

worldbuilding is at fault in such reductive perspectives on narrative as mostly a sequence of events arranged into a plot. By contrast, James closes with brief descriptions of two large-scale research projects which rely on National Science Foundation funding and take the synergetic collaboration of natural sciences and narratology seriously. One of the projects combines the forces of “two geographers, an environmental philosopher and indigenous scholar, and [James] as a narrative theorist,” who jointly study “water quality and governance in two indigenous communities” (186). The other project focuses on how people narrate their experiences with “wildland fire in rural Idaho” (187) and how such narrative-based data could be used “to increase scientific literacy” (187), to produce new insights into the occurrence and management of fires, and to improve ways of managing fire hazards (188). This section about her involvement in interdisciplinary research is all-too-brief and does not quench the thirst for more insights into innovative research designs and their results. At the same time, it leaves this reader looking forward to publications coming out of the projects and, more generally, further books and articles by James herself.

Nassim W. Balestrini, University of Graz, Austria

doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v7i1.237

Copyright: © 2026 Nassim W. Balestrini. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)), which allows for the unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Narrative in Crisis: Reflections from the Limits of Storytelling.
Edited by Martin Dege and Irene Strasser. Oxford UP, 2024, 182 pp.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced epidemiologic crisis as the antagonist of an overwhelming number of global narratives of precarity, inequality, and conflict. Individually and collectively, the human species cast, perhaps more frequently in liminal spaces than otherwise, for ways to make sense of its devastating grip, not only through a frantic resort to statistics (and the necropolitical figurations that it stood for) but also by means of narrating (with and without numbers). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, with its lingering shadow more than half a decade since it started, was and continues to brim with stories.

Edited by Irene Strasser and Martin Dege, *Narrative in Crisis: Reflections from the Limits of Storytelling* is a timely collection of essays that focuses on exactly this: narratives of/about crisis, including the untold, the unsanctioned, and the unheard. Consisting of ten chapters and organized in two parts, the book is a record of intellectual engagements in Europe and North America with the narrative crises of the past five years, starting (in its introduction) with spelling out the (not always knowable, certain, or coherent) modes in which psychology and narrative have met in collective attempts to make sense of the (clinically) unknown, the (psychologically) uncertain, and the (emotionally but also corporeally) incoherent – both in the narrative landscape of the 2020s and beyond. The introduction raises several urgent questions, among which “Will we have learned something about humanity and equality after this pandemic has ended?” (4) functions as the central query for the entire volume.

Launching an adjoining query on the power and the limits of everyday forms of narrative (through which human collectives have long labored to make sense of crises), the first part, “End of Story?” starts off with Mark Freeman’s reflections on what he argues is largely missing from such “alluring narratives” as white populist narratives on refugee crises and vaccine conspiracies. This, a mixture of “hope, despair, and nausea” (15), he identifies as the potential rise of emergent modes of relationality and solidarity which hope to puncture the self-sufficiency of “the seemingly self-sufficient self” (16) in the wake and *in spite* of catastrophic events.

Reading the COVID-19 pandemic against the epidemic that Albert Camus narrates in *The Plague*, Dan P. McAdams turns to a tripartite model of narrative in the third chapter. As McAdams argues, the modes of denial, redemption, and acceptance are those in which more or less all the stories about the pandemic, whether autobiographical or purely fantastical, have been told.

If McAdams’s chapter is invested in stories in which the virus appeared as more than a mere external cause for human suffering and, in fact, as a full-fledged adversary, the chapter by Corinne Squire zooms in on the term “crisis.” Squire sets out to make sense of its shifting practices and definitions in light of the 2020 pandemic and along *counteracting* (that is, alternative, transgressive, parodic, even oppositional) narrative strands. The chapter’s engagement with a variety of counteracting narratives of the pandemic, e.g., by people with long-term conditions and disabilities such as HIV and Chronic fatigue syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME) or those generated by the far-right and followers of various post-truth discourses presents evidence of tremendous intersectional complexity that usefully challenges ahistorical debates on COVID-19.

Similarly aware of the larger historical backdrop against which such narrative practices could be made sense of, and in exploring the double frame of “war” and “crisis,”

Hanna Meretoja's chapter, "The Pandemic as a Crossroads," argues for awareness about (and against) the narrative dangers of telling stories about the pandemic by relying merely on such metaphors as war, fire, or crisis. Instead, Meretoja calls for understanding the pandemic with the help of fittingly complex narrative moves that relate it to "the direction in which humankind is heading" (83) and frame it "as a lesson on the limits of our agency" (84).

