Guilt, Shame, and the Function of Unreliable Narration and Ambiguity in John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence*
Abstract

In a confessional, first person narrative, the concept of truth and how it is constructed and perceived is important. Truth in fiction can be created and interpreted in a number of different ways, and when the narrative that portrays it in addition is unreliable and ambiguous, discerning truth becomes a decidedly complex process. This essay interprets the confessional testimony of the narrator in John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence*, in order to examine the function of these narrative devices and how they affect the understanding of what is true in Banville’s unreliably narrated novel. It does so by following literary theories regarding unreliable narration by Tamar Yacobi and others, as well as theories of truth in fiction as first presented by David Lewis and expanded upon by Ben Levinstein and others. The different types of ambiguity suggested by William Empson are also considered. The novel’s narrative is analyzed specifically in relation to the understanding of how the protagonist eludes to his feelings of guilt and shame. These emotions are chosen for their prevalence in conventional confessions. The essay claims that the narcissistic narrator harbors neither of these feelings pertaining to the crime he has committed, but rather that he admits to being guilty and is ashamed of being caught, and that this is portrayed through the structure of the narrative rather than its content.

**Keywords:** Banville, John; *The Book of Evidence*; truth in fiction; unreliable narration; ambiguity; shame; guilt; narcissism; confession.
Truth is important to people, regardless of whether it is a question of truth in personal relationships, truth in political and social issues, or truth about ourselves. It is also something that can be hard to know. Truth in literature is a creature that can be just as elusive as truth in real life, with the added complication of being even harder to pin down considering that the very definition of fiction implies that it is made up. Truth in fiction, however, is none the less important because of its implied fictionality. The issue of truth in fiction in literary studies, in turn, becomes even more complex, even if not all that different, when the dimension of unreliable narration is added (Zipfel 109).

This is exactly the textual crux encountered in John Banville’s novel *The Book of Evidence*. The story is told through the first person narration of Freddie Montgomery, a man giving his unofficial testimony of the reasons for, and the circumstances surrounding him murdering a young girl. Frequently throughout the narrative, attention is drawn to the unreliability of the speaker as he at times stops mid-sentence to change the subject, says one thing only to immediately claim something different, and even at one point explicitly states that the story he is telling may or may not be true (14, 119, 220). Critics such as Elke D’Hoker and Francoise Canon-Roger have discussed and analyzed the novel’s ethical perspective, and the importance and interpretation of pictures and paintings, respectively. However, the implication of the nature of the narrative and its effects does not seem to have been focused on much in previous analyses of this novel, and I therefore believe it to be a relevant area of study.
In this essay I aim to explore and discuss the meaning, importance and function of unreliability, ambiguity and truth in *The Book of Evidence*, and in particular how it relates to the perception and interpretation of the narrator's attitude towards the crime he is confessing. For this to be possible and for the purpose of providing a background for these concepts, literary theories on the concepts of unreliable narration, truth in fiction, and ambiguity, by Tamar Yacobi, Ben Levinstein, William Empson, and others, will be presented and discussed. Eventually I will show that the ambiguity of the narrative created through the use of an unreliable narration is utilized to portray a character that, because of his narcissistic tendencies, harbors neither feelings of guilt nor shame regarding the crime he has committed.

Literary theories concerning the relevant concepts will be presented and discussed in the section ‘(Un)Reliability, Truth and Ambiguity.’ This will be followed by the sections ‘The Function of Unreliability,’ and ‘The Function of Ambiguity.’ In these sections I will analyze, problematize and discuss the function of these concepts, which includes matters such as the significance, and possible purpose, of the narrative as a confession or testimony, as well as how the narrator’s feelings of guilt and shame might be interpreted and understood, once the truth and ambiguity of the narrative has been addressed.

**(Un)reliability, Truth and Ambiguity**

When attempting an analysis concerning narrative devices, it would seem important to begin with establishing the structure of the narrative that is to be analyzed. Banville’s *The Book of Evidence* uses a first person narration, with a homodiegetic narrator, i.e. a character in the story (Zipfel 122). The narrator is Freddie Montgomery who is also the story’s protagonist, and all the information that the reader receives is filtered through Freddie’s consciousness.

