In January 2013, American journalist Paul Salopek started walking. He had roughly 21,000 miles to go, in a journey (still ongoing as of September 2017) that would take him from Ethiopia to the southern tip of the American continent, via Asia and North America. The itinerary is not arbitrary: Salopek is retracing the footsteps of generations of *Homo sapiens* as they spread from East Africa—where our earliest ancestors lived, more than 100,000 years ago—to the other continents, reaching Patagonia around 10,000 years ago. Salopek’s journey mirrors the route followed by groups of *Homo sapiens* as they slowly marched through our planet, changing it dramatically as they established increasingly populous and complex civilizations. Salopek calls it the “Out of Eden” walk, a title that adds a mythical dimension to a project informed by scientific models of human evolution. The walk is chronicled—by Salopek himself and his team—on a website sponsored by the National Geographic Society. It is explicitly framed as a story and told in chapters. It is also, as one might expect, presented in deeply affective language: this is one individual’s attempt to connect with the deep history of human evolution, providing today’s humanity, fragmented along national, cultural, and economic lines, with something of an origin story, a common idea of “the human” to cling to.

Obviously, this is a politically loaded project, which articulates an ideologically charged vision of humanity, as Salopek demonstrates through his empathetic account of the communities he encounters across the Global South. The West, to which Salopek undoubtedly belongs, has often aspired to identify the essence of humanity—what it means to be human, what it is like to be human; typically, these claims have ended up reinforcing the centrality of one particular culture, one particular group. “Out of Eden” complicates these blanket theoretical statements by foregrounding the physical, embodied performance of humanity: readers remain aware that, behind the written words of the website and companion articles, Salopek is reenacting, and at the same time performing, the evolutionary history of humankind by moving his body. This is how Salopek himself thematizes the embodiment of walking: “Walking is falling forward. Each step we take is an arrested plunge, a collapse averted, a disaster braked. In this way, to walk becomes an act of faith. We perform it daily: a two-beat miracle—an iambic teetering, a holding on and letting go. For the next seven years I will plummet across the world.”

Something as quotidian and uncomplicated as walking is defamiliarized into a controlled fall, a risky action that exposes the subject and evokes the perils of evolution: how the individual, embodied subject is vastly overpowered by evolutionary pressures. At the same time, the highly embodied “two-beat miracle” of walking is inscribed into the stylistic texture of Salopek’s language: it is an “iambic” rhythm, which the passage first announces and then proffers through the prosody of “a holding on and letting go.” The “Out of Eden” project thus appropriates the body as a site for negotiating the ideologically fraught boundary between our understanding of the human and the spaces and temporalities that shaped the history of our species.

Salopek’s narrative speaks to contemporary claims about the “enmeshment” between the human subject and biological, climatological, or geological processes—including evolution itself. If we

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take at face value what science tells us, there is little doubt that the human is an ideological construction based on metaphysical beliefs: our species falls on an evolutionary continuum with other species; human societies are shaped by material things and processes and contribute to shaping them—sometimes dramatically, as in anthropogenic climate change. Narratives like Salopek’s translate this abstract realization into an embodied, affective experience that is not only recorded by language but—and this is my main claim in this article—conveyed to readers through a mechanism of embodied simulation. Readers’ bodies resonate with the “two-beat miracle” of Salopek’s walk and thus serve as a bridge towards the “deep history” of our species—where deep history includes events, such as the migration of *Homo sapiens*, that far preceded recorded history and whose temporal scale is incommensurable with that of individual human life.\(^5\) I propose that the foregrounding of bodily experience—and the resonance it can trigger in readers—can help narrative overcome that sense of incommensurability, by offering a human-scale equivalent to processes that unfolded on a more-than-human scale. In Salopek’s case, thousands of years and countless human generations are compressed into a single man’s seven-year walk. This compression is the mechanism underlying what Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner call “conceptual blending,” which typically works by conflating an abstract, nonlinear process (such as human migration) with an embodied and much more tangible scenario, such as a man moving through space.\(^6\) Recent developments in embodied cognition (and in the related field of cognitive approaches to narrative) provide me with empirically grounded concepts to describe the embodied resonance that narrative may elicit as it attempts to convey the deep time of evolution. Of course, we’ll have to keep in mind that this rendering of more-than-human time periods into an embodied scenario can involve a loss of important information, or a distortion of scientific models. Yet the point of this translation is not scientific accuracy per se, but affective and imaginative impact within a culturally specific project (such as Salopek’s humanitarian narrative).

