Order and disorder in the storytelling can have a significant impact on how a reader receives, comprehends, and interprets a story. In the most orderly narration, the unfolding of time in the story may appear to be quite natural, and its analogy with ‘clock time’ or ‘calendar time’ gives it a good claim to be normative. However, in casual oral storytelling, people often loop back or flash forward to introduce salient information. A certain degree of disorderliness (as in, ‘by the way, this had happened earlier,’ or, ‘did I forget to tell you that …’) is also natural and normative. Purely chronological narration may be less ‘natural’ than it looks at first. Few people would argue that extremely disorderly narration proves more challenging to follow, and experimental writers have often exploited disorder (at the end of this chapter, I describe an influential case of such an experiment, William Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’). Some kinds of disorder, however, are quite conventional and even traditional, as in the *in medias res* opening of classical epic, as described by Horace. While modernist fiction often exploits the effects of disorder, the *Bildungsroman* and fictional autobiography typically follow a chronological pattern.

Any generalization about a typical use of order should be questioned: ‘realism’ does not necessarily require orderly narration, for some kinds of psychological realism depend on representing a character’s disorderly ‘thoughts,’ and experimental fiction may achieve its effects without rearranging the events of a plot line. While some accounts of narrative suggest a development from naive chronological narration (for instance in folklore or sagas) to more sophisticated disordering in modernist or postmodernist novels, a broader view of order discovers what theorists call *anachronies*, or disturbances to chronology, in many periods and kinds of fiction. This chapter provides vocabulary for the assessment of a narrative’s handling of chronology.

When approaching questions of narrative order, students of form ask, Do the events of the plot get narrated in the order that they occur, or not? Once again we rely on the structuralist distinction between *story time*, the time that
transpires within the imaginary world projected by the text, and *discourse time*,
the time implied by the quantity of discourse, in its linear arrangement of ele-
ments in the text (sometimes called text time). As a beginning point for the
discussion of order, we ask, when is the ‘now’ of the narrator? And when is
the ‘now’ of the story? What is the relationship of these times to one another?
When story time and discourse time run along in neat parallel to one another,
with a plot that mimics clock or calendar chronology in its straight-ahead tell-
ing, we say that the discourse is orderly. When, as is often the case, some bits
of a story time that occur ‘before’ or ‘earlier’ than the main stream of the nar-
rative interrupt orderly telling, the discourse has become disorderly, which is
not a term with negative connotations, though it may well make a text more
challenging to understand. Disorder can be manipulated with great artfulness,
as in nonlinear narratives such as the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
(2004). In order to discuss disorder in a manageable fashion, narrative theorists
describe the relationship of the order of the telling with respect to the order of
the happening. The discussion of order and disorder in the narration is thus
much more a matter of spatial arrangements within the text than of time,
for which reason I have separated it from Chapter 6, on ‘Timing.’ Here, as in
the previous chapter, the major theorist upon whose insights I draw is Gérard
Genette.

**Terms**

Nearly all narratives have a forward-moving direction, with ‘and then and then
and then’ logic dominating the narration. This quality dominates most narra-
tive even when the writer employs a hypotactic style. (*Hypotaxis* makes use
of subordination, dependent clauses and connectives suggesting consequence,
wheras *parataxis* employs sequences with simple conjunctions and loose
implicit connections.) Though complex, subordinated, intricate sentences may
slow the reader’s progress through a narrative, the momentum of storytelling
still usually proceeds forwards in time.

As we will see, even extremely disorderly narratives often employ forwards
narration for each narrative unit or episode. This is true even for some stories told
in reverse. For instance, Christopher Nolan’s 2001 film *Memento* proceeds
backwards, exploiting a plot device in which the focal character has lost
his short-term memory. The film begins at the end, and each (color) scene plays
out what occurred before the previous scene (though, to complicate matters,
the backward progression is itself interrupted with conventional flashbacks
and a set of scenes in a different palette featuring the main character talking
about the deeper past that he does remember). However, within each scene
marked as ‘before’ the previous one, the narration moves forwards. Similarly to
*Memento*, Sarah Waters’ 2006 historical novel *The Night Watch* features sections