This filtering, or refraction, of the information the reader is taking part of becomes somewhat problematic when it becomes apparent that Freddie has a penchant for being rather liberal regarding the truth in his portrayal of the events of the story. Frank Zipfel remarks on the conventions of the organization of homodiegetic narratives, that the events presented by the narrator happened in the past—as is the case in this novel—and how that leads to the creation of two distinct personas that represent the narrating character at different times. The narrating
persona stands apart from the experiencing persona. They often differ in age which in turn leads to a divergence between experience and knowledge, and possibly also between their wishes, needs and moral attitudes: “Thus one can say that the world of the narrator-character encompasses two different worlds, the world of the experiencing and the world of the narrating persona” (Zipfel 123). This fact is something that makes it easier for the narrator to manipulate the portrayal of events, if he so wishes. As the narrating-character is distanced from the immediacy of events in a way the experiencing persona is not, he has thus had more time to deliberately choose what to include, and what to leave out, in the narrative.

Tilmann Köppe and Tom Kindt define unreliable narration “as a narration in which it is part of the compositional strategy that the narrator does not give completely accurate information, or that the narration is misleading as to what counts as fictional truth” (Zipfel 117). One of many examples of these sorts of misdirection in Banville’s novel is when the narrator is telling the story of his first interaction with a man he called “the American,” before he learned his name, even though he was not sure that the man really was American. Freddie tells how he overturned a table after the man insulted their waiter only to immediately retract that version, declaring “that was not the way [he] did things, not in those days,” and proceeds to tell another version of what happened (12–13). Since the reader can rarely be certain of what is true and what is not, defining the novel’s narrative as unreliable is in accordance with Köppe and Kindt’s definition. But what does this mean for the understanding of which parts of Freddie’s story are true and which are not? The perceived importance of truth in the narrative of The Book of Evidence stems not from its content, but rather from how it is presented. Because of the unreliable narration and prevalent ambiguity, both of which concern the distorting or masking of truth, it does stand to reason that there is some purpose to this manipulation, thus suggesting that truth is significant.

Tamar Yacobi suggests as follows:

*[T]he coherent organization of the narrative is made possible once the reader recognizes the character’s interference with the facts or their significance. Sometimes, the perspectival factor having been identified and its interference corrected and discounted, the reader can more or less make out what really happened […].* (118)

“The perspectival factor,” or principal, is one of five measures of reconciliation and integration, Yacobi argues, that the reader has at his or her disposal when encountering “referential difficulties, incongruities or (self-)contradictions” in a
narrative (113–14). According to Yacobi, the key to identifying the truth about the events in Banville’s novel lies in comprehending the motivations of its narrator. This measure, “which brings divergent as well as otherwise unrelated elements into pattern by attributing them, in whole or in part, to the peculiarities and circumstances of the observer through whom the world is taken to be refracted,” is the primary measure applied in this essay to attempt to come to an understanding of Freddie’s narrative as well as the truth of his feelings of guilt and shame (Yacobi 118). However, while truth is interesting, and significant, in the case of The Book of Evidence and the questions regarding Freddie’s feelings that this essay focuses on, why Freddie tells his story the way he does may be regarded as even more revealing than the truth of the story itself.

Zipfel reviews and summarizes a number of theories regarding unreliable narration as well as fictional truth (a term seemingly coined by Zipfel), and how they relate to and interact with each other1. The theory which seems to be most important when discussing truth in fiction is that of David Lewis, if for no other reason than because it was one of the first to be presented on the subject. A simplified version of Lewis’s “Analysis 0” states that “true in a fiction is what is explicitly stated as existing state of affairs in the fictional text” (Zipfel 110). To avoid the problems that arise if one were to speak of truth in fiction as if it were factually true in the world of the reader, Lewis suggests that a statement of what Zipfel calls fictional truth is to be regarded as an abbreviated version of the same statement prefixed by an operator: “‘In such-and-such- fiction…’” or “In the fiction f[...].” (Lewis, 37–38, 42). The statement thus remains the same while differing in sense. For instance, the statement: ‘Freddie Montgomery has ten fingers,’ would be false in the reader’s world since he is a fictional character and thus does not have a physical body. However, if the statement is understood as an abbreviated version of the sentence: “In the fiction [The Book of Evidence],” ‘Freddie Montgomery has ten fingers,’ it can be regarded as true, permitting the assumption that he is a regularly formed human being, since he has a physical body in the fictional worlds of the novel (Lewis 37).

