CINEFORUM
ISSN: 0009-7039
Vol. 66. No. 2, 2026

Unreliability as Skillful Survival Tactic: Case Study of Ora in David Grossman's *To the End of the Land*

Amaria Mehdaoui
University of Saida, Dr. Moulay Tahar,
Algeria mehdaouiamaria@gmail.com

Abstract

Narrators are more than mere transmitters. It is against the backdrop of their narration that a reader becomes implicated or not. When well-crafted, they possess the ability to change a reader's cognitive, psychological, and emotional state. Gifted readers, however, can assess the reliability of a narrator and the tactics they use to overcome the implications of misbehavior or misunderstanding. However, in situations where themes such as motherhood or death are explored, the lines between reality and fiction, reliability and unreliability blur. Drawing on the rhetorical narratology of Phelan and Gerrard Genette theory of narrative discourse, this paper attempts to shed light on how the narrator of David Grossman's *To the End of the Land* defies the static boundaries between reliability and unreliability, outlining how unreliability becomes a survival tactic in war zones. The study results indicated that while readers are aware that Ora's unreliability is evident, emotional involvement remains difficult to ignore. The analysis also revealed that death and motherhood are driving forces behind the persistence of unreliability. Moreover, a secret communion between the implied author and implied reader is highlighted. The paper contributes to the study of unreliable narration by demonstrating how, in trauma and wars contexts, unreliability can function as a psychological defense mechanism rather than a mere rhetorical tool.

Keywords: Death, Narrative, Motherhood, Survival, *To the End of the Land*, Unreliability.

Introduction

Usually, when we read a narrative, we find ourselves cognitively, psychologically, and emotionally connected to what the authors are offering us. The connectedness is driven in many ways, amongst them what is transmitted through a narrator: "the formal logic of character narration has consequences for our emotional responses to character narrators, and these emotional responses, in turn, have consequences for the ethical dimension of our engagement with them and with the narratives in which they appear" (Phelan, 2005, p.5)

On the emotional level, narratives of motherhood and death are inevitably among the themes that readers find it difficult not to feel involved. Each fictional death experience resembles the everyday experiences readers witness, and motherhood stories affect them consciously or unconsciously. Crafting a narrator who narrates such complicated themes requires a wealth of stylistic skills and an eloquent voice that convinces despite all logical and ideological paradoxes. The narrator of David Grossman's *To the End of the Land*, this

paper claims, meets the requirements of a convincing narrator. Hence, the current paper focuses on how unreliability becomes a skill and a survival tactic to escape the horrors, not only of the war experience, but also of receiving a death notice at any cost.

To achieve this aim, the following research questions were set forth:

- What kind of challenges are faced by the narrator character in *To the End of the Land*?
- How is unreliability a tool in the hands of the narrator?
- What unreliability tactics did the narrator use to breach readers' consciousness and promote their sympathy and emotional involvement?

As a roadmap for the present research, the reader will be introduced to unreliability as a rhetorical narrative tool and to the different ways it affects narrative flow and conclusion. The study delves into the choice of the mother protagonist, the theme of motherhood, and the theme of death. It will clarify how the triangulation made it possible for the narrator of *The End of the Land* to survive the war zone on one hand and unreliability despite all inconveniences.

Literature Review

Unreliability as a Rhetorical Tool

Narration occurs in everyday conversations and representations, not only in books and novels. To be activated, narration requires a narrator, especially in the world of written narratives. While narrators are important, not all are reliable. In this context, Wayne Booth refers to unreliable narrators as only those who articulate behaviors and thoughts that differ from the implied author. The latter is "the author-image evoked by a work and constituted by the stylistic, ideological, and aesthetic properties for which indexical signs can be found in the text".***(*****The Living Handbook of Narratology, *n.d.)***.

According to Booth, an implied author differs from the real author and the narrator in the way it represents the ethical systems and values in the text. When in accordance with the narrator's ethics and beliefs, the narrator is judged reliable; otherwise, unreliable narration is activated. Hence, when an unreliable narrator misrepresents, misevaluates, or misreports events, a gap is created between the implied author and the narrator. Once readers recognize unreliability, they enter into a secret communion with the implied author behind the narrator's back. This gap is an intentional rhetorical device used by the real author to enhance effects, such as irony***(Booth, 1983)***. A successful reading is achieved only when the reader can decode the signals in the text, allowing them to enter the position of the implied reader and share the interpretive frames with the audience. Unreliability, therefore, is a rhetorical tool that deserves clarification in the context of this paper.