I will tackle these ideas in three steps. I will first explore the embodied underpinnings of language understanding, arguing that we make sense of language—and particularly of the creative language of narrative—by leveraging bodily schemata and processes. In order to exemplify and test out these claims, I will turn to another narrative that, like Salopek’s, attempts to flesh out humanity’s embedding in evolutionary history; unlike Salopek’s, this is a fictional narrative, William Golding’s late modernist novel *The Inheritors* (1955). This text focuses on one of the dead ends of evolution—a Neanderthal man—and is able to depict both the cognitive difference and the common ground between modern humans and Neanderthals through highly embodied language. Golding’s engagement with a group of Neanderthals brings to the fore the conceptual challenges involved in moving beyond divisions between “us” (modern humans) and “them” (Neanderthals); at the same time, *The Inheritors* suggests that embodied resonance with a nonhuman other may be key to reducing this divide. In the final, concluding section, I will return to the big picture issue of how narrative can deploy embodied strategies to project a sense of interweaving with the nonhuman world.

**Embodied Involvement and Thick Simulations**

In fields ranging from psycholinguistics to neuroscience, substantial evidence is emerging that language comprehension is not divorced from language users’ bodies. On the contrary, language and embodiment are tightly coupled. In a 2013 experiment, psychologist Raymond Gibbs asked two groups of blindfolded participants to walk towards an object after listening to a story.\(^7\) Both groups stood at


the same distance from the object, which they had seen before being blindfolded. Essentially, the participants had to guess how far the object was, by walking towards it. The stories the participants listened to were the same except for one crucial detail: one version of the story contained an embodied metaphor, “Your relationship was moving along in a good direction”—where the abstract state of the relation was described in terms of physical motion in space. The other version of the story contained a more general statement, without any overt reference to the body: “Your relationship was very important to you.” The study found that participants in the metaphorical condition tended to walk for a longer time, and ended up farther away from the start position, than those in the nonmetaphorical condition. Gibbs reads this result as confirmation for his embodied simulation theory of metaphor understanding: we understand embodied language by enacting, internally and mostly unconsciously, the verbally embodied action; in the case of Gibbs’s experiment, this simulation mechanism primed the participants towards bodily movement and subtly boosted their performance when it came to actual walking.

This is just a simple example of how language understanding triggers embodied responses, which can have very overt effects on how people use their bodies. In other scenarios, the role of the body in language comprehension remains covert—unless scientists probe it by way of brain imaging or more indirect, behavioral methods (for instance, by measuring response times to linguistic stimuli). Friedemann Pulvermüller has reviewed neuroscientific studies linking language comprehension to the motor cortex, including so-called mirror neurons. We understand verbs denoting embodied actions by relying on some of the same neural structures that are implicated in performing real actions. Consider verbal phrases such as “holding on” and “letting go” in the Salopek passage discussed above: processing these expressions activates neural mechanisms involved in the physical gesture of holding onto an object or letting go of it. Behavioral research in psycholinguistics—for example, by Arthur Glenberg and Michael Kaschak, or Martin Fischer and Rolf Zwaan—confirms this intuition: after parsing a sentence suggesting forward motion (such as Salopek’s “Walking is falling forward”), readers will be quicker to push a lever forward than in the opposite direction. Put otherwise, when the verbally described and the physically performed gesture are incongruent, there is an interference effect that suggests that the linguistic processing and the execution of movement have a shared neural basis.

Results along these lines strongly imply that language understanding involves bodily schemata in a much more consistent way than was previously thought. Benjamin Bergen articulates this embodied view of language in Louder than Words, where he builds on the concept of “embodied simulation”: the physical enactment of a verbally conveyed action, such as holding something in one’s hand or walking in a certain direction. For Bergen, embodied simulation is the central mechanism of language comprehension, even if different kinds of language may activate it to varying degrees: the comprehension of abstract language (such as we may find in an encyclopedia entry on “determinism” or “chemical valence”) is clearly less embodied than the processing of language evoking concrete states of affairs and situations.