The essence of understanding and interpreting truth in fiction hence lies in the distinction of “[s]torytelling [as] pretence” (Lewis 40). While it is of great import not to mistake the possible fictional worlds of a narrative as the one in which the reader

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1 One of these theories, presented by Marie-Laure Ryan, reconciles the element of unreliable narration with a possible world approach to fictional truth, but since this theory is slightly too complex for the scope of this essay, it will not be included.
itself resides, there is almost an equal importance in regarding fictional worlds, and the people who populate them, as real within that fiction. Lewis suggests that

> [t]he worlds we should consider, [...] are the worlds where the fiction is told, but as known fact rather than fiction. The act of storytelling occurs, just as it does here at our world; but there it *is* what here it falsely purports to be: truth-telling about matters whereof the teller has knowledge. (40, emphasis in original)

Lewis, in other words, builds his analytical approach to truth in fiction on counterfactual reasoning. Understanding that every work of fiction generates a multitude of possible fictional worlds becomes easier when viewing a narrative a series of ‘what if’ questions. For every one of such questions answered, a separate world is generated for every possible answer. When one is reading *The Book of Evidence*, this theory of possible worlds is particularly interesting, because of the ambiguous and unreliable narration, and how this essay deals with the issue will be discussed further in the analysis of the novel.

Lewis proceeds to present two modes of analysis differentiated by their basis of understanding of possible fictional worlds. ‘Analysis 1’ proposes that “[a] sentence of the form ‘In the fiction $f$, $[s]$ is non-vacuously true iff every world where $f$ is told as known fact and $[s]$ is true differs less from our actual world, on balance, than does any world where $f$ is told as known fact and $[s]$ is not true’” (Lewis 42, emphasis in original). “$s$” represents the statement or sentence the truth of which is being considered. This type of analysis of what is fictionally true thus depends on the reader’s knowledge and understanding of what is factually true in their own world and what that world is like.

To discount for situations such as, for instance, when the reader’s subjective view of the actual world somehow differs from the perspective or knowledge of the community of the story’s origin, a second approach is presented. Lewis suggests that, assuming that the beliefs of a community can be merged and are plausible, these beliefs can be fashioned into “the collective belief worlds” of that community, which it can then be ascribed (44, emphasis in original). As with ‘Analysis 1,’ disregarding, for the purpose of the analysis of this essay the relevance of the possibility that there might be “no possible worlds where $f$ is told as known truth,” thus rendering a statement vacuously true (42, 45), ‘Analysis 2’ puts forward that

\[ \text{iff is the abbreviated form of the phrase ‘if and only if,’ used ‘to introduce a condition that is necessary as well as sufficient, or a statement that is implied by and implies the preceding one’ (OED).} \]
a] sentence of the form “In the fiction $f$, $[s]$” is non-vacuously true iff, whenever $w$ is one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin of $f$, then some world where $f$ is told as known fact and $[s]$ is true differs less from the world $w$, on balance, than does any world where $f$ is told as known fact and $[s]$ is not true. (45)

“$w$” refers to one of the possible fictional worlds generated by a work fiction. An example from The Book of Evidence will illustrate ‘analysis 2’. The statement: “[f]or the crime of murder I would be caught and put away,” is told by Freddie as a known fact, and is true as this is what happens in the novel (Banville 152). It seems safe to assume that murder was considered a crime in at least one of the collective belief worlds of the novel’s community of origin—late 1980’s Dublin, Ireland (Kenny xvii). Therefore, it is non-vacuously true in at least one of the possible worlds of The Book of Evidence that committing a murder is a crime that will result in the incarceration of the offender. Nevertheless, an issue with Lewis’s approaches to analyzing truth is that he focuses primarily on concrete truths and facts. These, however, do not always help the reader or critic understand truths that might require some interpretation.

Richard Woodward argues that the analytical approaches presented by Lewis, and others, are flawed in how they are trying to explain fictional truth in relation to fictional worlds. He argues that these theories are a part of what he refers to as “the identification problem,” which concerns identifying what fictional worlds are. However, he proposes that to do this “the generation problem” of discerning “how a fictional world gets associated with a particular work of fiction” must first be solved (Woodward 159–61). The problem of generating fictional truth can reportedly be split into two sub-problems: how that which is being analyzed generates primary, and implied fictional truths respectively. The implied fictional truths are dependent upon the primary fictional truths as much as they assist the reader in guiding their understanding of the possible fictional worlds in which the story is taking place. As when identifying the possible fictional worlds, the background propositions and knowledge of the reader play a part in generating implied fictional truths. The propositions that are useful, suggests Woodward, are the “actually true propositions,” and the reader ought to hold as many of these propositions fixed as the primary fictional truths permit (161, emphasis in original).