The concept of unreliability was first introduced by Booth (1983) in relation to the implied author and readers discussed in the section above. It is, however, important to bring a brief discussion of narratives, narrators, and reliable narration.

Phelan (2017) argues that a narrative revolves around someone telling someone else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened. Narrators in this context play three basic roles: report facts, interpret and transmit meaning, and evaluate ethical values. These roles are established to convey information to their audience. In fiction, the rhetorical

exchange involves four distinct types of audience: (1) the actual audience (the real physical reader) sharing the author's values and ethics, (2) the authorial audience (the hypothetical readers the author writes for), (3) the narratee or the audience directly addressed by the narrator, (4) and the narrative audience or those who take the observer position within the story world accepting events as real.

Narrators are integral parts of the narrative and cannot be separated or neglected. They are the tunnel through which we receive and perceive stories. While both reliable and unreliable narration exist, it is argued that they "are neither binary opposites nor single phenomena but rather broad terms and concepts that each cover a wide range of author-narrator-audience relationships in narrative" (James Phelan, 2017).

Within the spectrum of narration, reliable narration occurs when the implied author communicates matters the author endorses through a character. Phelan classifies this into three subtypes: (1) restricted narration, (2) convergent narration, and (3) mask narration. In the first, the narrator reports the events reliably but remains unaware of the interpretations the author conveys to the audience. In the second, the three views of the author, narrator, and audience align. The third subtype, and most important for this paper, is that the narrator's voice is used to thematize the narrative. The implied author's voice becomes slightly refracted.

Unreliable narration, on the other hand, occurs when the author chooses to create a gap between the narrator's account and the truth. Phelan identifies six ways unreliability occurs. Three of these involve mis-: misreporting, misinterpreting, and misevaluating. The other triad is: underreporting, under-interpreting, and under-evaluating. Unreliability, as this paper will show, does not always push readers away. It can cause a bonding effect when the narrator's flaws are recognized, and it can reduce the emotional distance between the reader and the author (Phelan, 2017).

But why do readers get emotionally attached to unreliable narrators despite being aware of their misbehavior or misevaluation? In some cases, like that of Nick Carraway in The Great Gatsby, readers are emotionally involved because love is at stake, and love stories are most affectionate and most trustworthy. But how do readers get involved with themes of loss and death in the same way? This brings us to the importance of thematic selection and the skill of making a narrator an eloquent and convincing speaker.

Death in Life and Literature

Death is part of life, an inescapable reality. Choosing the theme of death in War Literature is a common and extensively explored topic. Death in literature featured prominently even in ancient scripts, including The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Book of the Dead, and by philosophers like Plato and Socrates. While in science and religion death has always present, in psychology it was initially avoided as a topic, and it took its time to be acknowledged.

After the First World War, death as a psychological subject re-emerged. Herman Feifel's seminal volume, *The Meaning of Death* (1959), launched the modern "death awareness" movement. Norman Farberow and Edwin Shneidman pioneered suicide prevention research and crisis intervention centers. Multiple journals, research centers, and courses soon followed (e.g.,

Omega: Journal of Death and Dying). Public attention was drawn by Jessica Mitford's The American Way of Death (1963) and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's On Death and Dying (1969) (Kastenbaum & Costa, 1977). In literature, works like *The Red Badge of Courage, All Quiet on the Western Front, A Farewell to Arms,* and *Three Soldiers* (among many others) brought death into the consciousness of readers from different perspectives. Literature actually benefited from the advances in psychology to develop trauma awareness in its narratives.

This section illustrates how death as a theme is addressed in narratives. In their work "Does It Matter if a Story Character Lives or Dies?" A Massage Experiment Comparing Survivor and Death Narratives (2022), Lillie Hellen M. et al. argue that, similar to fiction narratives, real narratives about death are important. The study found that death narratives increase persuasive impact and behavioral intent. They intensify narrative transportation (a key feature to increase the state of immersion/absorption into a story). When a character's death is foreshadowed, it prepares the audience for the event while simultaneously increasing suspense, interest, and curiosity. It also helps reduce counterarguing against the message. Readers are more focused on the plot and characters. By increasing transportation, death narratives encourage readers to "devote cognitive resources to following the story rather than challenging underlying persuasive messages" (Lillie et al., 2021, p.6).

