

**“But of course I wouldn't be writing this  
if it hadn't gotten worse”:  
Narrator and genre conventions of r/nosleep horror  
stories**

Bachelor's thesis

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<b>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</b> <p>Internet-kauhutarinat ovat kasvaneet suureen suosioon 2000-luvulla, ja Reddit-verkkosivuston kauhutarinoiden keskittyvässä Nosleep-yhteisössä onkin jo yli 14 miljoonaa jäsentä. Kuka tahansa saa julkaista kirjoittamansa tarinan r/nosleep-kanavalla, kunhan vain noudattaa yhteisön tarkkaan rajattuja ohjeita ja sääntöjä: tarinat esimerkiksi täytyy esittää kirjoittajien omina, todellisina kokemuksina, vaikka ne eivät totta olisikaan, ja myös kommentoijien täytyy suhtautua näihin tarinoiden tosina. Koska Nosleep-tarinoille on selkeät kriteerit, sitä voi ajatella omana kauhutarinoiden alagenrenään.</p> <p>Tässä kandidaatintutkielmassa tutkin, millaisia kertojia Nosleep-tarinoilla on, ja esiintykö niiden välillä samankaltaisuuksia. Lisäksi selvitin, millaisia muita yhtenäisiä piirteitä tarinoissa esiintyy genren tasolla, ja vertasin näitä yhtenäisiä piirteitä toisen internet-kauhun genren piirteisiin. Laadullisen tutkimukseni aineisto koostui yhteensä viidestä kaikkien aikojen suosituimmasta r/nosleep-kanavan tarinasta, joita analysoin käyttäen menetelminäni narratiivista diskurssianalyysia sekä genreanalyysia.</p> <p>Tutkimukseni osoitti, että kertojan rooli on olennainen osa Nosleep-genren piirteitä. Aineiston perusteella kertoja on aina homodiegeettinen, eli kerronta tapahtuu ensimmäisessä persoonassa, ja kertoja on itse osa tarinaa, useimmiten päähenkilön roolissa. Genreanalyysissa ja -vertailussa nousi esille, että Nosleep-tarinat pyrkivät pelottelemaan lukijoitaan pääsääntöisesti psykologisen kauhun keinoin. Nosleep-tarinoissa hyödynnetään nykyaikaisia elementtejä ja internet-kulttuuria, ja tarinoiden kertojat ”kommunikoiivat” usein lukijoiden kanssa osana narratiivia, mikä lisää niiden realistisuutta. Tarinoiden todentuntuuutta pyritään usein lisäämään myös otsikoimalla ne muistuttamaan internetin keskustelunavauksia sekä kerrontatyylin liittyvillä valinnoilla.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Horror fiction is a genre which has the primary function of scaring and frightening, and it has been simultaneously terrifying and intriguing its audience for centuries. Over the years, horror fiction has spread from literature to many other mediums, including movies, video games, comic books, and podcasts. Simultaneously, different subgenres of horror have emerged, for example as responses to developments of the world and its state. Additionally, horror fiction has been a fascinating research topic in fields such as literature and anthropology, as researchers have been interested in finding out what makes people scared – and why the fear fascinates. In the 2000s, the written horror stories have again risen in popularity on the internet, and a new subgenre, creepypasta, was established as a form of internet horror fiction. Following this, a medium for similar, short internet horror stories called Nosleep was created on Reddit, and it is currently one of the most popular Reddit communities based on its subscriber count of over 14 million (Redditlist 2020).

Internet horror fiction, regarding creepypasta, has been researched from different viewpoints. For example, Heikkinen (2019) analysed the role of computers in creepypasta stories. However, as the stories of Nosleep are governed by a detailed set of rules and exist only on a specific platform, the Reddit community, they could be viewed as their own type of internet horror fiction separate from creepypasta, which does not have these restrictions and limitations. The stories of Nosleep have not been academically studied before. As Nosleep stories are currently a popular form of internet horror fiction, of which some have been published as books and are even in the process of being adapted to films, a study could help to increase knowledge of this relatively new genre of contemporary horror fiction, and to answer what type of horror intrigues the readers of Nosleep.