There are in turn two ‘principles of generation’ presented in relation to the generation of these implied fictional truths: the reality principle (RP), and the mutual belief principle (MBP). The differences between these are reminiscent of those
between the two analytical models that Lewis presents. RP concerns “minimiz[ing] differences between fictional worlds and the actual world when assessing what is true in a story,” while MBP concerns “hold[ing] fixed those propositions that were mutually and openly believed in a story’s community of origin” (161, 162). The problems with both RP and MBP, nevertheless, are such that neither of them is particularly reliable in their generation of truth. RP allows for truths that may be overly general, and also for actual facts to infiltrate fictions where they may not belong. For example, if it is a fact in the actual world of a reader that it is illegal to run a red light on a bike, then that is an implied truth in *The Book of Evidence*, even if it is completely irrelevant, and wholly without textual support. MBP in turn entails that certain beliefs of a fiction’s community of origin must be implied truths in that fiction even when they might conflict with the primary fictional truths (162).

Woodward eventually concludes that there is no consistently reliable way through which to understand the generation of implied fictional truths, nor a fiction’s primary truths. Neither is a conclusion reached as to the distinction of what criteria need to be met for a truth to be qualified as primary. However, he suggests that these principles “are rules of thumb, which only give us defeasible warrants for drawing inferences from a story’s primary fictional truths” (163).

The importance of these concepts presented by Woodward, for this essay, is the distinction made between implied and primary truths, and which the essay deals with. Implied truths mentioned are meant only to guide the understanding of the possible worlds of *The Book of Evidence*. The truths dealt with in the analysis, regarding the purpose of the confession and the narrator’s feelings, are thus within this context viewed as primary truths. This distinction is made based on the perceived importance of these features to the overall understanding of the work.

In his essay “Facts, Interpretation, and Truth in Fiction,” Ben Levinstein endeavors “to clarify the relationship between literary criticism and truth in fiction using a logic-based schema compatible with Lewis’s theory,” as it has been criticized for not including the element of interpretation required for understanding fiction (64). Levinstein highlights the importance of the interpretive facet of understanding truth in fiction by providing the event of unreliable narration as an example. Before even attempting to understand the fictional truth of this kind of narrative, it must first be interpreted as unreliable. Proceeding to stressing the necessary distinction between interpretations made from inside or outside the story, he defines a ‘view’ as an
interpretation dependent on taking the fictional world as just that—a fictional world (68). Thus, a sentence expressing such a view, a ‘v-sentence,’ “recognizes at least implicitly the fictionality of any possible w-world,” and must therefore be an interpretation made from outside the story (69). Levinstein also postulates that, to make sense, a view must be plausible in accordance with the following criteria:

(i) it is internally consistent; (ii) it coheres with the principles of whatever Lewisian analysis we have chosen; (iii) there is at least one w in W such that the concepts in v are coherent with the facts of w; (iv) there is a sufficient amount of evidence that we can use to argue for all the sentences in v. (72)

“W” here represents all possible fictional worlds in a particular fiction, and “w” a particular subset of these possible worlds. When a critic interprets a work—a set, K, of subset ordered pairs of v’s and w’s, where the view must be plausible within the corresponding w, the elements of which can be described as “a specific reading of the text both with the physical and minute facts of the world and with plausible, interpretive sentences” (72)—they must combine these ordered pairs of v’s and w’s with extra-literary reasoning when interpreting it a specific way (73). The critic can then restrict the subset of ordered pairs by adding extra conditions, creating a K’, which is used to “determine truth relative to an interpretation” (73, emphasis in original).

Levenstein expresses this analysis as “a sentence [s] is true relative to interpretation if [s] is true in all the (w, v)-pairs of a selected subset of K” (73, emphasis in original). What this implies is that, for a statement to be true in relation to an interpretation it must be true in all relevant possible worlds of a fiction where the corresponding views are deemed plausible. Therefore, after establishing the narrative of The Book of Evidence as unreliable, done previously using the definition by Köppe and Kindt (information given by the narrator is not completely accurate, or is misleading as to what counts as true), I can proceed to interpreting it using Levenstein’s approach. The Lewisian theory used for the plausibility criteria will be the first, namely the one which relates to the actual world of the reader. From here on, any interpretive view of the narrative, such as, for instance, that Freddie feels neither shame nor guilt for his crime, must meet the four criteria for plausibility (internal consistency, coherent with Lewisian analysis, v concepts coherent with fact in at least one w, sufficient evidence) listed by Levenstein.
William Empson suggests that any prose sentence that can be analyzed, or interpreted, can be called ambiguous. He uses the word in a sense that defines it as “any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language” (1). Empson presents a theory, or rather an “analytical mode of approach,” of seven types of ambiguity, the first of which is the quite broad aforementioned definition of anything that can be interpreted in more than one way can be called ambiguous (1). Presenting numerous examples—primarily poetry, but drama and prose as well—he outlines and defines these types of ambiguities at length. For this essay, how he numbers and outlines the types in detail is not particularly relevant, but rather more so his insistence on the importance of the fact that ambiguities are different, making even the concept of ambiguity itself ambiguous. Empson summarizes his approach as follows:

Thus a word may have several distinct meanings; several meanings connected with one another; several meanings which need one another to complete their meaning; or several meanings which unite together so that the word means one relation or one process. This is a scale that might be followed continuously. ‘Ambiguity’ itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings. (5–6)

What Empson’s approach illustrates is that ambiguity is important, not only in *The Book of Evidence* but in general, and that there are numerous ways to interpret it. When used later in the essay, the term ambiguity thus suggests one or more of these different kinds of ambiguities, as it can sometimes be hard to discern one type from another.

Since the purpose of this essay is to interpret Banville’s novel through the comprehension of the function of ambiguity and unreliable narration, its theoretical framework is thus consistent with the aforementioned theories and modes of analysis presented by Empson, Yacobi and Levinstein. Because of the interference of the unreliable narrator, which makes certain understanding and knowledge of primary and implied truths generated by the narrative difficult, if not impossible, when bringing up the concept of truth hereafter, it will be a question of, as Levinstein presents it: “*truth* relative to an interpretation” (75, emphasis in original). The analysis will consist of attempting to provide plausible evidence in the form of textual examples, in light of this theoretical framework, of the view v which is that the narrative devices of unreliability and ambiguity are in fact used to portray, or rather (un)mask the truth...
concerning the narrator’s feelings of shame and guilt. The importance of these feelings, I would argue, is suggested by the structure of the narrative as a confession. Given that unreliability is the device most commonly utilized in the novel, as it permeates the entire narrative and also works to create ambiguity, it will therefore be the first to be analyzed.

The Function of Unreliability

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that this story is about a murder. Under normal circumstances a reader might assume that a book about a murder will build towards finding the culprit of the crime, or even the victim or the motive or any of a number of such aspects that we might find central to a crime- or murder-mystery novel. However, in *The Book of Evidence* the culprit has already been caught and the crime already solved. Rather than a mystery, the novel is the literary confessional of the narrating character, Freddie Montgomery.

Parts of the defense attorney’s dwindling hope of success in freeing Freddie is portrayed throughout the novel, with a certain nonchalance, and the purpose of the confession is not the prospect of being him found innocent, the improbability of which is implied as early as on page four. So what, then, is the purpose of a confession such as this? What is the narrator trying to accomplish by telling his story? As Yacobi suggests, understanding Freddie’s reasons for telling his story in the manner he has chosen is vital to the comprehension of what he is trying to convey. Francoise Canon-Roger presents the idea of the centrality of the paintings and images in the novel, and more importantly the act of viewing, and suggests that “[t]he purpose of the accused is not to convince the public that he is not guilty but to show that there is more to the case than meets the eye” (34).

The last paragraph in *The Book of Evidence* explicitly addresses the truth of the narrative the reader has taken part of, and is therefore a good place to start when examining the reliability, and ambiguity of the work, how this affects the understanding of what is fictionally true as well as what the narrative is trying to convey.

I thought of trying to publish this, my testimony. But no. I have asked Inspector Haslet to put it into my file, with the other, official fictions. […] It was to be my defence, I said. […] It’s my story, I said, and I’m sticking to it. He laughed at that. Come on, Freddie, he said, how much
of it is true? […] True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame (219–20).

What is referred to in the first sentence of the quote as “this” is the entirety of the novel—Freddie’s testimony, or confession of the crime he has committed. A testimony, one might assume because of possible legal implications, ought to be truthful. And yet this testimony is questionable in its reliability, both on the level of content and that of narration.

The statement that all of it or none of it is true seems to imply that the narrator, to some unknown degree, is a liar, or at least that his narrative consists more or less of lies. Saying that all of it is true clearly contradicts that none of it is true, and vice versa, so what does this really mean? Trying to decipher the reliability of a statement made by a self-professed liar is inherently circular, unless you have tangible evidence to support your assumptions. This is something that can never be found in the novel as all information is governed over by the unreliable narrator. The liar paradox brings to attention the fact that something cannot be true and not true at the same time. Richard Kenneth Atkins illustrates the paradox with an example: “LP = This proposition (i.e. LP) is not true” (422). He explains that the paradox arises once one questions the truth of LP. If LP is true, then it is not true, however if LP is not true, then it is true—and so the circle continues. He concludes by establishing that, regardless of whether one accepts that LP is neither true nor not true, or that LP is both true and not true, either explanation is absurd if one also accepts that a proposition cannot be neither, nor both, true and untrue at the same time (422). Thus, when Freddie states that none of the narrative is true, neither can that statement in itself. However, since Freddie’s proposition does not solely refer to the truth of the proposition itself, it has slightly different implications than the example by Atkins.