Death narratives, moreover, trigger "loss frame messages." They can become powerful narrative tools to decrease loss aversion by highlighting the outcomes of perceived benefits and depicting experiences that are not always negative. While death narratives are generally persuasive, they can trigger paradoxical reactions varying between acceptance and psychological reactance (defensiveness), which in many ways can be overcome by the immersive power of the narrative (p. 439). While the paper draws our attention to the fact that narratives about death are not always negative, it highlights how narratives of this nature change our perception of the death topic itself. It elucidates how our emotional reactions to narratives, real or fictional, are easily intrigued to the extent that a topic like death becomes accepted and even embraced.

In "Death and Literature", (Carroll, 2019) explores how literature grapples with the theme of death, integrating psychological viewpoints. From early childhood, people struggle with the perception of death as universal, unavoidable, irreversible, and involving the cessation of all 'biological' functions. This 'biological' aspect stimulates imagination, prompting human beings to contemplate the struggle with the end of life. Many people, in the process, develop supernatural beliefs about what comes after death; this contributes to the rise of anxiety and uncertainty, opening doors to further imagination (Carroll, 2019).

Literature serves as a crucial medium to fill the cup of human imagination. Through these imaginary activities, literature presents subjective experiences, decorating them in an aesthetic form, connecting them to abstract concepts, and locating them within the spatial realms of past, present, and future (p. 138). To establish a comprehensive framework to understand literary responses to death, literature needed to integrate ideas from other fields in the social sciences, including particularly theories from sociology and psychology.

In this respect, different movements advocated for the portrayal of death in literature.

They argue that fictional narratives are constructed to help humans understand and make sense of the world and their place in it. Symbolic images, such as death, increase human awareness of it. These narratives provide templates for self-narrative, opening doors for possible experiences through simulated scenarios. These adaptive scenarios encompass making sense of death as an important event that impacts the human experience from memories to future expectations (p.140).

As a matter of fact, authors, readers, and fictional characters all combine to bring the thematic experience into the literary text. Characters, as imaginary persons with beliefs, values, and motivations, reflect the author's views. They elicit readers' reactions, a parallel to real-life interactions. These reactions are emotionally charged by the idea of death, eliciting feelings of fear, sadness, rage, sadism, and even joy and happiness. Specific genres have been devoted to the emotional responses to death, including horror literature, tragedy, and elegy (p. 140-43).

Death as a theme is explored in a variety of ways. Diverse attitudes towards it, including fear, uncertainty, acceptance, desire to escape from pain, willingness to self-sacrifice, and increased appreciation of life, are depicted in literature. While fear of death is unavoidable, Caroll argues it is not an all-encompassing human motive, as the Terror Management Theory claims (p.140). Responses to death, he suggests, are more nuanced and sometimes even positive. While fear is indeed the initial and natural reaction, human beings can achieve a state of acceptance regarding the topic of mortality and the death of loved ones. This is not an outcome of absence of emotion but a profound understanding of the inevitability of death.

For some people suffering from chronic physical pain, death can be perceived as something to be feared but also as a release, a means to escape suffering. Approaching death, for others, is a source of wonder because it provides the experience of knowing what is beyond. This is rooted in many spiritual and religious people's consciousness or deep human curiosity about the ultimate unknown. It serves as an aesthetic and emotional response to death.

In certain cases, human beings may willingly face death or even embrace it for the sake of a greater cause (war, family, and ideals, for example). Paradoxically, the awareness of death may lead to more diverse responses, including the motivation to live a better life, cherish relationships, pursue meaning, and engage with future experiences. Among all reactions summarized above, the denial and engaging in plans (including relationships) suit the study of Grossman's novel and this paper.

Motherhood in Literature

The figure of the mother in literature is a recurrent theme, whether the literary work addresses it directly or implicitly. Motherhood is often idealized as natural, universal, and fulfilling. Mothers are the symbol of production, sacrifice, and continuity. However, in the light of traumatic, disruptive, and marginalized experiences, there must be a re-examination of their representation.