In the final chapter in the book's first section, Luka Lucić and Guro Nore Fløgstad bring history even more meticulously to the analytical center. Focusing on a regional crisis of comparable acuity, "Beyond Trauma Narratives: How the Military Siege of Sarajevo Shaped the Stories Told in the Aftermath" employs the retrospective narrative mode set in the stories that ten Sarajevan adults have written as reflections on how, as children, they had endured the 1,335-day-long siege of Sarajevo from 1992 to 1995. The sociocultural mapping of the COVID-19 pandemic onto the siege of Sarajevo, the authors demonstrate, sheds much-needed light on the uses of language in the narrative formations and formulations pertaining to individual accounts of "radical change" in one's living conditions and of ensuing technologies of coping with "trauma" in what connects the "self" in times of acute crisis (be it regional or global) to "the space experienced" (106).

The book's second part, "The Self in Crisis," stays with the question of the self (including crossovers between narrative and individual emotions, thoughts, and stories), while casting a closer look at the affordances and limitations of storytelling in coping with crisis. "Plotless Stories and Unthought Knowns," by clinical psychologist Ruthellen Josselson, takes up the task on a predominantly personal note. The chapter poses a fundamental question that emerges at the early stages of any crisis such as COVID-19 (i.e., a large-scale health crisis followed by a near-global lockdown): "What can we know, and how do we know it?" (111). Accompanied by haunting (but unnervingly familiar) images of empty public spaces across the United States and Europe, such as Times Square and London's National Gallery during the early days of the lockdown, the chapter details not only the tension between data, subjective experiences and memories, troubled senses of time and space, and communal (including political) accounts of crisis, but also the intermediary, interpretive (and not always successful) role that "narrative" has played in bridging them to one another.

"Coping Personally and Politically with World Crises" further complicates the COVID-19 crisis as Michel Ferrari and Melanie Munroe discuss the significance of personal and communal "wisdom" (including the resources that individuals and communities have at their disposal in accessing it, and the function that "cultural narratives" (129) assume in dealing with crises (such as surviving the residential school system in Canada) and their aftermaths. As the authors argue, "wisdom is not about using a

specific coping strategy, but about discerning the most appropriate ways of coping with a crisis” (131).

Next, written before the pandemic had come to a widely agreed-upon end (as most chapters in this collection were), Molly Andrews’ “Rethinking our Lives” entertains the possibility of comprehending what has remained incomprehensible in the COVID-19 crisis while living it. This includes its exact origins, the psychological challenges it has posed to various communities, the emotional weight of loss, alienation, and even the forced re-imagination of the nature of one’s lived sense of time (especially of one’s pre-crisis past) – what Andrews usefully terms “fluid temporality” (144).

The volume closes with “The Self and Its Crises.” Adopting a cultural narratology approach, Jens Brockmeier revisits some of the ways a two-sided, philosophical and psychological, approach to the age-old, tenuous interlinks between the self and its crises facilitates a better understanding of the integral yet shape-shifting, “fundamental category” of the self – whether *in* or *out* of crisis (160). He rounds off this debate by analyzing the modernist “pandemic” narrative of Ingmar Bergman’s 1957 movie *The Seventh Seal*, which Brockmeier reads as a struggle between an elusive sense of a living, feeling, sovereign self and its face-off with death and demise.

Well-placed in the “Explorations in Narrative Psychology” series, *Narratives in Crisis: Reflections from the Limits of Storytelling* is an account of the COVID-19 pandemic while it was still unfolding. Covering a wide range of topics that are tackled from a variety of perspectives and accessibly written, it functions as a successful collective endeavor by scholars in Europe and the United States to understand the interjection of the everyday with an unusually high dose of the radical that the Covid-19 crisis made possible. Second, the volume explores the narrative toolboxes that individuals and communities resorted to (or else that they had to create from scratch) in trying not only to cope but also to comprehend and commemorate. Follow-up research in the years to come should show how the narrative modes explored in this collection will evolve, what tales will have remained, and what accounts will have been (un-)remembered.

Mahshid Mayar, University of Innsbruck, Austria

doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v7i1.245

Copyright: © 2026 Mahshid Mayar. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)), which allows for the unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.