Consequently, what is indicated by Freddie is that the narrative cannot consist of only lies, nor only truths. Moreover, it seems improbable that the only true thing is his shame. For this reason, and in the light of the possible worlds theory incorporated in Levenstein’s analytical model, every statement in the narrative that can be interpreted as either true or not true generates its own set of possible fictional worlds. For the rest of the analysis, the subsets of possible worlds that will be addressed are those where the textual examples used are considered as truths, however ambiguous, rather than lies. The ambiguity created by the unreliable narration and the
questionable level of truth in the story is clearly a purposeful device in the novel, but one might still wonder to what end it is being used.

Not only does the narrator overtly state that the level of truth in his telling is questionable, he also calls it “[his] story” (my emphasis), again pointing to the fact that he is the one who decides what to include, what to leave out and whether or not to tell the truth. He is the one with the knowledge, and thus the power. Even if he is convicted, which he most likely will be given that the text “was to be [his] defence” (my emphasis), indicating that it no longer will be, he maintains the upper hand, at least in his own view, by keeping the details of, and reasons for, the crime to himself.

The narrator expresses a certain level of irreverence towards the legal system and the prosecution of the case as is implied by the referral to the prosecution’s evidence as “official fictions” (my emphasis). This irreverence is also portrayed through his descriptions of the experience in prison as being “just like school,” and that he and his fellow inmates are “obsessed with physical comfort” (5), showing that he is less than threatened by what the authorities have the power to do to him. In fact, even before he was caught by the police, the feelings he expresses about the prospect of capture and all that it entails seem to be quite contrary to what one may imagine the feelings of a murderer might be. Freddie states that “[he] decided to give [him]self up. […] [He] imagined [him]self being lifted tenderly and carried through a succession of cool white rooms to a place of calm and silence, of luxurious surrender” (130). This little bubble of fearlessness in the face of capture, of longing for “luxurious surrender” is quickly burst when the narrator does not give himself up, but instead goes to the pub where he happens to meet the old family friend whose house he then proceeds to hide out at.

By giving the reader this little glimpse of supposed bravery that he then fails to live up to, he portrays himself as being greater than he actually is, supposing the norm that bravery is a characteristic with positive rather than negative connotations. He states that “[he] decided to give [him]self up” (my emphasis), thus putting the power over his state of freedom in his own hands rather than the hands of the police who he is convinced are already chasing him. However, since he does not go through with his intended surrender, this statement might just as well be viewed as posturing—a manner of self-aggrandizement—to make himself feel better, more important and powerful, without ever having the intention of turning himself over to the police.
One facet that makes the narrator’s willingness to be arrested and his feelings of guilt and shame come into question is that of moral culpability. At the end of the narrative it is stated that the text was meant to be the narrator’s defense. Earlier in the text, though, he states that he has no intention of defending himself. Apart from this explicit contradiction regarding the need or intention of defense, the factor of free will is here a relevant one. If the narrator believes in predestination, that he had no real choice when he committed his crime, then he is automatically exempt of moral culpability and thus has no need to defend himself. These are issues brought into question in the following quote, prefaced by the pondering of the narrator on how his life turned out the way it did:

Please, do not imagine, my lord, I hasten to say it, do not imagine that you detect here the insinuation of an apologia, or even of a defence. I wish to claim full responsibility for my actions – after all, they are the only things I can call my own […]. I am merely asking, with all respect, whether it is feasible to hold on to the principle of moral culpability once the notion of free will has been abandoned. (16)

This argument is given after supposed reminiscing has made the narrator come to the conclusion that he has done the things he has done because he “could do no other” (16). Even if there is no evidence given that this is an actual fact and not just a way for Freddie to use a philosophical or religious loophole to get out of being found morally culpable for his actions, it does have the advantage of putting him in a direct line with a higher power. My reasoning here is that, if the notion of free will is abandoned because of the realization that everything in life is predetermined, that means that there is someone, or something, that has determined the path people’s lives are meant to take. This implies, in turn, that humans are important enough for this effort to be worthwhile, the belief in which indicates a certain level of narcissism. I have excluded the possibility that the abandonment of free will is in any way caused by the belief in biological or genetic determinism, since there is no evidence of this in the narrative. Instead some kind of higher power seems to be the deciding factor for how the narrator implies that he believes his actions come to be manifested.