Cultural narratives, Lazzari and Ségral (2021) argue, often silence or marginalize motherhood experiences. Among the themes they discuss, experiences in the context of war, genocide, and displacement are usually neglected. These experiences, according to them, are

central rather than peripheral due to their emotional, psychological, and political dimensions. Drawing from Trauma Studies, Feminist Studies, and the intersection of Literary and Cultural Studies, they call for a comparative, interdisciplinary, and transnational approach engaging with narratives in their forms and diverse contexts.

The figure of the mother has been studied in different manners but as static figures. In her paper "Maternal Genealogies: The Figure of the Mother in/and Literature", Gill Rye argues that while mothers are ubiquitous in literature, they are frequently represented as ambivalent, silenced, or marginalized figures. While acknowledging criticism of the so-called French feminists, including De Beauvoir, Rich, Irigaray, and Kristeva, for their essentialism and ahistoricism, Rye emphasizes the continual relevance of its key concepts when brought with historically grounded sociopolitical perspectives.

Despite the increased attention to maternal figures, mothers remain predominantly objects of discourse constructed through the perspective of others, husbands, daughters, and sons, or cultural narratives, rather than narrators of their own experiences. As Rye states, "mothers are overwhelmingly objects of other's discourses rather than subjects of their own" (Rye, 2006) This critical gap persists even as contemporary women's writing is increasingly implicating first-person narrative mother voices. Literary criticism, according to Rye, should engage with maternal subjectivity from the mother's point of view. Ora, in Grossman's *To the End of the Land*, fulfills this objective.

Rye positions the figure of the mother as a dynamic, contested, and generative site of literary meaning—one that continues to challenge feminist theory, literary criticism, and cultural representation. Ora, as this work suggests, is a narrator of her own voice. She defies silencing and marginalization by telling her own narrative. Our objective in this paper is to assess its reliability.

In "Beyond the World of Guilt and Sorrow: Separation, Attachment and Creativity in Literary Mothers and Sons", Nancy Bakes challenges dominant cultural and theoretical narratives that privilege separation, individuation, and detachment as necessary for male development and creativity. Through a deep analysis of different characters in literary contexts, Bakes argues that literary representations reveal maternal attachment as a powerful and generative force for shaping both male creativity and maternal subjectivity (rather than separation). Drawing on literary works, she proposes that attachment persists across the lifespan and continues to structure emotional life, memory, and creative production, even after death.

While mother-daughter relationships have been extensively theorized, the mother-son relationship remains comparatively underexplored, often treated as taboo or theoretically uncomfortable. This neglect stems from feminism's historical ambivalence toward male development and psychoanalysis's tendency to narrate maternal loss exclusively from a son's perspective, thereby erasing maternal grief and subjectivity (Backes, 2000). This paper, I propose, fulfills this gap by bringing the mother-son relationship in literature within one of the neglected contexts, that of trauma and war.

The Intersection of Maternal Unreliability and Trauma

Drawing on the above-discussed theories, it becomes clear how mothers burdened with sacrifices for their children and within war-zone conditions have no choice but to become unreliable narrators. To maintain the sacred bond with their family members, especially children, and to overcome their traumatic experiences, a survival tactic is activated to preserve their sanity in a world falling into chaos and insanity. It is better to speak unreliably than remain voiceless.

To the End of the Land* OR *A Woman Escaping Tidings

To the End of the Land (Grossman, 2010), or the simple direct translation of the Hebrew version A Woman Escaping Tidings, is a novel that was written by an Israeli author who himself experienced the loss of a son in war in southern Lebanon, an event that left him with a deep awareness of the impact of loss and trauma during times of war in general. Despite his neutrality regarding politics in his fiction and journalism, Grossman's novel under study is inherently situated within narratives about war. The story tells of Ora, a mother character, who goes through an emotional journey rather than a chronological sequence of events. While waiting for her son Ofer to finish his military service and leave for a celebratory hiking journey in the Galilee, Ora is shocked by his decision to return to aid his comrades and fulfill his destiny as a military man. Terrified that she will receive notification of his death, Ora decides to flee home with Avram, Ofer's biological father, to escape the death notice by recounting to Avram details of Ofer's life that he does not know. Telling the story of Ofer and putting him into words, according to Ora, is what will make him stay alive. This desperate magical thinking is but an attempt to shield her son through the power of language and memory. Despite our knowledge of the delusional journey Ora pursues, our sympathy and involvement are not restrained. For that reason, the purpose of this study is to raise the question of how an implied author, a narrator, and an implied reader can be involved in the crime of unreliability, yet in a compassionate way.

