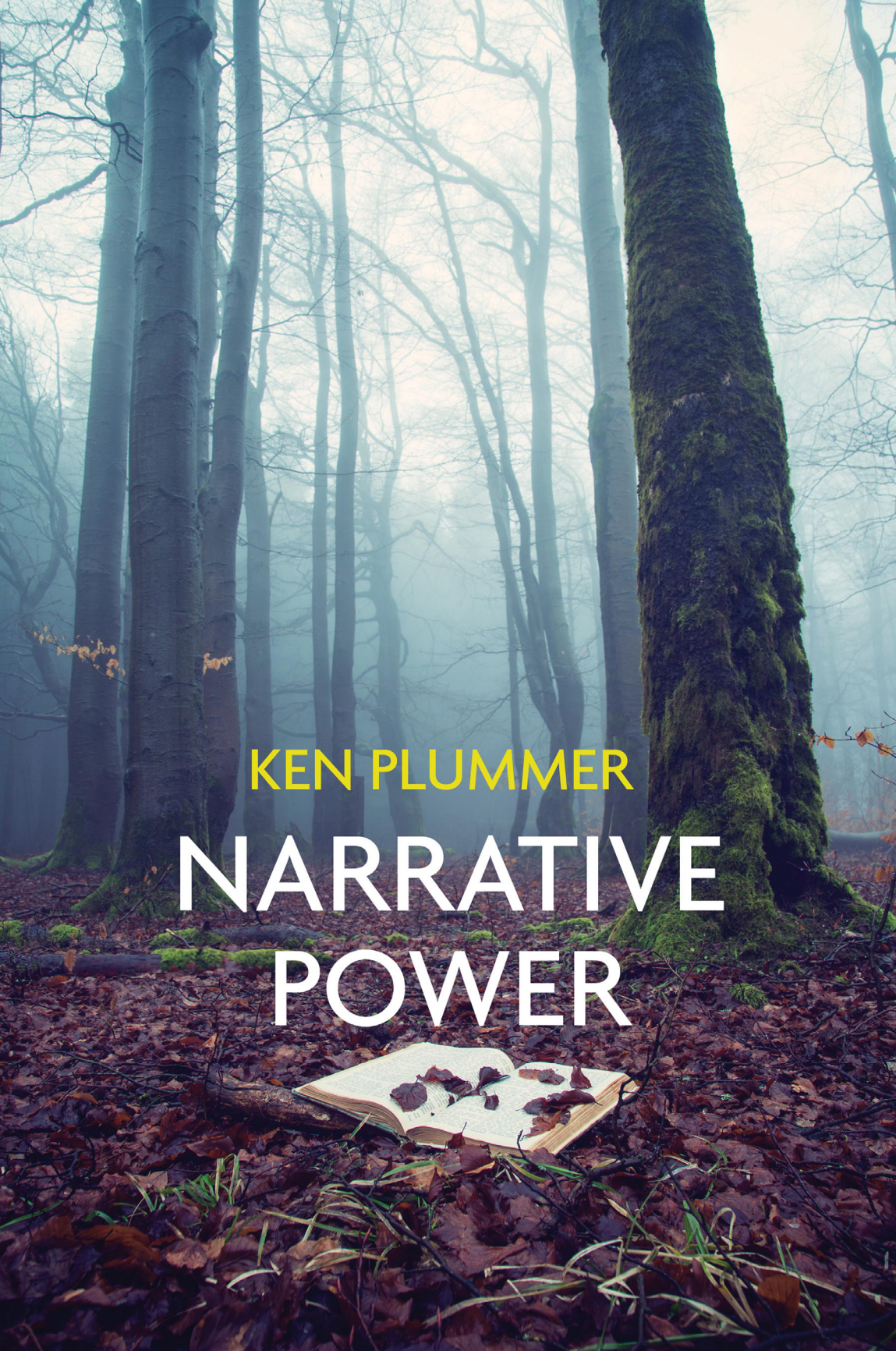
KEN PLUMMER
NARRATIVE POWER

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The Struggle for Human Value

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polity

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Stories animate human life: that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided . . . A good life requires living well with stories. When life goes badly, a story is often behind this too . . . Narrative makes the earth habitable for human beings.

Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*

That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end. But the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcomes of action.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Every conflict is in part a battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard.

Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*

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Prologue: Going Backstage

Once upon a time, there was the story. Like you, I have lived all my life with stories. It is an almost universally recognized fact that what makes our humanity distinct from other life on Planet Earth is our ability to tell and listen to stories. What is less universally recognized is that we are also thinkers about the power of our stories: we do not just tell and listen, we also reflect upon them and act with them. Stories help us to imagine, animate and value human life. We live our lives between stories of imagination and stories of reality: call this, if you like, *the reality puzzle.* This book provides some further ways to reflect on these flowing stories: I ask how power shapes stories, how stories shape power and how understanding the way all this works might help move us towards better worlds for all.

From the slow evolution of the face-to-face local oral cultures of antiquity to our currently dazzling moments of global digitalism that convulse us with rapidly fragmenting, fast-speed, niched networked tweets, we have always been the animal living with narrative power. We dwell across the globe in a vast multitude of complex interconnecting reflective storied social worlds. Our narratives are continually born, sparkle, flicker, silence and die; some get remembered. Our everyday lives are influenced, shaped and even coerced, by the storied actions of others. They become saturated in everyday political relations. And this is a basic puzzle: just how do we human beings come to dwell within this *story–power dialogue,* and what does it do to humane governance and us?

A life in stories

I guess I started being interested in narrative power when I was about 15. As an unread working-class teenage boy and young man born in Wood Green, London, I struggled for a few years with the possibility of being homosexual. This was England in the early 1960s and homosexuality was stigmatized as sin, sickness, crime and tragedy. (It still is today in much of the world.) Everywhere I turned, I heard stories and saw images that suggested my being was a problem and I was doomed for a tragic existence. My life became a dialogue with queer stories. Watching the film *Victim* in 1961 displayed this only too clearly. Here was the story of a life of queer-bashing, blackmail, therapy, prison, darkness, sorrow and ultimately suicide. If I was to believe this dominant powerful narrative of the day, could this well be my own pathetic life story? Maybe. If I had been born any earlier, this may have been my fate, as it certainly was for a great many. But I was also a child of the countercultural 1960s and challenging counter-narratives were in the making. Among these was the emerging powerful, positive story of Gay Pride and Gay Rights: 'Sing if you're glad to be gay, sing if you are happy that way.' A few lawyers were beginning to tell new stories to change the law; some psychiatrists were reworking their scripts of sickness into health; and a new language and culture of stories was starting to be told that gave us new visions. A new narrative, and imagery, were in the making and I was living them: the 'Coming Out as Gay or Lesbian' story became a growing genre of writing and film and eventually appeared in many countries across the world. Slowly, new possibilities were being sensed. I seized the moment, as we say, and started to refashion my little youthful life and world through these new tales. My life was not to be downtrodden: I was not going to live in the closet; I was going to make sure I could lead a life where I could be an out gay man. And this is more or less what happened, and very quickly. The old story was discarded, the new one shaped and adopted. The counter-stories of social movements changed my life. But I also learnt that stories are never finished – there is a kaleidoscope of sensibilities around them, and they will keep moving on.[1]

Retrospectively, I can see unfolding in all of this a major genre of storytelling, which has sculptured many little lives and big political moments: a self-fulfilling narrative. Stories become grounded in everyday life, have consequences, shape outcomes, change lives and sometimes become self-amplifying: telling the story helps bring about

what it tells. This means we had better be careful what stories we tell. I was lucky to find new stories in the making: the old ones would have made my life very unhappy. I slowly learnt that stories have a history, and their right moment matters a great deal.