The idea of predestination however does not mean that the narrator takes no pleasure in the actions he is performing. In telling about a dream in which he finds himself consuming flesh that is possibly human, he states as follows:

Believe me, your lordship, I do not enjoy relating these things any more than the court enjoys hearing them. And there is worse to come, as you know. […] That is all there was, really, except for an underlying
sensation of enforced yet horribly pleasurable transgression. [...] Some nameless authority was making me do this terrible thing, was standing over me implacably with folded arms as I sucked and slobbered, yet despite this – or perhaps, even, because of it – despite the horror, too, and the nausea – deep inside me something exulted. (54)

Would it be a great interpretive leap to say that the attitude the narrator displays may very well be applicable to his attitude towards the murder of the young girl? I would think not, since it is important to consider that everything has been put into the narrative for a reason. As suggested by the divergence between the narrating-character and the experiencing persona of this homodiegetic narration, Freddie has had time to consider what to include in his story. This dream has no purpose in relation to the confession of the murder other than to try to illuminate the narrator’s feelings in relation to a purported “enforced […] transgression.” The feelings expressed are those of pleasure and exultation—feelings that are only distantly, if at all, connected with the feelings of guilt and shame. The inclusion of this dream, the significance of which is somewhat masked and ambiguous, can therefore be argued to be a part of the narrator’s attempt at exploring and explaining himself to a possible reader. Consequently, the understanding of this as the purpose of his narrative confession works towards making possible the correction and discounting of the interference of Freddie’s unreliability, in line with Yacobi’s suggestion.

The Function of Ambiguity

Freddie himself brings up the concept of masks on several occasions. One of these occasions is when he is waiting for the police to find him. As he waits, he describes how he grows restless and impatient, but also the power he feels at having acquired this new mask, or persona, of an innocent man, that he dons whenever he leaves his hideout. He states that “there was that constant, hot excitement, like a fever in the blood, that was half the fear of being unmasked and half the longing for it” (172, 173). This ambiguous feeling towards being unmasked and understood seems to be ever present in the narrative.

On the last page of the novel the narrator states that the shame is the only true thing in his confession. I would argue that the shame referred to is not shame felt about the crime committed, but rather about something else. In another dream the narrator chooses to relate as part of his sometimes defensive non-defence, he
approaches his feelings about being captured after having committed a crime. This is then supposedly not the murder of a young girl, but some other unspecified crime that neither the narrator nor the reader knows much about.

What is peculiarly awful in all this is not the prospect of being dragged before the courts and put in jail for a crime I am not even sure I have committed, but the simple, terrible fact of having been found out. This is what makes me sweat, what fills my mouth with ashes and my heart with shame. (124)

If this statement is to be taken at face value, it could be interpreted as an ambiguous explanation—ambiguous only in the sense that can be applied either to this supposed dream scenario or the fictional reality of the murder committed—for his actions, since there are several aspects of the quote with direct relation to other arguments he has made about his role in and attitude towards his crime. First of all he states that the prospect of being imprisoned is not that terrible, which seems to be in line with his feelings about actually being in prison and the romanticized ideas of capture expressed in relation to him wanting to surrender to the authorities. Secondly, the issue of moral culpability comes into play again when dealing with whether or not he has committed the crime he is being dragged before the court for. I do not believe it is a question of having committed the act or not, as much as it is about whether or not the act should be considered a crime in the light of him suffering a lack of free will. If this statement is interpreted as having a direct relation to the crime the narrator is confessing to, which in my view it does, then the shame he feels is not for having taken another person’s life, but for “having been found out.”

Similar to the ambiguity of the narrator’s expressions about feelings of shame is the ambiguity surrounding his feelings of guilt. He states: “After all, I might be found innocent. Oh, I mustn’t laugh, it hurts too much, I get a terrible twinge, as if something were pressing on my heart – the burden of my guilt, I suppose.” (4). The guilt he here refers to may be interpreted either as a feeling of guilt, or as him being guilty of the crime he is accused of. I would argue that the latter is more probable when viewing the juxtaposition of the quote in its entirety. He—possibly ironically—laughs at the prospect of being found innocent, and this is what brings on the thing that seems to be “pressing on [his] heart.” If the notion of being found innocent is ridiculous enough to laugh at, then it would seem that he does admit to being guilty of the crime, however, it does not necessarily mean that he feels guilty about it. The likelihood of this being the case is supported by the following statement regarding his
feelings after the girl he has just bludgeoned with a hammer turns to him and asks for help: “What did I feel? Remorse, grief, a terrible – no no no, I won’t lie. I can’t remember feeling anything, except that sense of strangeness, of being in a place I knew but did not recognise” (119).