Death and Denial

Death, as previously discussed, elicits different reactions. One unavoidable reaction is fear. Humans cannot avoid the fear of death itself; they can only create defense mechanisms to protect themselves despite their awareness of the inevitable outcome. In his Pulitzer-winning book *The Denial of Death*, Becker argues that the fear of death is the quintessence of human activity. Becker distinguishes between the symbolic self (the part of us that creates art, imagines, and thinks of itself as possessing power) and the physical self (the part that is doomed to decay):

> We might call this existential paradox the condition of individuality within finitude. Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars, out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man

> literally the status of a small god in nature, as the Renaissance thinkers knew. Yet, at the same time, as the Eastern sages also knew, man is a worm and food for worms. ***(Becker, 2024, p.26)***

Therefore, we build our personalities, and by extension our voices, as a defense mechanism (a vital lie).

In *The end of the Land*, Ora's voice of denial is this vital lie in action. She is not just telling Avram the story of the son he does not know; she is addressing the reader, inviting them to accept her quest as legitimate. She is building a wall against the void.

In recasting a basic psychoanalytic idea, Baker introduces his concept of the 'causa sui project' or the attempt to be one's own creator. According to him, humans engage in heroic projects (like writing a novel or raising a family) to achieve symbolic immortality (Becker, 2019). When a narrator like Ora focuses on the legacy of her flight, and hence on her journey with her ex-lover, her 'grand purpose', she is performing an immortality project to mask the silence of death.

> "Maybe the whole thing was the opposite of what I thought."
> "Opposite how?"
> She slowly turns her palms out. "Because I thought that if we both talked about him, if we kept talking about him, we'd protect him, together, right?"
> "Yes, yes, that's true, Ora, you'll see—"
> "But maybe it's the exact opposite?"
> "What? What's the opposite?" he whispers.
> Her body flutters at him. She grips his arm: "I want you to promise me."
> "Yes, whatever you want."
> "That you'll remember everything." (p.571)

The voice that is both loud and obsessed with immortalizing her son is a defense mechanism. This, one suggests, drives the reader not only to sympathize with her because they recognize her heroic effort to stay meaningful in a world shaped by war and trauma, but also to accept that her unreliable voice as logic.

Motherhood and Acceptance

The discussion of motherhood earlier within the theoretical section of this paper elucidated how marginalization and avoidance have traditionally characterized narratives about mothers. In the field of feminist narratology, Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings provide different frameworks that expand our traditional view of mother narrative voice. They see motherhood not as a biological state but as a moral orientation. Sympathy towards the narrative voice in this respect changes when this orientation is translated through the narrative voice itself.

In her book In *A Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan challenges the idea that moral maturity is defined by impartial justice. A maternal voice is never an 'I' but a 'we' because women, especially mothers, operate within an Ethic of Care where care is what maintains relationships (Carol, 1982). If not because of mothers' care, how would many families stand together?

Instead of an autonomous ego, a maternal voice avoids the solitary hero trap, and each decision is a negotiation of self, not as solitary but in relation and for the sake of the child. Readers of fictional narratives, aware of this interdependency, do not usually sympathize with the characters' pursuit of power but with their ability to sustain the sacred bond under different circumstances, even in wartime. Its voice gains authority because it is self-directed, making the narrator morally superior to other types of narrators who are driven only by self-interest.

Ora's decisions are driven by this relationship. While readers are aware of the delusional situation she is entrapped in, the source of her psychological breakdown seems more factual than any other option. Readers do not care if she is living in a myth, as long as she is not abandoning her child or accepting her son's death as patriotic heroism.

In Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education, Nel Noddings expanded Gilligan's idea by introducing the concepts of Engrossment (thinking focused on care) and Motivational Displacement (the mothers' goals being temporarily replaced by the needs of their child). Applying Noddings' theory within narrative voice analysis, one can notice how the inner life of the mother is consumed by the child's needs, creating a hyper-vigilant voice. This narrative voice becomes a tool to show the mental weight of care, but this emotional feeling is what drives the readers' sympathy elicited through effective labor (Noddings, 1984).

