

Narrative in Contemporary Poetry

The 21st century has no shortage of people telling their stories and speaking their experiences through every medium imaginable. However, the recent use of narrative to tell other stories about the past is becoming common in artistic mediums too. The 2016 hit musical *Hamilton* achieved success retelling the story of the founding fathers of the United States through rap music and dancing. In many ways this makes history (whether that's about the eighteenth-century founding fathers or - with McCallum's book - a plantation-owning Scottish poet) much more accessible. It becomes easier for people to emotionally connect to seemingly distant lives and experiences. Poetry scholar Claudia Holler states that "...the concept of narrative identity is rewarding not because of its unambiguous nature, but because of its interdisciplinary reach and connectivity." This makes it more appealing to artists/scholars like McCallum, who weave research into their art.

As Brian McHale points out, the majority of poetry before the turn of the 19th century was narrative poetry. The explosion of new styles and new ideas about the function of poetry has made narrative poetry seem outdated. Only in a contemporary context has there been a reevaluation of the traditional form. McHale writes, "the communal is precisely what the so-called New Narrative or Neo-Narrative movement claimed to seek through its revival of narrative poetry in the 1980s." This interest shown by contemporary poets in this idea of the communal has led to a return to storytelling. Narrative poems are one of the oldest forms of storytelling, as seen in epics, ballads, and Arthurian romances.

By going back to a perhaps more traditional form of poetry in her book, *No Ruined Stone*, McCallum uses narrative to set a groundwork for themes of class, race, heritage, and slavery, while still working in a language that feels both antiquated and refreshingly familiar to the reader. In focusing specifically on Robert Burns and his life through narration, McCallum can work through topics like historical erasure and whitewashing, because the language and technical form of writing lend themselves to the feeling of an earlier time. Narrative poetry is seeing a revival in part because its increasingly widespread use by poets like McCallum.

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Information sourced from Claudia Holler's *Rethinking Narrative Identity: Person and Perspective* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013); "Narrative Poetry" from the *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, vol. 15, issue 3; Brian McHale's "Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry" in *Narrative* vol. 17, no. 1, 2009; and A.N. Wilson's "A Question of Self-Identity" in *The Daily Telegraph*, July 21, 2008.