And, indeed, since the mid-1970s, I have spent a life academically engaged with stories. Initially examining a wide range of stories about the sexually diverse, I argued for the significance of narrative and story research as a powerful method for the social sciences (in my first publications 'Doing Life Histories' (Faraday and Plummer, 1979) and *Documents of Life* (Plummer, [1983] 2001)). Over the subsequent years, I have increasingly tried to develop an approach that is less concerned with literary narrative and more with the sociological, ethical and political importance of storytelling and listening: there is an ecology of narratives in which stories are assembled, understood, given value and lived through our actions in the world. This was most clearly set out in my book *Telling Sexual Stories* (Plummer, 1995), which offered a sociology of stories and then applied it to the field of sexualities.

And so it seems that I have been living with narrative power all my life, even if I did not quite realize it at the time; and it has now become the prime focus of this study. This new book has been simmering within me for many years. My question, simply put, is: How does narrative shape power and how does power shape narrative? My focus is on power–narrative interaction, a dialogue in which each feeds on the other, is emergent and generates change. I ultimately look to a world where narrative acts and narrative power make for better worlds. As they have for me.

Both narrative and power have existed everywhere since the beginning of human time. They are ubiquitous, and at the start of the twenty-first century there is an explosion of new forms. As I was writing this book, there was never a day when issues of narrative power were not prominent: Trump's 'fake media', the Brexit divide, terrorist stories, 'Putin', the clash over the environment, the refugee crisis, Syria, Yemen, the dangers of the digital world of tweets and surveillance, the emergence of the story of 'Trans', the sexual harassment stories of #MeToo and Weinstein, Hollywood and the UK Parliament. As each of them flagged a significant *narrative crisis or muddle*, I wondered whether there had there been any progress in our narrative understanding and skills since Aristotle's famous discussion of rhetoric and poetics (Aristotle, 1991, 1996). They provided little hope that a civilized, caring modern narrative world was at work here. And yet, at the same time, every day I exchanged good stories with

people of all kinds, watched videos, read books, visited art galleries, went to the theatre, listened to music and experienced the omnipresent joy of narratives at their best.

Taking a stance

Folk have written a lot about stories, life stories, narratives, discourse and what is often called 'narratology'. My focus here is selective: on how stories work socially and politically, highlighting the generic features that underpin a great many different stories. I will mention many tales, but I have no space to illustrate any of them in great detail. Readers looking for extended discussions of any specific story will not find them. (I have chosen, for example, largely to bypass Trump and Brexit where there is already a huge industry discussing them.) Nor am I concerned with fiction. My main focus is on *tales of suffering in documentary reality*: these stories are grounded in real life. There will be leakage all around – indeed, the very distinction of what is reality and what is fiction will become central as we move on. I also write at a time of cataclysmic change: digital stories are reworking classical storytelling. I live myself as a migrant in time. Having lived half my life with the classical modern narrative, I have since lived in a world where digital narratives have rapidly taken over. I now stand at this vital threshold and confront it as best I can.

Within this study, two rather different books jostle to appear. First, I attempt to produce a grounded, intellectually serious account of *narrative power*, highlighting its many elements but especially the idea of *narrative actions*. I do this by looking at a range of stories that give us down-to-earth problems to think about, and using them to suggest a few wider patterns.

This is how the book starts and ends; and along the way you will be introduced to a wide array of stories. But second, the book is also a very personal one. It is driven by my own personal, political and normative concerns about human suffering, the struggle for human value, and the precarious narrative muddle we keep making for ourselves.

