this concept differs from truth in fiction.

Bertolet introduces the notion in explaining how we sometimes use sentences like

- (1) Holmes smokes a pipe,
- (2) Pegasus has wings,
- (3) Poirot wears a moustache,

to say something true. Bertolet says, roughly, that in uttering (1)-(3) we presuppose the existence of certain stories. Further, we presuppose that Holmes, Pegasus, and Poirot *figure in* these stories. What we assert is that, according to the stories, they are thus and so. What we assert is true because, according to the stories, those characters are thus and so (Bertolet 1990).

On Bertolet's view, a character figures in a story just in case were that story true, the character would exist. This may sound suspiciously like some version of truth in fiction. A character figures in just in case it is true in the fiction that the character exists. Lest the distinction appear a merely verbal one, I want to consider how *S*'s figuring in a

fiction F differs from its being true in F that S exists. According to most theorists who traffic in talk of truth in fiction, whether a claim like

(4) Sherlock Holmes exists

is true in a story depends on whether (4) is true at those worlds where the story is *told as known fact*.⁷ Contrast this, however, with the following claim.

(5) Sherlock Holmes figures in the Holmes stories and novels of Conan Doyle.

(5) is true at our world, not at some possible world. For (5) to be true is for it to be the case that were the Holmes stories true, Holmes would exist. The truth condition for (5) does not require that there be worlds at which the stories are *told* as known fact. (5) requires for its truth merely that there be worlds at which the stories are *true*. The distinction between the truth conditions for (4) and (5) may appear to some quite thin. We can state truth conditions for (5), however, without the need to mention possible worlds. (5) is true just in case the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ (or some other referring expression purporting to pick out the detective) appears in Conan Doyle’s writings in a non-opaque referential context. So, Holmes figures in the stories just in case he’s named or referred to in a context into which we can *quantify in*. I prefer this way of characterizing something’s figuring in a story because it enables us to avoid the question about which worlds are the relevant Holmes worlds. Whether a character figures in a story is a purely linguistic matter.⁸

This does not mean, however, that whether a character figures in a story will always be clear. For a story may implicitly create an opaque referential context. Take the case of the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*. At the end of the film, Dorothy awakes, apparently having dreamt that she visited a land called Oz and had some adventures with a tin man, a cowardly lion, et al. Does the Tin Man figure in the story? Given Dorothy's conversation with Auntie Em at the end, this is not so obvious. After the tornado passes, Dorothy relates her adventures in Oz to her family, upon which Auntie Em says, "Oh, we dream lots of silly things when we. . ."

Dorothy interrupts her saying, "No, Aunt Em -- this was a real, truly live place. And I remember that some of it wasn't very nice..." It is not clear who is right, Auntie Em or Dorothy. Did Dorothy *really* visit Oz, or did she just dream that she did? Did the mention of characters like the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion occur within the scope of a tacit 'dreamt-that' operator or not? This is not clear. If the mention of these characters occurred within the scope of an intensional operator, then the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion do not figure in the story. If mention of these characters occurred outside the scope of such an operator, then they do figure in the story.

The difference between whether a character figures in the story and whether it is true in the story that a character exists is a difference in the respective truth conditions for those claims. A character figures in just in case they are referred to in a non-opaque context. It is true in the story that a character exists just in case the character exists at the relevant worlds where the story is told as known fact.

It is important to stress that figuring in is not identical to the ordinary notion of something's being in a fiction. The former is a technical term. What reasons are there

for adopting such a term? I think the term affords a way to identify the ‘existential commitments’ of a story without the need for a notion of truth in fiction. ‘What does the story say exists?’ is a question that deserves an answer independent of the answer to the question, ‘what does the story say is true’. If I have shown that asking the second question is suspect, then an answer to the first that does not depend on an answer to the second is to be preferred. This is precisely what talk of figuring in affords.

3. The White Rabbit Problem Revisited

Literature and film abound with ‘it was all a dream’ stories. Provided the dreams in question are cohesive and of central importance to the plot of the work, we are inclined to think that the characters in the dream are characters in the work. The Grand Inquisitor, despite his merely appearing in a dream, is a character in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) because the dream in which he appears is central to the plot of the novel. Pegasus is clearly not a character in our story about the boy, but the White Rabbit and the Grand Inquisitor are characters in their respective stories. In this section I shall attempt to state generally what it is for a character to be in a story in the relevant sense.