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11 See Bergen, Louder Than Words, 281.
Because narrative is by definition about concrete situations (and more specifically about events affecting one or more characters), its baseline embodiment will be fairly high. Thus, in a seminal article Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski and Vittorio Gallese develop an account of narrative comprehension centered on the idea of “liberated embodied simulation,” a term that suggests that the simulations that accompany narrative reading are not directed at the reader’s physical surroundings, but at a nonactual scenario. Liberated embodied simulations are cognitive processes that operate at the same unconscious level as what psycholinguists call “situation models” or “construals” (schematic representations of the situation being verbally referred to). Just like situation models, embodied simulations are not (or not necessarily) experienced at a conscious level. Yet, as Wojciehowski and Gallese’s analysis of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway goes on to show, not all embodied simulations triggered by verbal narrative are identical. In fact, the claim advanced by researchers working on the embodied basis of language is that simulations are implicated in making sense of any concrete linguistic expression, regardless of discourse context or stylistic qualities. Through the creative use of language, literary narrative is particularly effective at giving rise to what I will call thick embodied simulations, where the word “thick” is—after Clifford Geertz—a function of the experiential richness and semantic complexity of a simulation. Another way to put the same point is that simulations tend to be unconscious, low-level responses that rarely lead to a conscious feeling in engaging with everyday language. By contrast, literary narrative has developed devices that can make readers fully conscious of those simulations—for instance, by conjuring up vivid mental images or infusing the simulations with emotional, interpretive, or ethical significance. This stratification of responses is what I mean by the “thickening” of embodied simulations. Salopek’s passage (quoted above) is quite effective at this, because of how it evokes—repeatedly—the arrested quality of the walking, which disrupts expectations and elicits affect. Readers are much more likely to experience embodied involvement in response to Salopek’s conceit than to an ordinary sentence such as “I walked to the grocery store,” even as embodied simulation will be implicated in both cases.

It is important to keep in mind that these claims about the thickening of simulations are based on intuitions about reader-response, not on direct empirical evidence. Clearly, more research is needed to substantiate and specify my notion of thickening. But, conceptually speaking, distinguishing between different kinds of simulations seems inevitable; in a similar vein, linguist David Ritchie argues:

[A] robust concept of simulation [...] may range across several levels of detail, from a subtle muscle contraction the individual is scarcely aware of or a fleeting emotion that barely registers, to a detailed imaginative reconstruction of the experience of

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being lost in a dark cave [in Ritchie’s example], all the way up to a reader’s empathetic imaginative reconstruction of a writer’s experience.\textsuperscript{16}

Thick simulations are defined both by their level of detail (as Ritchie suggests) and by the salience of the affective responses and ethical judgments that accompany them, which will obviously depend on both the features of a certain narrative and readers’ interests and predispositions.

The link between textual features and thickness of simulations is, of course, easier to generalize about than readers’ individual responses. Narratives typically focus on a character (a narrator or protagonist) who is present on the verbally evoked scene; readers’ embodied simulations tend to center on that character and reflect his or her spatio-temporal perspective, as an early psycholinguistic study by David Bryant and colleagues shows.\textsuperscript{17} One way to thicken simulations is, therefore, to evoke characters’ embodied engagement with their surroundings, or to foreground their affective responses. Creative metaphorical language can also help flesh out simulations by capturing a character’s experience with more clarity and nuance than would be possible through conventional, nonmetaphorical language.\textsuperscript{18} The tropes that punctuate Salopek’s account of walking are what I call “phenomenological” metaphors and similes: they bring readers closer to the lived experience (or phenomenology) of a particular character—in this case, the storyteller’s.\textsuperscript{19}