Unlike often patriarchal narrative structures, that picture sympathy driven by the quest of autonomy, Noddings urges to use maternal voice driving sympathy through responsibility. In this framework, a mother's voice is compelling because her choices are never truly for herself, they are always weighted by the vulnerability of another.

Ora in Grossman's novel never loses connection with her child, emotionally and linguistically speaking. Her journey is driven by sharing the same fate as her son, even if separated, they remain together. Wandering in a zone of war, calling it a journey, is but a tactic to express her bond. To share sacrifice, sense of displacement, insecurity, and fear is what makes her still connected to him.

The Narrative Stand in *To the End of the Land*

To the End of the Land is a narrative driven by denial and denial is what steers the unreliable narration (as it will be later noted). According to Genette, every text exhibits traces of narration. In order to focus on its linguistic components, one has to detach it from its context of production and reception. For Genette, every narrative is diegesis (a recounting of a story), not mimesis (showing what really happened). While Ora is narrating her story, she is unable to show us what is really happening, her narrative stems from what she thinks is and what will happen.

To be able to analyze the narrative voice, one has to deconstruct its narrative layers first. In his seminal work Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, Genette distinguishes between three layers of the narrative reality: Histoire (story), Récit (narrative), and Narrating (narration). The first refers to the signifier or the narrative content (the events). The second is the signified or the representation of the discourse. The last (and most important to us) is the act of telling. It is worth mentioning that the Récit/narrative is the only layer that is available

for us for textual analysis. ***(Genette, 1980)***

In the case of Grossman's novel, grief constructs the layers of the narrative, because the histoire/story is about the fear of loss and death, while the récit/narrative itself is unable to be told. We encounter a character who fled her best friend's death (a real event in the past) when she was a child, and she flees the notification of her son's death (something that has not happened yet). Ora is grieving death through denial. Narration, therefore, is breaking down. In the state of fleeing the notification, Ora refuses to narrate it. If she accepts narrating it, it would destroy both her and the coherence of the récit.

On the road of grief, Ora does not deny the fact of the death notification; she simply denies its consequences on who she will become. The narrative, hence, pauses, time freezes, and the act refuses to carry on. If Ora were to accept the coming of the notifiers, a new story where truth could live would have to come—a story without Ofer. If Ora were to agree to wait for the news, the events would develop into another plot, thus a revised plot. Denial in this state keeps the events at the threshold of narratability; it keeps it alive and ready to be analyzed.

Another concept in Genette's terminology will lay the groundwork for how denial leads to unreliability in the novel. In Genette's framework, an 'internal focalization' is a form of focalization that is restricted to the consciousness of a single character. We see the events from Ora's consciousness. The truth exposed in the novel is all filtered through her and is limited to her knowledge, emotional state, and psychological state. Because we are aware of the traumatic experiences Ora went through, being isolated from her family as a child due to contamination and the death of her childhood best friend Ada in an accident, we cannot deny that Ora's narration exhibits a psychological form of paralipsis (in Genette's terminology, this refers to the omission of a given element in a narrative) where omitting the reality of notifiers and her son's death news from her landscape keeps him alive.

Implied Author Role in *To the End of the Land*

An implied author is a key figure in understanding unreliability in literature. There is a distinction between the real author (David Grossman in this case), real readers (us), the narrator (Ora, the mother and protagonist), and the implied author (the version of the author that is created by the text itself).

Wayne Booth describes the implied author as a "second self". It is the moral and artistic consciousness that decides on how to tell the story in the way it is revealed to readers. While Grossman writes for a given audience (us), the implied author addresses 'an implied reader', a reader who is expected to comprehend the layers that constitute the narrative, the irony, and the gap in the character (s)' situations. In our case, the implied author addresses the implied readers who are expected to understand the gap in Ora's memory, the irony of fleeing a note of death to keep her son alive, and the tragedy of the whole situation.

The importance of the implied author in this study lies in raising the tension between what the narrator says (Ora's words) and what the implied author knows. This gap reveals unreliability. In Ora's mind, staying away from home can stop the news. This communication of a death notice needs two partners: a notifier and a receiver. By breaking the communication

line through fleeing, she creates a fantasy, a magical thinking as a survival strategy that keeps both hope and her child alive.