If the narrator suffers neither feelings of shame nor guilt, nor, as is expressed in the last quote, of remorse, then what is the purpose of this confessional narrative? Thinking about confessions brings to mind legal confessions as well as religious confessions. Considering the questionable truthfulness, it might be argued that this is not a typical confession with ties to his legal case, and the lack of remorse makes it an unlikely religious confession. D’Hoker writes about confessional narratives, and “confession as (un)masking” and I believe this to be the case in The Book of Evidence (Confession 33–36). Dennis A. Foster argues that in a secular confession, such as a literary one, the “desire for truth” is something that brings together the reader and the writer, since truth is more important than in a religious confession due to the absence of ritual and convention (D’Hoker, Confession 32).

Through the ambiguous and unreliable narration, Freddie unmasks himself as a narcissist with little regard for others. Mark O’Connell, in contrast to Foster, argues that the reader of one of Banville’s “narcissistic fictions,” for instance the confession of Freddie, is always “external or incidental to” the process of explanation and understanding that the narrator is going through, and that even though an implied reader is addressed, they “are really just imagined surrogates for the narrator’s own self” (1). If this were to be understood as true, then the only “person” with the power to grant Freddie any kind of absolution through self-knowledge is Freddie himself, completely alienating him from the otherwise possible forgiveness of a kind reader.

O’Connell also argues that The Book of Evidence “[i]n certain respects, […] is about nothing more or less than perception itself: how Freddie perceives the world and himself in it, and how he perceives others perceiving him” (55). Freddie confesses that what he considers his “essential sin” is “that [he] never imagined [the girl he murdered] vividly enough, that [he] never made her be there sufficiently, that [he] did not make her live” (215). This in turn implies a belief that the importance of others people’s lives hinges on his sufficient perception of them, which he may provide or withhold either by will or by chance.

D’Hoker addresses Freddie’s self-reported failure to “make her live,” and the novel’s ethical perspective. D’Hoker argues that rather than failing to make his victim
live, to imagine her as other to him, it is being faced with her in fact being a “real” and complex person, who cannot be easily squeezed into whatever mould he has designated for her, that ultimately causes him to kill her (Portrait 30). Whatever the reason, he nevertheless seeks a kind of twisted absolution by assigning himself the task of bringing her back to life through his imagination, indicating that, in accordance with O’Connell’s view, he is the only one capable of absolving himself of his sins (Banville 215–16).

In this essay, I have shown that the narrative devices of unreliable narration and ambiguity affect the understanding of what can be interpreted as fictionally true in John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence*. By providing evidence to meet the four criteria of plausibility required by Levenstein’s analytical approach for an interpreted view of a fiction to make sense, I have illustrated that Freddie Montgomery harbours neither feelings of shame nor guilt regarding the crime to which he is confessing. The purpose of his confession, rather than the possibility of absolution and forgiveness, is self-discovery—the unmasking of his true self. In his novel, Banville manages to portray a rich and complex character, although not necessarily a sympathetic one, through the structure of the narrative rather than through the content of it.

It is not so much *what* the story tells the reader about its character that allows for comprehensive understanding, but rather *how* the story is told. Since the novel is constructed in a manner that makes getting to the truth difficult—if not impossible—when taking the narrator’s statements at face value and without serious questioning, it strikes me as almost improper to ignore it. To me it seems that Banville has taken great care when structuring the novel’s narrative, and he uses it to the fullest extent as a tool to shape and reveal the nature of his protagonist, rather than only using it as the means with which he relates the story. Truth in this case, muddled by ambiguity and unreliability, thus illuminates more by being withheld than shared, presupposing that the purpose of the reading is to understand the narrator and his actions.

The interpretation of truth and understanding of how it is generated has been at the centre of this essay. Although, truth in fiction, however important is always dependent upon the modes through which the fiction is narrated. There are, as shown in the theoretical discussion, numerous approaches to choose from when trying to determine the condition of fictional truth, be it primary or implied, and this in itself also works to indicate its importance. Nevertheless, since truth is such an elusive creature as to resort to hiding itself in an unknown number of possible worlds, it could
be concluded that there can never be too many theories or practices through which the critic or the layman tries to capture and study it.
Works Cited