Not all thickening strategies are character-directed, of course. We have seen that Salopek’s passage foregrounds (and thematizes) the iambic rhythm of “a holding on and letting go”; along similar lines, style may also involve readers’ bodies by creating a certain kind of stylistic patterning that they experience in sensory terms. Moreover, moving now to the macro-level of plot, the progression of narrative itself may take on quasi-rhythmic qualities. Cognitive linguist Michael Kimmel talks about the “affective contour” of narrative to refer to the way in which expectations about the outcome of a story line fall into a certain pattern, with embodied image schemata—such as “path” or “blockage”—structuring our understanding of the narrative. Such schemata, along with the affective values that accompany them, further contribute to readers’ embodied involvement.\textsuperscript{20} When these strategies are successful, embodied simulations become thick and may result in full-fledged bodily feelings: for instance, a sense of “presence” or immersion in a narrative that almost feels like a slice of reality; or an empathetic bond with a character; or a feeling of absorption into a plot, of “moving along” with the narrative and its twists and turns. William Golding’s \textit{The Inheritors} deploys several of these embodied devices, as we’ll see in the next section, through its experimental, and at times disorienting, writing style. In that respect, Golding’s novel goes further than many other, more conventional

\textsuperscript{18} For more on this, see Marco Caracciolo, “Phenomenological Metaphors in Readers’ Engagement with Characters: The Case of Ian McEwan’s Saturday,” \textit{Language and Literature} 22, no. 1 (2013): 60–76.
\textsuperscript{19} A few more examples of phenomenological metaphors and similes from Salopek’s 2013 article (I’m italicizing the relevant portion of the quotation): “I awoke before dawn and saw snow: thick, dense, choking, blinding. \textit{Like plankton suspended at the bottom of a sunless sea,} swirling white in the beam of my headlamp. It was the dust.” “We plod across an acacia plain \textit{darkened to the color of chocolate,} swirling white in the beam of my headlamp. It was the dust.” “We plod across an acacia plain \textit{darkened to the color of chocolate,} swirling white in the beam of my headlamp. It was the dust.” “The world changes when you are thirsty. . . . The desert \textit{tightens around you like a noose.}” Note that I’m not making a distinction between metaphor and simile here, based on the assumption that both figures involve “cross-domain mapping,” or the comparison between different semantic domains; see Elena Semino and Gerard Steen, “Metaphor in Literature,” in \textit{The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought}, ed. Raymond W. Gibbs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 232–46.
narratives set in prehistory in its attempt to blend embodied responses and the deep time of human evolution.

**Resonating with Lok**

Golding’s novel focuses on the experiences of a Neanderthal man, Lok, as he and his group members come into contact with a new species of humans (*Homo sapiens*). Only the last chapter, with an abrupt perspective reversal, centers on one of our conspecifics, Tuami, and offers an external viewpoint on the Neanderthal mind that had served as our guide throughout the novel. Narratologically speaking, both minds are depicted through internal focalization, but to vastly different effects. Indeed, the interest of Golding’s portrayal of Neanderthal thought processes lies not in its scientific plausibility, but in how effectively he conveys a sense of profound difference between modern humans and their Neanderthal cousins. Golding’s Neanderthals think in pictures, which they can share with their group members wordlessly, almost telepathically. By endowing his Neanderthals with this more-than-human cognitive ability, Golding pushes back against previous cultural representations of Neanderthals as bloodthirsty, brutish creatures. Even more strikingly, Golding’s Neanderthals appear incapable of intentional violence. Yet they are also severely limited in their abstract reasoning: their minds are drawn to sensory details in a way that slows down—and in some cases seems to inhibit—inference and generalization. Golding’s Neanderthals thus oscillate between human, more-than-human, and animal features in a way that foregrounds the ideologically loaded question of their cognitive difference. The novel thus speaks to contemporary discussions on *Homo sapiens* exceptionalism, and by extension to fields such as disability and autism studies. The challenge for the reader of *The Inheritors* is learning to appreciate Lok’s cognitive difference without establishing a hierarchical power relation with him, which adds to the difficulty of Golding’s prose.