Each chapter is discrete and problem-focused – drawing out its own questions, examples and ideas. Underpinning all this is a critical humanist stance: a stance that is analytic, theoretical, methodological, ethical and political.[2] It simply takes the complex, grounded human life as a key starting point, even as it must also immediately be located in its insignificance in a vast pluriverse of time and space. Ultimately,

it links to progressive egalitarian, humanitarian and caring values and politics: here are emancipations that lead globally to a better world for all and not just the few. As people make their own narratives – but not usually in moments and structures of their own choosing – a politics of empowerment and an enhancement of lives become possible, creating new opportunities for better worlds. I recognize there are no grand truths, no grand theories, no grand narratives and no grand answers in this politics of narrative humanity – even though we have often to act as if there are. Our human world and our humanity are an indelibly risky business. Even as stories are there to help us, they are perpetually fragile.

The stories to come

We will see over and over again a standard catechism of stories. They establish scenes, characters, values and plots with beginnings, middles and endings: themes are established, troubles developed, and ultimately some kind of resolution is attained. This seems to be a basic universal grammar of storytelling. And I have set this book up in this classical mode. But my tone and moods change as the stories unfold.

I start with an Overture of *puzzlement and vision:* with a range of illustrative stories around human suffering that will give a good sense of issues and motifs to come. In Act 1, I set the scene by providing a more formal and abstract statement of the key features of narrative power (chapter 2). I then look at a few of the major stories of power and set them in dialogues with the power of stories (chapter 3). In Act 2, I look at the fragility of our narratives and how this arises from five key sources. I now become more *concerned* and *critical* as I examine areas where human beings suffer while doing narrative work: through narrative inequality (chapter 4); through a changing media, especially the riskiness of narrative digitalism (chapter 5); through the different dangers of living with complex modern narrative states (chapter 6); through a troubling reality puzzle which makes the line between truth and fiction a universal, historical problem (chapter 7); and, finally, through the contingencies that shape our stories over time (chapter 8). Act 3 then suggests the possibility of narrative hope – a better world of stories that can be shaped by a politics of narrative humanity. This final section (chapter 9) then becomes much more explicitly *normative and political,* looking for re-valuations, imaginaries and new political acts in a world fast heading along a road to disaster. We need

a better narrative world: here I highlight the importance of developing narrative wisdom and narrative trust, making modest grounded proposals for a new politics of narrative humanity as we move into a digital and cosmopolitan world.

Ultimately, the book leads to a series of meditations about what humanity values – in a world that has now been reduced to an overwhelming crass economic and commercial narrative of life. The book becomes a re-valuation: a critical, analytic provocation, providing tools for making sense of narratives now, and to dream afresh about what could be done in the future – the futures of stories in a challenged world. My tale is a tale of how bad stories can drive out good stories, of how many 'stories of the good' get silenced, but how eventually good stories may just triumph. In the closing chapter, I am ultimately asking the big question: How can we build sustainable stories that support the progress of our world and our humanities?

Overture: In the Beginning

In the beginning
There was the story.
A story of suffering;
And a story of hope.

1

Narratives of Suffering

Six Stories in Search of a Better World

> We think we understand each other, but we never really do.
> Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Narratives are the Wealth of Nations. At birth, we enter a world of perpetual storytelling that has long preceded us. Soon our childhoods become full-time training grounds for early dialogues with others: for making new words, learning to listen, interpreting others. We then live our adult lives acting in dialogues with the stories of others as we struggle with meaning, sense and value. And one fine day, as we reach our deathbeds, so our own life stories may weave into the memories, the hauntings, the obituaries for others. Even as we leave the continual Grand Narrative Dialogue procession behind us, it will most surely continue without us. Every day, a life will entail an immersion in a steady stream of grounded telling and listening to stories in their rich multiplicity of forms. Societies become the vibrant spaces where people go about constructing and reconstructing stories: today, yesterday and tomorrow. Never the one and only story – the fixed and unitary tale does not exist – our stories will change, fragment, multiply, disperse.

The multiplicities and complexities of narrative

The range of the stories we confront is truly astounding: we dwell in worlds of narrative differences, narrative pluralism, narrative polyphony that have been much studied.[1] Difference is the name of the game: varieties of form, structures and contents within storytelling, and multiple audiences in the outer world who make very different

senses of the tales. As we start to examine issues of narrative power, we always need to keep in mind this grand diversity of narrative.