In giving this account, I shall put the notion of figuring in to work. Recall that, according to Bertollet, (1)-(3) can be used to say something true about certain stories. It is not the case, however, that

- (4) Holmes is a ballet dancer,
- (5) Pegasus smokes a pipe,

(6) Poirot chummed around with Captain Kirk,

can be so used. In uttering (1)-(3), we presuppose the existence of certain stories in which Holmes, Pegasus, and Poirot figure. And we assert that, according to the stories in which they figure, these characters are thus and so (Bertolet 1990). In uttering (4)-(6), we also presuppose that there are certain stories in which Holmes, Pegasus, and Poirot figure. We assert that according to the stories they are thus and so. What we say is false, however, because according to the stories, Holmes is not a ballet dancer, Pegasus does not smoke a pipe, and Poirot did not chum around with Captain Kirk.

The notion of figuring in operative in this account provides a sufficient condition for a character's being in a story. As we noted above, a noun phrase picks out something that figures in a story just in case that phrase appears in a non-opaque referential context within the story. The White Rabbit does not figure in the *Alice* story. For, expressions referring to the White Rabbit occur within the scope of an implicit Alice-dreamt-that operator. Alice, however, does figure in the story. Holmes does not figure in *The ABC Murders*, because, the name 'Holmes' occurs in a context into which we cannot quantify in; Poirot is merely referring to the Holmes stories. As far as figuring in goes, Holmes and the White Rabbit are on a par.

It seems, however, that we can use

(7) The White Rabbit wears gloves,

(8) The Queen of Hearts is obsessed with beheading,

(9) The caterpillar smokes a hookah,

to say something true, while we cannot use

(10) Holmes and Poirot were both involved in the ABC case,

to say something true. Intuitively, we want to say that (7)-(9) can be used to say something true because they are about characters that are in the *Alice* story, and they say of those characters what the story says about them. (10) cannot be used to express a truth, intuitively, because Holmes is not a character in *The ABC Murders*. Bertolet's notion of figuring in alone is insufficient to explain this.

Something must be added, then, in order to capture the sense in which the White Rabbit is a character in the *Alice* story but Sherlock Holmes is not a character in the Poirot story. I propose the following. *S* is a character in a fiction *F* just in case *S* figures in *F* or *S* figures in a central narrative within *F* in which *S* is depicted as being appropriately related to a character that figures in *F*. Since the White Rabbit occurs in a central narrative within *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (i.e., Alice's dream) and the White Rabbit is depicted as being appropriately related to Alice in that narrative, then since she figures in, he is a character in the larger story. Sherlock Holmes does not figure in *The ABC Murders* because, while he appears in a narrative within the story (i.e., the Holmes stories as portrayed in the Poirot novels), that narrative is not central to the plot of the story, and Holmes is not depicted in that narrative as being appropriately related to any character that figures in the Poirot stories.

Of course, something must be said as to what it is to be depicted as being appropriately related to a character who figures in. I have in mind here being depicted as standing in a spatiotemporal relation to a character who figures in. Since Alice's dream depicts her as standing in spatiotemporal relations to the White Rabbit, the White Rabbit is a character in the story. The imbedded stories do not depict Holmes as standing in spatiotemporal relations to Poirot (or any other character in the Poirot stories, for that matter), so Holmes is not a character in the story.⁹

What makes an imbedded narrative central to the plot of a story? This issue is somewhat murky. It seems clear that the above story featuring the boy who dreams of Pegasus does not contain an imbedded narrative that is central to the plot of the story. Imagine that, after waking, the boy goes on to do a number of things and have a number of adventures. Unlike Alice's dream, the Pegasus dream is a mere passing event; it is not crucial to a large portion of the tale. I predict that we would be uncomfortable saying that Pegasus is a character in the story. Were the dream to recur or take on special significance to the plot of the story, we would become more willing to say that Pegasus is a character in that story. My conditions on characterhood predict this pattern. Let us take another example. In the film *The Big Lebowski*, the title character has a dream in which Saddam Hussein figures. Is Saddam a character in *The Big Lebowski*? Not necessarily. The dream sequence in which he appears, while entertaining, is not central to the plot of the story.¹⁰ It seems that, in attempting to decide whether a character's appearance in a dream or imbedded narrative makes that character part of the story as a whole, we look to whether the imbedded narrative is of central importance to understanding the plot of the story. Were we to skip over the imbedded story, would we be missing out on something

crucial? If so, then the characters in the imbedded narrative are in characters in the story provided the imbedded narrative depicts them as spatiotemporally related to characters that figure in the story.

4. The Self Reference Problem

In this section, I want to raise a problem that, to my knowledge, has not received attention in the philosophical literature on fiction. I shall call this problem the Self-Reference Problem.