The aim of the present study is to research the genre conventions of Nosleep horror stories, further focusing on the role of narrators. First, the study will cover the theoretical section, which includes a look into the study of literary narratives and the genre of horror fiction. Second, the data and methods of the study are introduced. This is followed by the analysis and results, and finally, the paper finishes with the conclusion section, where the results and points of view for future research are discussed.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Literary narratives

#### 2.1.1 Definitions and key concepts

Narrative text, as summarized by Toolan (2001: 8), is “a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can ‘learn’”. This sequence is then performed using language as a medium: the narrative can be presented in written form, it can be spoken, or even acted out. Narratives are often pre-constructed in comparison to spontaneous conversations and they usually have trajectories, such as beginnings, middles, and ends (Toolan 2001: 4). Narrative texts, or simply narratives, always have a narrator in some form and a listener (Toolan 2001: 1). Bal (2009: 5) defines the contents of the narrative as a *story*, which is also “‘colouring’ of a *fabula*” – a *fabula* is the chronological series of events presented in the narrative. To summarize, a *fabula* can be defined as the timeline of the narrative, whereas a story is the plot of the narrative.

As narrative is an extensive term, the study of literary narratives specifically is called narratology. According to Pavel (1985: 86), the term has been used differently by different researchers: Tzvetan Todorov coined the term to refer to the study of literary narratives in general, while Mieke Bal’s definition of narratology covers the research of the topic from narrative discourse’s point of view. The roots of narratology are in Russian formalism, a school of literary theory interested in establishing methods and treating literary theory as a science - especially well-known theories of the orientation are the works of Propp on morphology of the folktale and Bakhtin’s on language and discourse from a social point of view. The terms *fabula* and *story*, known as *syuzhet* in Russian, originate from Russian formalism as well. (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 2005: 29, 34, 39)

#### 2.1.2 Narrator

Narrator is the voice which tells the story of the narrative. According to Bal (2009: 18), it is the central concept in narrative analysis: narrative texts always have narrators, even though they might be unnoticeable or even invisible, and the narrator is the one who shapes the text with their identity and choices. The concept of narrator is closely related to the concept of

focalization, coined by Genette (1980). The term focalization refers to the narrative perspective, as does the narrator, but the focalization draws a distinction between what is seen and who is speaking (Bal 2009: 146). For example, in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, the book is narrated from Harry Potter's point of view in third-person narrative, and the reader knows what Harry feels and sees what Harry sees. As Harry Potter is unfamiliar with the magic world he has entered, he does not recognize or understand some things around him, such as magical creatures and objects, and they are described as unknown and peculiar.

When the narrator is analyzed, the most common aspect of the analysis is usually the point of view. In literature, narration is typically done from either first-person ("I-narration") or third-person ("they-narration") point of view (Montgomery 2007: 261-262). Genette (1980: 244) explains these points of view as the writer's choice of having their story told by either one of the characters or by an outside narrator. He refers to the typical first-person narrative, or the story where a character is narrating, as a *homodiegetic* narrative, whereas the third-person, absent narrator is called *heterodiegetic* (Genette 1980: 244-245). Montgomery (2007: 266) calls these narrations internal and external, respectively. Furthermore, Genette (1980: 245-246) presents two types of homodiegetic, or first-person, narratives: usually the narrator is the main character of the story, which makes the narrative person *autodiegetic*, but in some instances a secondary character is narrating someone else's story. Famous examples of this type of storytelling are Nick Carraway narrating the story of Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, and *Wuthering Heights*, which is narrated by two characters, Nelly and Lockwood.

The third-person narration has typically more variety when it comes to portraying events. First-person narrative has a limited point of view, as it is the narration of one character with restricted knowledge and perception: if the character is not present when something happens, they do not know about it if they are not somehow informed. Third-person point of view, however, can be narrated with either restricted or unrestricted knowledge (Montgomery 2007: 266). For example, the previously mentioned *Harry Potter* series has a third-person narration with restricted knowledge, because the reader knows and feels only what Harry Potter feels and sees what Harry Potter sees. On the other hand, some works with third-person narrations have so-called omniscient narrators, which can narrate the feelings and point of views of multiple characters in the same text.