Stories exude from past myths, epics, legends, folklore, fairy tales and the grand millennia-old religious tracts, but they can also be found today in the contemporary banalities of mundane scribbles on bathroom walls, Post-it labels and everyday tweets. Stories can harbour grand narrative forms (tragedy, comedy, romance, melodrama, satire, farce) alongside little lesser ones (jokes, anecdotes, gossip). Our clothes, our fashions and our artefacts can and do tell the stories of our homes and lives. There are our 'documents of life': the autobiographies and life stories, the obituaries and the tombstones, the oral histories and the family histories, the 'truth commissions' and the 'memory sites', the desert island discs and the playlists, the diaries and letters, the podcasts and the blogs. There are the *Bildungsroman*, the genealogies, the therapeutic self-testimonials, the memoirs and the auto/ethnographies. There are visual narratives: in art, sculpture, stained-glass windows, architecture, photographs, film and video. Musical narratives – from baroque tales through love songs to aggressive rap – are everywhere. The brand and the logo bring new stories to the commercial world of neo-liberal markets. And more: nowadays our storytelling has exploded beyond the old technologies of film and television into digital life – social media, digital games and the digital narratives of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and the rest. Stories are multiple and multitudinous, arriving in many shapes and forms, speaking of many different things, appearing across all forms of media.

Above all, they weave and interconnect with truth and fiction, each creating a vast inter-textual panorama in which we come to dwell, suggesting a key contrast: that of a *fiction–reality continuum*, a reality puzzle, through which we can appraise stories for being more or less realistic or true to life. They hold one key to the emplotment, ordering and unlocking of the vast complexities and flows of our unique human lives.

On Stories and Narratives

To be clear at the outset: a narrative is not quite the same thing as a story. There is a long-standing terminological muddle here that may never be completely resolved, and, in truth, the two ideas merge with each other so much that the distinction can often be hard to sustain. But, most commonly, *stories* direct us to *what* is told, while *narratives* tell us *how* stories are told. I take stories to be the skeleton of

'who, what, where, when and why', of *what* we tell, and narratives to be the underlying ways we tell and communicate, *how* a story is deeply fashioned by apparatus of telling. So stories, the *what* we tell, put characters into plots, with beginnings, middles and ends: they set scenes, create tensions and find resolutions. All good stories are expected to do this, postmodern irregularities notwithstanding. Narratives, the *how* we do this, examine the acts, apparatus, mechanics and structures that make it all work: just *how* we tell tales, present news reports, make films, send tweets, tell our stories. All stories are narratives, but not all narratives are stories. Power features in both; and both can take on an infinite variety of forms and shapes as they persistently muddle and mingle together.[2]

Janus-faced Narratives: The Inner and Outer Worlds of Stories

Follow the story. Understand the narrative. We start with this. Follow the story both inwards to the dynamics of vulnerable personhood, and outwards, to the tragi-comedies of risky societies. Like the Roman god who looked perpetually in two directions, we have a fine balancing act to perform as stories and narratives lead us to both inner and outer worlds. Look one way and, thanks to Freud and others, we now know much about the story of the inner life; looking the other social way, we find we know much less. Indeed, it is one controversy of stories that they frequently lead us into thinking psychologically when stories also lead us to the traumas and troubles of society. This study does some re-balancing by thinking of stories as social, and indeed political. Behind every story there is a social – often political – story waiting to be unpacked.