Indeed, as readers engage with the Neanderthal-focalized chapters they are asked to infer what is going on in the storyworld by extrapolating from the rich sensory texture of Lok’s consciousness. In Ian Gregor and Mark Kinkead-Weekes’s words, we “share [Lok’s] limitations as we use his eyes. It is of course open to us to use our own reasoning powers on his experience.” At one level, then, readers have to make up for the limitations of Lok’s thinking through conceptual inferences; but at another level they are asked to draw on the resources of their own embodied minds to imagine themselves into Lok’s body. This embodied resonance is an involuntary process, which applies to all readers who read Golding’s prose with comprehension. For those who are willing to go one step further and reflect, as I do here, on the larger stakes of their embodied involvement, the gap between humans and Neanderthals becomes bridgeable.

In part, this connection between readers and Lok is an effect of the internally focalized depiction of the character’s inner experience; for instance, Lok “flared his nostrils and immediately was rewarded with a whole mixture of smells, for the mist from the fall magnified any smell incredibly, as rain will deepen and distinguish the colours of a field of flowers. There were the smells of the people...

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too, individual but each engaged to the smell of the muddy path where they had been.”25 Clearly, Lok’s proficiency at picking out each of his group members’ smell exceeds the sensory abilities of modern humans. As the narrator puts it in a later passage, Lok “performed miracles of perception in the cavern of his nose. The scent was the smallest possible trace.”26 The “miracle” of Lok’s sense of smell is, of course, difficult to grasp for readers. Yet consider the comparison with a field of flowers whose colors are intensified by the rain: this simile builds on a sense of (chromatic and not olfactory) differentiation readers are closely familiar with; it is what I called in the previous section a “phenomenological simile,” helping readers imagine the variety of smells that Lok is able to identify. But because smell is, unlike vision, a proximal sensory modality—in that its range is relatively limited—the simile prompts us to construct a detailed embodied simulation centered on Lok’s body.

A related strategy that also serves to thicken readers’ embodied simulations is synesthetic metaphor. For instance, when Lok hears a group of Homo sapiens speaking, he experiences sound in terms of visual pattern: “The sounds made a picture in his head of interlacing shapes, thin, and complex, voluptuous and silly, not like the long curve of a hawk’s cry, but tangled like line weed on the beach after a storm, muddled as water.”27 The metaphorical association emphasizes the incomprehensibility of the language of Homo sapiens, whose qualities strike Lok as novel and perplexing (“tangled” and “muddled”). At the same time, the synesthetic connection points to Lok’s capacity to appreciate the interrelatedness of sensory input, before concepts and language break it down into separate sensory streams. As Lawrence Marks puts it in an article on the physiological basis of synesthesia, “there are natural correspondences between experiences in different sensory modalities, and […] these seem to be nothing less than ‘hard wired.’”28 Synesthetic metaphor as a linguistic device contributes to the sense that the narrator is recording Lok’s experience at a raw, unmediated level; readers are thus asked to construct simulations that mirror the interconnectedness of sensory stimuli.

In two intriguing passages, the narrator depicts Lok’s body as capable of sensory “thinking” that does not require full consciousness. Here the embodied thought process is conveyed not through explicit verbal language, but through a mere, and yet highly suggestive, question mark: “There came a noise from the foot of the fall, a noise that the thunder robbed of echo and resonance, the form of a noise. Lok’s ears twitched in the moonlight so that the frost that lay along their upper edges shivered. Lok’s ears spoke to Lok. ‘?’ But Lok was asleep.”29 In the original, the question mark stands out even more, being preceded and followed by a line break; it is a graphic device signaling an indeterminate noise, which may (or may not) suggest possible danger. But just as the embodied warning does not register in Lok’s consciousness, its exact meaning escapes readers—a highly effective way of strengthening the empathetic bond between readers and Lok, because it suggests that readers are locked into the character’s embodied awareness of his surroundings.

Other passages foreground not just perception but bodily movement; we have to imagine them as a close-up evocation of Lok’s skillful interaction with the environment. Here is an example: “Half-lying, half-crawling, grinning all the time with fear [Lok] moved out over the river. He could see the wetness down there, mysterious and pierced everywhere by the dark and bending stems. There was no place that would support his whole weight. He had to spread it not only through all his limbs and body but be always in two places, moving, moving as the boughs gave.”30 Lok seems to be climbing through branches suspended over a body of water, and the quickness and agility of his movements is captured by the simplicity of the metaphorical expression “be always in two places,” with the

26 40.
29 Golding, The Inheritors, 33. A similar use of the question mark for the ears’ warning is on p. 94.
30 Golding, 97.
repetition “moving, moving” directly reflecting the embodied logic of Lok’s climbing. Golding’s prose is rich in such kinetic traces, which work like the efficient brushstrokes of an impressionist painting: they create a compelling picture of the protagonist’s embodied experience even as readers struggle to understand his motivations in more cognitive terms, or to recognize the objects around him.