## 2.2 Horror fiction as a genre

### 2.2.1 Literary genres

In general, *genre* – derived from Latin word *genus*, “type or “kind” (Montgomery 2007: 41) – can be defined as a socially constructed type of communication. This means that the concept of genres is language-related, and genres can exist in various forms related to language: most people can name genres of music, text, movies, and literature, for example. There are countless existing genres and new ones are created often – there are also many ways of categorizing texts into different genres. In literature, genres have been often defined by classifying texts into categories based on the common characteristics they share, such as tone, story line, and linguistic features. According to Montgomery’s (2007: 42-44) categorization, text can be classified based on the text’s

1. formal properties, such as the rhythm or pattern
2. theme or topic
3. mood or anticipated response
4. occasion, such as text related to different social rituals
5. mode of address, such as letters and emails

However, according to Devitt (2004: 165-166), these types of categorizations are often seen as rigid by today’s literary theorists, and many of them choose to look at genres in a cultural context as an interaction between the writer and the reader.

Literary genres, and genres in general, are subjective to some extent, as there are no clear definitions on what constitutes a specific genre. Furthermore, these definitions are changing over time, as they are socially constructed. As explained by Bhatia (1993: 18), “text by itself is not a complete object possessing meaning on its own; it is to be regarded as an ongoing process of negotiation in the context of issues like social roles, group purposes, professional and organizational preferences and perquisites, and even cultural constraints”. Some genres are also more flexible while some are rigid: genres such as sonnets and haikus have clear structures, and they are defined based on their formal properties (Montgomery 2007: 42). The writers must be familiar with the conventions of the genre and follow them to make their text effective and recognizable. Literary genres are often quite fluid, and many works can be a mixture of multiple genres, such as history and romance, and sometimes these combined genres, when utilized enough, are defined as new subgenres.

### 2.2.2 Defining horror fiction

Horror is a genre of fiction with the primary function of scaring or frightening the reader, and evoking feelings such as fear and terror, or even disgust. Thus, horror fiction stories are often classified to the genre based on their mood and anticipated response. The allure of horror fiction is said to stem from the “mankind’s effort to invoke and subdue the demonic” (Saricks 2009: 112) – people are interested in experiencing the feelings of horror, thrill and repulsion while simultaneously knowing they can stop reading or watching when they choose to. According to Thacker (2011: 8), the fascination of horror is not only about fear, but the thought of unknown: as famously stated by Lovecraft (1927), notable horror fiction writer, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown”.

As literary genres are fluid and subjective to some extent, the definition of horror fiction can vary. For example, Colavito (2008: 14-15) defines several major categories of horror, including supernatural horror, weird tale, *contes cruelles*, psychological horror, dark fantasy, and science fiction. On the other hand, Saricks (2009: 112, 230) draws a line between horror and psychological thriller by defining horror as a genre containing a tangible monster of some type, such as a vampire or a werewolf, whereas psychological thriller includes internal, psychological monsters, such as manifestations of different emotions. As the most notable and generally recognized definition of horror fiction is the goal to frighten the reader, the genre in this study is not going to be as strictly defined. Thus, it can be said instead that the subgenres of horror fiction use a plethora of ways to frighten the reader: supernatural horror uses monsters and paranormal beings, such as ghosts, while psychological horror can deal with more realistic situations, emotions, and mental illness.

Horror fiction can also be classified to the genre based on the theme, mood, and topic of the stories. Horror stories are often recognizable by their dark atmosphere, pressing tone, and inclusion of frightening elements, such as different terrifying characters, situations, and events. The language of horror fiction is very expressive and rich with adjectives and descriptions to bring the characters and situation alive (Saricks 2009: 117). According to Saricks (2009: 116-117), in horror fiction the tension builds up when the story progresses, and the stories can usually offer more “unsatisfactory” and vague endings to storylines in comparison to other genres: horror stories often leave matters unsolved, and they can end in

twists and cliffhangers (a plot device, in which the character has a big revelation or receives important information as the story concludes). Saricks (2009: 119) also notes how point of view can affect horror fiction: the stories often offer a limited point of view which can intensify the reading experience, as the reader can identify and sympathize with the protagonists. As limited point of view is popular, unreliable narrators are often featured, especially when it comes to psychological horror fiction.

### 2.2.3 History of horror fiction

According to Colavito (2008: 37), horror fiction originates from the Romantic period, where it was developed as a counterreaction to the scientific and factual nature of the Enlightenment era. Although horror stories have existed in folktales and other forms of oral heritage for a very long time, the first horror novel was written in the 18th century. *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole is, according to Colavito (2008: 37), "the first representative of what would become the Gothic school of horror fiction", as it started the trend of horror novels and gothic fiction, and went on to inspire many authors – works of Edgar Allan Poe are famous examples of the gothic horror genre.