Works of fiction can be, in part, about real things. This strikes me as an intuitive view about the possible subject matter of fictions.¹¹ Take the case of *The ABC Murders*, for example. In part, the novel is about London. The novel also features real properties like being human, being a murderer, and so on. Furthermore, the novel features some of the fictional works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. If Poirot were to visit a library, it seems clear he would find on its shelves books and stories by Conan Doyle: namely the Sherlock Holmes corpus. How else would Poirot know of the exploits of this fictional detective? This may strike one as odd, however. For if the novel contains these fictional works, why not others? If Doyle's works are on the shelves in the Poirot stories, why aren't Christie's? After all, she occupies the same literary tradition as Doyle, her books on are on *our* shelves next to his. But, if Christie's stories are on the shelves at Poirot's favorite library, couldn't Poirot read fictional tales about himself? This may strike some as in need of explanation.

A different case may put a sharper point on this worry. In his *Don Quixote*, Miguel Cervantes places one of his own books on the shelves of Don Quixote's library (2001). It is clear that the book figures in the story, after all, it is on Quixote's shelf. Does this mean that Cervantes himself is a character in *Don Quixote*? This might seem unavoidable. For a romance, *Galatea*, written by Cervantes figures in the story. Doesn't that mean that Cervantes figures in the story as well? But, if that is the case, then it looks like Cervantes' other works might figure in too, including *Don Quixote*. Shouldn't it be possible, then, for Quixote to read of himself in a work of fiction?¹² This possibility might strike one as odd.

Can authors refer to the works of other authors, even to their own works, in their stories without generating inconsistencies? I am tempted to think that they can. Poirot can read, without difficulty, about the exploits of Holmes. Quixote can thumb through *Galatea* without worrying about finding himself in some work of fiction. It appears as though there is a presumption that, when an author explicitly acknowledges a literary tradition in a work of fiction, the author means to exempt the work in which this tradition is acknowledged from that tradition. When Christie mentions the Holmes stories, she means to acknowledge the writings of Conan Doyle, drawing them into her story. She does not mean to include her own writings (or at least, not those featuring Poirot). This presumption can be toyed with at an author's discretion. Cervantes pushes the boundaries of the presumption by including at least one of his own works in *Don Quixote*. The reader is led to conclude, however, that *Don Quixote* itself does not figure in the story.

It seems, however, that this presumption could be totally disregarded by an author of fiction. An author might refer to the very work she creates in that work. Does this result in some kind of inconsistency? I am tempted to think that there is some inconsistency in so referring. Suppose that Quixote had on his shelf next to *Galatea* a copy of *Don Quixote*. The presence of this book might seem to explain Quixote's strange type of madness. But would its presence constitute some kind of inconsistency? Quixote would figure in a story within the story (namely the one told in the book on his shelf). In that story, Quixote is depicted as having a book on his shelf, namely *Don Quixote*. And in *that* book, Quixote is depicted as having a book on his shelf, and so on. Perhaps this is paradoxical. Perhaps the air of paradox derives from the worry that Quixote is somehow involved in spatiotemporal relations to himself in virtue of his appearing in such an imbedded fiction. Just as no one can be to the left of oneself, so too no fictional character can stand in certain relations to him or herself.

Perhaps a better explanation of the air of inconsistency is as follows. We are inclined to think that Quixote is a character in the story. Further, we are inclined to think Quixote is a flesh and blood person in the story. But, if the novel itself is in the story, then Quixote is both a fictional character and a flesh and blood person. He has some kind of bizarre dual existence.¹³

Why should this strike one as inconsistent? After all, an author of fiction can write a novel about *me*. I could read such a book without experiencing any philosophical worries.¹⁴ Why, then, couldn't Quixote read such a novel? I do not want to argue that Quixote couldn't read a tale about himself. In Cervantes' novel, he *does* hear of a manuscript detailing his exploits. This presents no problem. What I maintain is that

there is an air of inconsistency about Quixote reading *Don Quixote* itself. What strikes me as inconsistent about this is that Quixote would be reading the very work that is responsible for his being a literary character in the first place. Why is this a problem? The story says (or implies) that Quixote was brought into the world by human parents. But, if *Don Quixote* were included in the novel itself, the story would *also* say (or imply) that Quixote was brought into the world by Cervantes. The inclusion of *Don Quixote* in *Don Quixote* thus entails a contradiction in the story. The story says both that Quixote was both brought into the world by human parents and not brought into the world by human parents.¹⁵