Readers are thus encouraged to take on a Neanderthal’s body through sensorimotor empathy based on rich embodied simulations. This empathy is an equivalent of the immediate mimicry experienced by Lok himself: “As the smell of cat would evoke in him a cat-stealth of avoidance and a cat-snarl; as the sight of Mal tottering up the slope had made the people parody him, so now the scent turned Lok into the thing that had gone before him.”31 Not only does Golding’s novel prompt readers to imagine themselves into a Neanderthal’s body, but it does so by exposing the Neanderthal in them: their tendency to resonate with embodied language, in the same way as the novel’s Neanderthal protagonist, Lok, resonates with the things and people surrounding him, almost blending into them and losing any sense of self-other differentiation.32

This embodied identification with Lok takes on new meanings as soon as the narrative perspective shifts from the Neanderthal to a Homo sapiens character, Tuami. The cognitive complexity of modern humans is announced by the fact that, unlike most Neanderthal characters, whose names are short and monosyllabic (Ha, Nil, Fa, Lok), Tuami and the other humans in his group have polysyllabic names.33 Here the world is far more recognizable than it was in the previous chapters: Tuami’s concepts overlap with our own, bringing the character’s mental as well as physical world into immediate focus. Consider the following passage, for instance: “[Tuami] waggled the paddle in the water and the sheets tossed. The sail made a sleepy remark and then was attentively full again. Perhaps if they squared off the boat, stowed things properly——? Partly to assess the job and partly to turn his eyes outwards from his own mind, Tuami examined the hollow hull before him.”34 Nowhere in the Neanderthal-focalized sections do we find such a clear articulation of causation (the paddling causes the wind to fill the sail), or of psychological motivation (Tuami’s complex reasons for examining the hull).

But clarity comes at the expense of embodied proximity: as we engage with Tuami’s calculating mind, we develop a sense of cognitive mediation that marks a sharp departure from the physical rawness of Lok’s experience. The psychological divide between Lok and Tuami has important ethical implications, as Golding scholars have emphasized.35 While Neanderthals are, for Golding, fundamentally incapable of violence, Tuami’s thought processes evince a predisposition towards conflict and deception. It is precisely this predisposition, the novel implies, that determines the evolutionary success of Homo sapiens and its eventual obliteration of the Neanderthals. The novel ends with Tuami peering into the horizon and perceiving a “line of darkness” that serves as a symbolic equivalent of the evolutionary future of Homo sapiens. Yet Golding’s novel does not rule out the possibility of bridging the gulf between the two species of Homo: the title already suggests that there might be continuity between them, that modern human may have “inherited” something from their evolutionary relatives.36 What is inherited is, on my reading, the capacity for somatic resonance—

31 Golding, 67.
32 In J.M. Coetzee’s The Lives of Animals, the protagonist—Elizabeth Costello—comments as follows on Ted Hughes’s poems “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar”: “In these poems we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body”; J.M. Coetzee, The Lives of Animals (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 51. My contention is that Golding does the same by asking readers to inhabit a Neanderthal’s body.
33 I am indebted to Hannah Wojciechowski for this observation.
34 Golding, The Inheritors, 215.
36 This idea of “inheritance” resonates with current DNA evidence pointing to interbreeding between Homo sapiens and Neanderthals. Traces of this interbreeding can be detected in the genetic profile of living non-African humans. See Paul H. Mason and Roger V. Short, “Neanderthal-Human Hybrids,” Hypothesis 9, no. 1 (2011): e1.
which is demonstrated by Lok at the diegetic level, but also stimulated in readers by Golding’s deeply embodied style. The upshot is that the audience may span the evolutionary gap between themselves and Neanderthals by imaginatively embodying the latter—and the distinctiveness of their cognitive make-up. In turn, this embodied dynamic raises questions about *Homo sapiens* and the troubled legacy of its encounters with other species, over the course of evolutionary history as well as in today’s world.

