In narrative theory, the subfield of unnatural narratology has carved out a vocal and occasionally controversial space. There are several possible sites that show the creation of this contentious critical space, but one might be a series of articles published between 2010 and 2013 in the journal *Narrative*. The first in this exchange, “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models,” by Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, offers a framework for understanding unnatural narratology by modeling the approaches of its four authors, using those models to then propose new paths for the field. Uniting their four approaches are what they see as two aspects of unnatural narratives: 1) their capacity to challenge “mimetic understandings of narrative” and 2) the consequences of that challenge to the concept of narrative (115). Monika Fludernik, in her article “How Natural is ‘Unnatural Narratology’; or, What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?,” challenges the very use of the word “unnatural,” noting the problematic politics of the term and claiming that in her book *Toward a “Natural” Narratology* (1996; note the quotation marks) “the term was not to be contrasted with an opposite,” and, when dichotomy was necessary, employing the less charged term “non-natural” (357). She challenges the conflation of “natural” and “mimetic,” as well as “unnatural” and “anti-mimetic,” that
she sees framing the approach of unnatural narratologists. In the same issue, Alber, et al. respond to Fludernik’s critique by asserting a more complementary relationship to her “natural” narratology (380). While they acknowledge differences of attention and approach, they see those differences between natural and unnatural narratology as equally important.

I provide this brief context to point out the way Alber’s monograph, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*, enters an already rich, occasionally heated, and rapidly diversifying conversation. Unlike other branches of narrative theory, like cognitive narratology or rhetorical narratology, which describe their methodology or theoretical framework, the modifier “unnatural” in unnatural narratology describes the kinds of narratives studied. Moreover, the definition of the term itself—unnatural—depends on the scholar employing it. Brian Richardson locates the “unnatural” of unnatural narratives in their antimimetic characteristics and their effects on readers—the way that they “contravene the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violate mimetic expectations and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres” (3). Stefan Iversen identifies the unnatural within the text itself, rather than in reader–text relationships, in clashes between rules of a storyworld and the scenarios or events taking place within that narrative universe. Henrik Skov Nielsen situates it in those narratives that deviate from the natural paradigms of oral narratives. Maria Mäkēla nearly equates the “unnatural” of unnatural narratives with “fictional” or “literary,” noting cognitive challenges provided by such texts.

Alber builds his own definition of the unnatural from work in cognitive narrative theory that acknowledges the relationship between reader engagement with fictional worlds and real-world knowledge. For Alber, the unnatural are those fictional instances that undermine, challenge, or confuse the frames and scripts that we’ve establish from our embodied, real-world experiences, thereby creating representations of physical, logical, and human
impossibilities. This relationship between cognitive frames and narrative impossibilities is historically contingent; unnatural or impossible frames become conventionalized and incorporated into our cognitive framework and help clarify the development of literary genres and literary history. Thus, the unnatural is key to the book’s larger project: reconsidering the position of postmodern narrative in literary history. For Alber, postmodern narratives combine conventionalized impossibilities from earlier literary periods and genres (Gothic, fantasy, children’s narrative, etc.) with realist contexts. The typical disorienting effects of postmodernism result from this combination of possible and impossible, conventional and unconventional.

Alber lists nine strategies by which readers make sense of these postmodern, unnatural narratives, ranging from foregrounding thematic concerns to blending frames to reading allegorically. Perhaps the most important strategy in terms of the conventionalizing processes of Alber’s argument is what he calls “the Zen way of reading,” which “presupposes an attentive and stoic reader who repudiates the earlier explanations and simultaneously accepts both the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, worry, and panic that they might evoke in her or him” (54). It’s refreshing to see a call for unknowingness and apprehension at the center of reading. Resistance to meaning-making, or at least delay and deferral, seems especially important when dealing with texts that undermine the sense-making frames through which we order and negotiate experience. It’s a position that needs occasional reminding, both in pedagogical and critical circles. At the same time, I am curious about the relationship between the two sides of the “double vision” Alber describes in his strategies for negotiating the impossible: on one side, we engage world- and meaning-making strategies to make sense of the unnaturalness of a narrative; on the other side, we sit contemplatively in a state of unknowingness, resisting the interpretive move, and embracing the strangeness of the unnatural. While Alber warns
against understanding the reading strategies sequentially, it nonetheless seems necessary to separate these two very different hermeneutic approaches. Can one read for sense, at either the level of world or meaning, and at the same time embrace a reading position that defers those two goals? Is Alber calling for a Zen precondition that attunes readers to the sense-making processes of the unnatural—Zen as a state of reading that one first enters, which then allows a fuller engagement with the text’s unnaturalness?