It might be objected that, in the story, since Quixote is depicted as a real flesh and blood person, any novel about him in the story cannot be responsible for his existence. This, I take it, is just to deny that *Don Quixote* can figure in *Don Quixote*. For *Don Quixote* is the novel responsible for Don Quixote's being a literary character. So, if a book appears in a story without being responsible for Don Quixote's being a literary character, then that book is not *Don Quixote*.¹⁶

It might also be objected that, were *Don Quixote* to appear in *Don Quixote*, then the literary character brought into existence by the imbedded novel would not be identical to the literary character brought into existence by Cervantes. This, I take it, would only show that the novel *Don Quixote* that figures in *Don Quixote* is not identical to *Don Quixote*. So, on this suggestion, it appears as though Cervantes cannot include *Don Quixote* in *Don Quixote*, he can merely include a novel very similar to *Don Quixote*.

Why is self reference in fiction problematic? I think it makes trouble for the view that real persons and things can figure in fictions. Novels are real things. If real things

can figure in novels without implying any inconsistency, then novels themselves should be able to figure in without inconsistency. But, it looks as though a novel cannot, without inconsistency, figure in itself. Why should this be the case? After all, the novel is just one more real thing. Other novels could figure in without inconsistency. It seems that we might have to reconsider the view that real things can figure in fictions.

I do not take myself to have decisively refuted the claim that novels can be about real persons and things. In fact, I take this view to be very attractive. What I have done is rather to have raised a puzzle for those who hold such a view.

5. Closing Remarks

I have argued that talk of what is true in a fiction is misleading for a number of reasons. If I am right about this, then theorists about fiction should abandon this kind of talk. Philosophers should attempt to discover what characters or events figure in stories rather than what is true in stories. In closing, I want to suggest another reason for avoiding this sort of talk.

Talking about what is true in a fiction creates the felt need for a semantics of fictional discourse that involves *worlds* associated with stories, films, novels, and plays. According to such a semantics, to say that *p* is true in a fiction just means that *p* is true in the relevant world or worlds where the story is told as known fact. Perhaps there are good reasons to think this kind of talk makes sense. After all, people often say things like, 'In the world of the Holmes stories, London is a dirty place.' But this ordinary talk is not metaphysically loaded. People are not inclined to believe that there is a *place*

where the happenings of the Holmes stories occur. In the philosophical literature, truth in fiction is often characterized as being importantly like truth in our world. It's true in the Holmes stories that Holmes smokes a pipe just in case, at the Holmes worlds, he really *does* smoke a pipe.

This does an injustice to the way we think about fictional characters. Fictional characters are not real. We do not think of them as occupying any real (but nonactual) worlds.

The alleged phenomenon of truth in fiction has been used to motivate all sorts of metaphysically dubious posits: fictional worlds, Meinongian entities, and so on. Once we abandon the view that there are truths in fiction, some of the temptation to posit these entities evaporates.¹⁷

Of course we can say true things *about* fictions. That they were authored by so and so, that certain characters figure in them, that certain events are depicted in them as having occurred. Does our ability to say true things about fictions require metaphysical posits? I do not think so. Our saying true things about fictions is no more mysterious than our saying true things about our dreams. We do not think, at least most of us do not, that the phenomenon of dreaming commits us to dream worlds, dream objects, or strange, non-existing but somehow subsistent dream creatures. Dreams just aren't real. But they are of importance to our waking lives. They tell us things about ourselves, they amuse us, we can talk about them and share them, so too with fictions. We can say what happened in a story just as easily as we can say what happened in a dream, and with as little confusion in both cases. When I say, as I sometimes do, that last night I was flying over the Empire State Building I can, in some contexts, say something true. How do I do

this? I presuppose that I had a certain dream. I *assert* that *according to the dream* I was flying over the Empire State Building. There need be no event of my flying over a building in order for me to say something true about what I dreamt.

This is not to diminish the importance of fictions any more than it is to diminish the importance of dreams. In fact, it fits in with some of our talk about the act of creating fictions. We often say that an author ‘dreamt up’ a character, or that a screenwriter creates a ‘dreamscape’ that we can share in.

If what I have to say above is right, then the semantics of talk about fictions can be assimilated to the semantics of talk about dreams. Since the latter are not existentially committal, neither are the former. Just as fictions can contain truths, so too can dreams. I can dream about real people, places, and events. Authors of fiction can write about real people, places, and events. In neither case, however, do we need special objects for the dreams or stories to be about. To suppose otherwise is to invite error.