While many of our troubles get told as stories couched in individual terms, as 'personal troubles', they often have their roots in much larger structural traumas that are not immediately visible: traumas of human social isolation and community breakdown, housing and homelessness, poverty and unemployment, discrimination and exclusion, dislocation and migration, violence and war. Ultimately, our sufferings may be structural. And as we come to tell our tales, we may come to share these with others: we come to dwell in *communities of narratives*.[3]

Six opening stories

All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.
Karen Blixen (interview in the *New York Times Review of Books*, 3 November 1957)

I am interested in reality stories and human stories, with tales of documentary reality and tales of human suffering. Such stories bring with them the possibility of understanding the deep troubles of the world and sometimes the hope of making things better. Both are evoked in the opening quote from Karen Blixen (1885–1962), a Danish author who often wrote under the name of Isak Dinesen.[4] To get us going, this scene-setting overture invites you to consider six short, grounded stories of narrative suffering at the start of the twenty-first century. There is much to learn from them.

Malala Yousafzai: Injustice Icon

I tell my story not because it is unique but because it is the story of many girls . . . One child, one pen, one teacher, one book can change our world.[5]
https://www.malala.org

I start with the contemporary tale of Malala Yousafzai (2014): an iconic narrative memoir much discussed in the news, press and media, becoming a bestselling book, a documentary film, a YouTube hip hop video and even a choral piece for International Women's Day in 2017. Malala's story is a modern 'celebrity story', a contemporary 'narrative icon', an already classic 'story of a girl who changed the world'. The plot tells the first-hand account of a 15-year-old girl shot in the head at point-blank range by the Taliban while travelling back from a remote school in the Swat Valley of Pakistan with her friends on the local bus. The date was Tuesday, 9 October 2012; it was widely reported across the world. She was flown in a critical condition to Birmingham in the United Kingdom for treatment at Queen Elizabeth Hospital; recovered, she left ultimately in January 2013, by which time she had been joined by her family in the UK and was settling into a new life in England. Ultimately, she has become a global symbol of both peaceful protest and the importance of educating girls, addressing the United Nations Youth Assembly on her sixteenth birthday (12 July 2013). She is the youngest-ever winner of the Nobel Peace Prize (in 2014) and the co-founder of the Malala

Fund, an organization to empower girls through education in developing countries. In the autumn of 2017, she started a course of study at Oxford University.

Her story illustrates many key ideas of narrative power. She displays iconic power, the potential for counter-narratives, and the media clash over global stories. Coming to assume celebrity power, she becomes what the sociologist Thomas Olesen (2015, 2016) calls a 'global injustice symbol', or an *injustice icon* – here, a carrier of Western humanitarian values. This in turn raises the issue of how her story might be read across cultures. For the stories told by the British media were not the same as those told in the Pakistani media (Thomas and Shukul, 2015). The idea of *narrative states* (chapter 6) will start to suggest ways different countries handle stories and how they travel across borders. So, while it is true that much of the mainstream media in Pakistan reported Malala by citing the Western press, there was also a very clear development of a rival narrative too. While the Western media highlighted Malala as a victim of terrorism and a female activist for educational rights, the alternative media were very critical of this Western intervention, raising the issue of bias in contrasting global accounts. There is a danger in using one story to represent all of Muslim girls' experiences. For Malala's story actually feeds comfortably into Western binary (and maybe imperialistic) narrative structures that allow the West to ignore their own involvements and reinforce the idea of the dangerous Other outside of the West. In any event, her story was in some ways an unusual case – her parents had long been involved with education and were campaigners for education in Pakistan. Stories always need contextualizing.

Malala's story can be seen as setting the scene for thinking about the nature of power. She experiences the power of the Taliban *over* her body when she is attacked; but she also comes to know about her own power *to* act when she decides to help the world's women, empowering herself and gaining identity and solidarity. Engaging in what I will be calling narrative actions, she illustrates two contrasting kinds of *grounded ubiquitous power*: the 'power to' and the 'power over'. Here is what we might see as the distinction between ubiquitous power and *governmental power*. Malala faces ubiquitous power (a power found widely in society), *patriarchal power* (the power of men over women), governmental power (the power of states to intervene) and *global power* (in this case, the power of the United Nations). Ultimately, Malala's story draws attention to the locational symbolic violence against girls, their global inequality and their need for education. According to UNESCO, there are some 32 million