In Part Two, Alber models these strategies in specific unnatural conditions. This second section of the book is remarkably ordered, with each of its three chapters modeling a postmodern instance of the unnatural—character, time, and space—and then reconnecting that instance to its predecessor in literary history. For instance, Alber subdivides his chapter on unnatural spaces into four disorienting spatial strategies: disorienting container spaces, allegorical space, impossible geographies, and metalepsis (the transgression of narrative levels). In each of these subsections, Alber pairs a postmodern literary space with its conventionalized equivalent. He connects the unnatural container spaces of Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* with similar instances in children’s narratives like P. L. Traver’s *Mary Poppins* series and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. He links the impossible geographies of Guy Davenport’s “The Haile Selassie Funeral Train” to earlier examples in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Beowulf*. With each of these connections, Alber explains how earlier works offer equally unnatural spaces; the difference is that their unnaturalness has been conventionalized and incorporated into our cognitive frames. The postmodern instances unnaturalize them again. The strange spaces of children’s narratives and fantasy are expected; their postmodern counterparts are not.

The book’s conclusion takes this rather surprising claim—that postmodern strangeness is more similar to than different from the strangeness in earlier literary periods and genres—and uses
it to develop six basic characteristics of the postmodern that distinguish it from its unnatural predecessors: 1) radicalization of those unnatural modes, 2) extension or concentration of impossibility, 3) diffusion and demotion of the supernatural, 4) ridicule through exaggeration, 5) shift to a postmodern agenda, and 6) foregrounding of impossibility through metafiction. For Alber, the “postmodern agenda” involves a Lyotardian suspicion of master narratives and a turn to the posthuman. He considers the relationship between his conception of the postmodern and that of theorists like Charles Jencks, Linda Hutcheon, Christian Moraru, Fredric Jameson, Patricia Waugh, and Brian McHale. I am curious how Alber would respond to theorists like David Harvey—or, similarly, the larger scope of Jameson’s understanding of postmodernism. While Alber acknowledges Jameson’s use of the pastiche and incorporates it convincingly into his own model, how does he address the way that Harvey and Jameson recognize the relationship between postmodernization (what we might call the processes of late capitalism), postmodernity (the condition of life as affected by late capitalism), and postmodernism (the artistic response to those conditions)?

Even if Alber challenges the more established sense of postmodernism as a reaction to and move away from the strategies of modernism, how does his definition of the postmodern address the historical contingency of these strategies, other than by the observation that they often occur after their conventionalized predecessors (though not always; see, for instance, *Harry Potter*)? For Alber, the distinction between literary periods is fluid and reveals far more similarity than difference between literature from different historical moments. Moreover, those continuities point the way beyond the postmodern. Since the continual processes of conventionalization inevitably incorporate unnatural aspects of literature into our cognitive frames and scripts, the disorienting effects of the unnatural in postmodern narratives will eventually (or perhaps already
have) become conventionalized. That process of incorporating postmodernism into our cognitive framework leads to new possibilities for unnatural narratives, what Alber calls post-postmodernism. Moreover, it lies in the hands—or perhaps the minds—of readers and their engagement with the disorienting techniques of these newly unnatural narratives. But how might we situate (historically, culturally, etc.) and contextualize those minds and those conventionalizing processes that work to incorporate the postmodern?

**Works Cited**