¹ One must be careful in formulating even the simple minded answer. For the stories do not contain the sentence ‘Hastings exists’ or ‘Kirk does not exist’ yet they do say that Hastings exists and do not say that Kirk exists.

² Some examples are David Lewis, “Truth in Fiction.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978): 37-46. Derek Matravers, “Beliefs and Fictional Narrators”. *Analysis* 55 (1995): 121-122, Christopher New, “A Note on Truth in Fiction”. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 421-423.

³ This example is Rod Bertolet’s. Rod Bertolet, *What is Said: A Theory of Indirect Speech Reports*. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990).

⁴ There are those who think that the name ‘London’ in the Holmes stories cannot refer to London. I am somewhat sympathetic to this view. The above questions can be recast in such a way that respects this

claim. One might ask, ‘Are the things Doyle said about the city he calls ‘London’ true of London?’ and so on.

⁵ Lewis (1978) mentions this case and cites Carl Gans “How Snakes Move” in connection with this point.

⁶ This example belongs to Rod Bertolet.

⁷ Of course, there are various ways to spell out such a view according to whether one thinks the worlds in question are to be the so-called ‘belief worlds’ of the author and her community (Lewis), of the present audience (Matravers), or of the narrator (New). I will not enter into this dispute here.

⁸ This is clearly what Bertolet had in mind. This might seem unappealing, however, given nonlinguistic fictions. I am not sure what to say about nonlinguistic fictions, if there are any. I am inclined to think that a character figures in just in case that character is *represented* in a context that is referentially transparent.

⁹ This is not, however, to say that the fictional character Holmes does not figure in the Poirot stories *qua* fictional character. There may be worries associated with taking the appropriate relations to be spatiotemporal ones. God, for instance, could figure in an imbedded narrative and not stand in any spatiotemporal relations to anything and yet still be a character. I’m not sure what to say about this case. Presumably God would be depicted in the imbedded narrative as being related in some way to someone who figures in. Perhaps being so related is enough to secure characterhood. Thanks to Bertolet for this point.

¹⁰ I say Saddam is not necessarily a character in the story because, due to the time the story is set, the name ‘Saddam’ actually occurs in the film outside of an opaque referential context. I merely mean to say that the appearance of Saddam within a peripheral dream sequence isn’t enough to secure his characterhood in the story.

¹¹ There are, of course, those who would disagree. See Peter French’s “Places in Fiction” CITATION???

¹² The *Quixote* story raises an additional difficulty. For reference to a spurious volume of Quixote’s adventures is mentioned, and Quixote is represented as knowing of this volume. I do not know what to say about this case. One may be tempted to think that Quixote figures in the novel and that a fictional character with that same name figures in a story imbedded in the novel. I am not sure about this treatment, however.

¹³ Kendall Walton may not have a problem with saying things like this, but it strikes me as paradoxical. See his “How Remote are Fictional Worlds from the Real World?” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37, no. 1 (1978): 11-23.

¹⁴ Thanks to Peter French for this point.

¹⁵ What I’ve said here presupposes the view that authors bring their literary characters into existence. Such a view is articulated and defended by Amy Thomasson in her book *Fiction and Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. I shall not defend the view here. Those who are already unfriendly to such a view may take the above case as evidence against the claim that authors of fiction bring their literary characters into existence. My argument, however, does not require that authors bring into existence abstract literary objects. All I require is that we can truly say that authors create literary characters, and the sense in which they do so is different from the sense in which parents create children.

¹⁶ There is a tangled skein of issues here. I am not claiming that *Don Quixote* could not contain without inconsistency a novel word for word identical to *Don Quixote*. Rather, I am claiming that such a novel would not be *Don Quixote*. This may be a controversial claim to make. I shall reserve defense of this claim for another occasion, however. Similarly, while Poirot could read of himself in stories word for word identical to Christie’s novels without inconsistency, he could not read of himself in the novels of Christie. For those novels are responsible for his existence as a literary character. Also, I am claiming that a work of fiction’s being responsible for the existence of a literary character is an essential property of that work of fiction. I shall not defend this claim here, however.

¹⁷ There are others who make this claim as well, among them Urmson (1976). I do not maintain an Urmsonian, though much of what I say is consistent with one. I incline more toward the Russellian position that the sentences authors of fiction token are false (unless they say something about the world which is the case). While I do not agree with the Urmsonian three-valued view (true, false, fictional), I do not think that authors of fiction make false *assertions*. Rather, they token false sentences. I do not wish to register a view at this time as to what *speech act*, if any, authors of fiction perform.