**Conclusion**

Evolution has become an important focus for approaches to literature attempting to move beyond dichotomies between nature and culture, biology and social practices. Scholars such as Joseph Carroll or Jonathan Gottschall have argued that literary texts, including literary narratives, are shaped by evolutionary biases and predispositions. For instance, in a study of the British novel they hypothesize that “protagonists and their associates would form communities of cooperative endeavor and that antagonists would exemplify dominance behavior.” The problem with this approach is that the generality of the hypothesis inevitably evacuates or at least sidelines the specific complexity of individual texts. Largely in response to these reductionist models, Nancy Easterlin has developed a “biocultural” account of interpretation that steers clear of the universalist assumptions of hard-nosed evolutionary literary criticism; instead, it seeks to expose the “relationship between cognitive predispositions, historical situations, literary artifacts, and the aesthetic value of individual texts.” This is, largely, the philosophy that informs this article, and it offers an important model for this special issue as a whole.

Human evolution is, for writers like Golding or—in the domain of nonfiction—Salopek, something fundamentally problematic, and not just due to gaps or limitations in scientific knowledge. Rather, the spatio-temporal scale of evolutionary processes resists straightforward capture in narrative form, because of what Monika Fludernik describes as the “anthropomorphic bias” of storytelling: narrative is not just a human practice, but a practice geared towards the spatio-temporal parameters of human societies. Further, narrative accounts of human evolution are caught up with humanity’s uneasy efforts to define its position vis-à-vis the material world, including nonhuman animals and the *Homo* species that preceded us. In this article, I have argued that embodiment is a crucial resource for narrative as it tries to overcome these hurdles: Salopek’s narrative project foregrounds bodily movement as a stand-in for human migration over the eons of evolution, while Golding’s novel confronts us with the cognitive divide between Neanderthals and our ancestors in embodied terms. In both cases, the body puts readers in touch with the deep history of our species, potentially prompting them to revisit and reappraise humanity’s embedding in the material world. This invitation becomes particularly salient in Golding’s novel, in which somatic empathy for a Neanderthal destabilizes notions of *Homo sapiens* superiority and mastery, instead revealing our shared embodied (and biological) “inheritance,” which binds us to other living creatures and to the material environment in which we evolved.

Of course, Golding’s probing of our problematic Neanderthal inheritance is cast in ethical and imaginative terms, instead of strictly biological ones, but the convergence is remarkable.


Crucial to this destabilizing action is narrative’s capacity to engage readers through embodied strategies. Building on research in the mind sciences, I have argued that embodied simulation—the reenactment of verbally described actions—is an important component of narrative comprehension. However, while embodied simulations tend to be pervasive and unconscious in everyday language, literary narrative has the power to evoke simulations that are experientially textured and impactful. Various stylistic strategies, such as synesthetic metaphor or the foregrounding of bodily movement, can contribute to the thickening of embodied simulations. Certainly, more work—both empirical and conceptual—is needed to deepen our understanding of how literary language can resonate in readers’ bodies. But, as I have tried to show in this article, a biocultural account of literary narrative should develop a sensitivity to both cognitive-level involvement and to the broader interpretive and even ideological stakes of that involvement: in Salopek’s and Golding’s writings, thick embodied simulations become bound up with a renegotiation of the evolutionary history of our species. Problematic notions of Homo sapiens exceptionalism are questioned, and with them culturally entrenched conceptions of what constitutes a “normal” human embodied mind. This narrative probing of our biocultural identity through the deep history of evolution is exemplified by Salopek and Golding, but it is not—of course—limited to them. In fact, it falls into a broader tendency in contemporary narrative to unsettle the divide, entrenched in Western culture, between humanity and the material world, human and nonhuman animals. Thus, this article should be seen as part of a wave of narratological approaches that seek to move narrative theory beyond its anthropocentric comfort zone.

Bibliography


