



palgrave▶pivot

Cause and Effect in Fiction

Frances Howard-Snyder

palgrave
macmillan

Cause and Effect in Fiction

Frances Howard-Snyder

Cause and Effect in Fiction

palgrave
macmillan

Frances Howard-Snyder
Bellingham, WA, USA

ISBN 978-3-031-52711-1 ISBN 978-3-031-52712-8 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-52712-8>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover pattern © Melisa Hasan

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Paper in this product is recyclable.

For my mother, Mary Howard, who first taught me to love stories.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have helped make this book possible. Western Washington University granted me two quarters of professional leave to work on this project. For that I am most grateful. Thanks also to the folks at Palgrave Macmillan, especially Robin James and Tikoji Rao Mega Rao, for excellent editorial support.

The project started life as a thesis I wrote as part of my degree requirements for my MFA in Fiction at the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University. I am immensely thankful for the three stimulating, nurturing years I spent in this program. I am especially grateful to Suzanne Berne, brilliant writer, fabulous teacher, and dear friend, who supervised the writing of the thesis, and who made many helpful suggestions to improve it; to Rick Barot, the program director for leading a wonderful program; and to all the terrific teachers and students from whom I learned so much.

I am grateful to George Saunders for the concept that inspired the project and for a generous email exchange on the topic. Scott Nadelson, a professor at the Rainier Writing Workshop, taught a fascinating class on the vignette novel that inspired discussion of one of the objections in the last chapter.

Thanks to my son, William, for help with the PowerPoint for my presentation of my thesis and for a very insightful conversation about literary merit. My philosophy department colleagues at Western Washington University, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Hud Hudson, Ryan Wasserman, Dennis Whitcomb, Neal Tognazzini, and Christian Lee, read three of the

chapters of this book and gave me really helpful feedback. I hope my responses have done justice to their input.

To my dear writing group members, Sati Mookherjee, Laura Rink, Janet Oakley, Linda Lambert, Victoria Doerper, Brenda Wilbee, Carol McMillan, Andrea Gabriel, Shala Erlich, Kirsten Barron, and most especially, my dear mentor and friend, Laura Kalpakian, thanks for all the great writing help.

I am grateful to my parents and my sister for their love and support throughout the years and for great conversations about this material.

And to my beloved family: Dan, Peter and Josie, William and Hannah: I couldn't do without you.

CONTENTS

1	Cause and Effect in Fiction: An Introduction	1
2	Causation and Causation in Fiction	11
3	Cause and Effect in Plot	21
4	Cause and Effect in Character	35
5	Cause and Effect in Setting	45
6	Cause and Effect in Dialogue	53
7	Cause and Effect in Theme	63
8	Cause and Effect, Counterfactuals, and the Role of Fiction in our Psychic Lives	79
9	Objections and Replies	89
	Index	101

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frances Howard-Snyder is a Philosophy professor at Western Washington University and has co-authored a logic textbook. She has also published numerous articles on ethics and philosophy of religion. She has an MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop, and has published stories in *The Magnolia Review*, *Silver Pen*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, as well as other publications. For more information, see franceshowardsnyder.com.



CHAPTER 1

Cause and Effect in Fiction: An Introduction

Abstract This chapter introduces the topic of the book: causation within, or according to, stories, and my intention to explore and defend George Saunders' claim that the successful deployment of such causation makes fiction better. In addition, this chapter tries to make sense of the notion of literary merit. If no stories are better than any others, there is no point writing about what makes stories better. I explore several different accounts of literary merit and argue that some of these are false, and the ones that remain provide a sensible basis for exploring the question of whether and how and why causation makes fiction better.

Keywords Causation • Causation in fiction • George Saunders • Literary merit

There are two things that separate writers who go on to publish from those who don't. First, a willingness to revise. Second, the extent to which the writer has learned to make causality. Making causality doesn't seem sexy or particularly literary. It's a workmanlike thing, to make A cause B, the stuff of vaudeville, of Hollywood. But it's the hardest thing to learn. It doesn't come naturally, not to most of us. But that's really all a story is: a series of things that happen in sequence, in which we can discern a pattern of causality. (George Saunders 2021, p. 226)