> All those nights she has spent waiting for them, ever since Adam enlisted and through all his stints in the Territories, and then for the three years of Ofer's service. All those times she has walked to the door when the bell rings and told herself, This is it. But that door will remain shut a day from now, and two, and in a week or so, and that notification will never be given, because notifications always take two, Ora thinks – one to give and one to receive – and there will be no one to receive this notice, and so it will not be delivered, and this is the thing that is suddenly illuminated in her with a light that grows brighter by the minute, with needle-sharp flashes of furious cheer, now that the house is closed up and locked behind her and the phone inside is ringing incessantly, and she herself is pacing the sidewalk, waiting for Sami. (p.57)

Ora even idealizes her thoughts, treating them as logical and applicable to all similar situations by recognizing it as 'law'. While the implied author is aware that this is actually only her illusion, not a 'law of nature,' he shows the readers the desperation behind her statement. He reveals Ora's contradictory self, thereby signaling imperfection in her narration, indicating that her words cannot be objectively processed. Yet, a deep empathy is announced through the implied author toward Ora's traumatic experience and emotional state:

> And therefore, when they come to inform her, she will not be here. The parcel will be returned to sender, the wheel will stop for an instant, and it may even have to reverse a little, a centimeter or two, no more. Of course the notice will be dispatched again immediately—she has no illusions. They won't give up, they cannot lose this battle, because their surrender, even just to one woman, would mean the collapse of the entire system. Because where would we be if other families adopted the idea and also refused to receive notice of their loved ones' deaths? She has no chance against them, she knows. No chance at all. But at least for a few days she will fight. Not for long, just twenty-eight days, less than a month. This is possible, it is within her power, and in fact it is the only thing possible for her, the only thing within her power. (p.57-58)

Through this empathy, implied readers come to believe Ora, accepting her tale as a moral necessity to keep her son in a state of humanity rather than a state of military service. The implied author even uses Ora's unreliability to reveal the psychological fee of life lived in the shadow of war, transmitting a universal emotional experience. Because death is overshadowed in her telling, the reader's counterargument is reduced. The reader becomes not a passive observer but an active accomplice in Ora's tale because the death of a young man is difficult to bear.

Unreliability Undisguised

In *Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*, James Phelan distinguishes between three primary types of unreliable narration: misreading, misreporting, and misevaluating. In Grossman's novel, Ora exhibits all three types, even simultaneously, as a psychological defense mechanism

against the traumatic experience: the fear of losing her son. First, Ora misreports the causal laws of the world by treating her physical presence or silence as a biological force that can protect her son. The trick lies in the paradox: if she is not home to receive the notifiers, the event cannot manifest in reality. By reporting it as a law of nature, her brain attempts to rewrite the physics of war into a shield of 'storytelling', a fact that the readers know is not true.

Simultaneously, Ora misreads her own journey, attempting a hiking journey through a war zone as a neutral act (her son's life). Despite her conscious knowledge of the dangers of crossing the war landscape, she reports it as a place to escape. Yet, her own narrative is contaminated by war terminology, and the horrors of the conflict remain: "we are walking where every stone is a memory of a battle…how can I say I am escaping? I am walking deeper into it" (p.184). She misreads her hiking as stepping out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the events she is actually walking directly through. While she believes she is running towards freedom, she emphasizes her own entrapment in the cycle of violence.

In the same respect, Ora misevaluates her relationship with her son and his fathers (biological and legal). Ora's ethical judgment is evident in how she justifies keeping secrets from them. For years, she has evaluated keeping Avram (the biological father and her companion now in the journey) at a distance as an act of protecting her son. During the journey with Avram, she confesses, "I didn't keep him from you for his sake, Avram. I did it for mine. I could not bear to see myself through your eyes" (p.555). This is clearly a moral self-deception. Her contradictory justifications and confessions, if they reveal anything, reveal a retrospective correction of her misevaluation. It also alerts readers that her evaluations throughout the text—about her life, family, and relationships—are biased and hence unreliable. Ora is what some critics call a self-conscious unreliable narrator: "I have to tell it right. If I don't tell it right, the memory will fail, and if the memory fails, Ofer will slip away" (p.112).

In Phelan's terminology, Ora's misreporting of memories constitutes a desperate rhetorical tactic of survival. She admits to polishing facts because she believes accuracy is less important than its protective power. This makes readers believe her, thereby forcing the narrative to abandon objective truth in favor of survival.

Conclusion

This research paper intended to bring unreliability as both a rhetorical and narrative tool. The main objective was to assess how reliability can generate empathy on readers despite its ethical backdrop. After processing unreliability, thematic imposition, and their outcome on the reader, the research paper reached these conclusions:

1- Unreliability does not merely stem from failure of ethics or memory.
2- Unreliability, therefore, is a sophisticated rhetorical and narrative survival tool.
3- Death and motherhood serve as emotional and psychological drivers behind the persistence of the unreliable discourse.
4- The complex layers of Ora's narration (as the novel possesses different types of narration and this paper focused on hers only) prove that Ora's magical thinking and her perception of it as 'law of nature' function as a vital lie and a defense mechanism

against loss.

5- Readers do not judge Ora for her disillusionment and false decision thereby recognize her 'engrossment' in her child's survival as a morally superior orientation.
6- Her unreliability is therefore legitimized.
7- The gap between what Ora reports and what the implied author knows creates a space for implied readers to engage in a secret communion.
8- In this space, the reader accepts Ora's misreporting and misevaluating of the landscape as a necessary heroic effort to overcome trauma.
9- Ultimately, Ora's journey proves that in the context of war, human beings may contradict themselves, their ethics, and their emotional standards to preserve what is precious to them (In Ora's case, it is her son's image of being and staying alive).
10- Ora's unreliable voice preserves the memory of her son alive and hence making her discourse valuable.

References

Backes, N. (2000). " Beyond the World of Guilt and Sorrow": Separation, Attachment and Creativity in Literary Mothers and Sons. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*. https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/download/2176/1384

Becker, E. (2024). *Denial of death*. Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia. https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=SgYJEQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Ernest+Becker+the+denial+of+death&ots=9gf8SsE6bW&sig=BDIAigSw5n65Sut1Dou2Ug8BIlc

Booth, W. C. (1983). *The rhetoric of fiction*. University of Chicago Press.

Carroll, J. (2019). Death in Literature. In T. K. Shackelford & V. Zeigler-Hill (Eds.), *Evolutionary Perspectives on Death* (pp. 137–159). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25466-7_7

Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse: An essay in method* (Vol. 3). Cornell University Press.https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=yEPuQg7SOxIC&oi=fnd&pg=PA15&dq=Narrative+Discourse:+An+Essay+in+Method&ots=55NGqOHFRR&sig=z5thKhya0IBxipQN9wSVKzjBwcE

Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard university press. https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=XItMnL7ho2gC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=In+a++Different+Voice+1982+Gilligan&ots=6XkALMLl05&sig=ExM_A8qWtXv4_yn1Rca6lRwCeYE

Grossman, D. (2010). *To the End of the Land*. Random House.

Phelan, J. (2005). *Living to tell about it: A rhetoric and ethics of character narration*. Cornell University Press.

Phelan, J. (2017). Reliable, Unreliable, and Deficient Narration: A Rhetorical Account. *Narrative Culture*, *4*(1), 89. https://doi.org/10.13110/narrcult.4.1.0089(Booth, 1983)

Kastenbaum, R., & Costa, P. T. (1977). Psychological perspectives on death. *Annual Review of Psychology*. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1977-29224-001

Lazzari, L., & Ségeral, N. (Eds.). (2021). *Trauma and Motherhood in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-77407-3

Lillie, H. M., Pokharel, M., John, K. K., Christy, K. R., Upshaw, S., Giorgi, E. A., & Jensen, J. D. (2022). Does it matter if a story character lives or dies?: A message experiment comparing survivor and death narratives. *Psychology & Health*, *37*(4), 419–439. https://doi.org/10.1080/08870446.2021.1873337

Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education*. Univ of California Press. https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=u7MwDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR11&dq=Caring:+A+Feminine+Approach+to+Ethics+and+Moral+Education&ots=Lyw2UyAzbn&sig=OFQxOBDoKzaeoUS_mW94Qw_vxso

Rye, G. (2006). Maternal genealogies: The figure of the mother in/and literature. *Journal of Romance Studies*, *6*(3), 117–126. https://doi.org/10.3828/jrs.6.3.117

The living handbook of narratology. (n.d.). Retrieved February 4, 2026, from https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.html