As the genre grew in popularity, more variety began to emerge. The nineteenth century was dominated by novels which Colavito (2008: 17) calls "biological horror": Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* are reactions to developing sciences, such as psychology and evolution theory. Other historical events and changes of life had effects on the genre as well, such as the First and Second World War and the advances in physics and astronomy, which increased interest in scientific horror; and modern developments like spirituality and development of photography, which increased interest in paranormal and spiritualist horror, as it became possible to capture events on film (Colavito 2008: 17). Other forms of technology have developed simultaneously, and over the years, horror genre has expanded beyond literature: movies, television shows and video games are some of the more popular ways to consume horror today. Regardless, horror literature is alive and well – one of the most famous authors of the 21st century, Stephen King, is primarily a horror author whose countless works, such as *Carrie*, *It*, *Misery*, and *The Shining*, have also been adapted into movies and TV shows.

#### 2.2.4 Internet horror fiction

Since its creation, the internet has served as a platform for content creators to publish their work to wide audiences, and the genre of horror fiction has not been an exception. Internet is filled with horror stories, but over the past decade, more specific subgenres of online horror fiction have emerged. Creepypasta is a type of internet horror fiction which has received its name from the way the stories are passed around, or “copied and pasted”, on forums and different sites. Creepypasta stories have drawn influence from urban legends, serial killers, and other forms of horror fiction, such as movies – especially the genre of “found footage” horror seems to have inspired creepypasta writers (Heikkilä 2019, 7, 29). Creepypastas often include pictures or other types of visual content relating to the story, which are intended to add to the creepiness of the story and make it seem more real. When the genre of creepypasta first emerged in the late 2000s, the stories were very similar to each other and shared common features and conventions, such as describing rituals and rites, but today the genre is more diverse and less defined – the term creepypasta is used almost synonymously with short horror stories appearing on the internet (Creepypasta.com 2020). Probably the most known example of creepypasta is Slender Man (or Slenderman), a character which has gone on to inspire several video games, movies, and other sources of popular culture.

As internet horror stories’ popularity was increasing, the Reddit community, or subreddit, named Nosleep was created in 2010 as a place to post original horror stories. For the sake of clarity, I will here on out refer to this forum as *r/nosleep* (referring to Reddit’s subchannels is commonly done by adding the channel’s name after the abbreviation *r/*). Today, *r/nosleep* has over 14 million subscribers (on May 19, 2020). Anyone with a Reddit account is free to post their horror story on *r/nosleep* if they follow the posting guidelines of the subreddit. The rules of the subreddit are introduced in section 2.2.5.

The popularity some of the most famous creepypastas and Nosleep stories have garnered has expanded the genre of internet horror beyond written form: narrating the stories on podcasts or on YouTube has become increasingly popular in the last decade as well. Some of the YouTube channels focused on narrating internet horror have over 1 million subscribers. Even though the authors of the stories are often originally unnamed and unknown, some have gone on to sign book or movie contracts because of their work (Dodgson 2020).

### 2.2.5 The rules of r/nosleep

As stated previously, Nosleep stories are subgenre of horror short stories similar to creepypasta, and their goal in general is to frighten the reader. The known genre requirements or conventions of Nosleep stories are that the stories are posted on r/nosleep and that they follow the subreddit's rules – if the story is not on r/nosleep, it is practically impossible to recognize it specifically as a Nosleep story. There are no specific requirements for the writers, as anyone with a Reddit user account and an internet access can post a story on r/nosleep. On the other hand, the posts (or the stories) have a plethora of requirements, such as that they must be formatted correctly, meaning using paragraphs and proper grammar, and that they must fill a certain word count. These rules are put forward by the moderators and/or founders of the community, and posts are deleted if they do not fulfil the requirements. The posting guide of r/nosleep is extensive, but based on the depth of the rules depicted, as in the amount of additional information added to them, the most essential ones seem to be that the posts must be complete horror stories, that they must be plausible, and that they are to be treated as true events by the community. Thus, they are on the focus in this analysis.

The posting guide states that the stories “must contain a meaningful amount of horror and be framed as a scary personal experience” (Nosleep: Posting guidelines 2020). The type of horror presented in the stories is also governed by the rules, as they state that stories with the primary focus on subjects such as rape, abuse or gore are not accepted. The plausibility rule is extensive, and states as a general rule: “if readers can look outside or turn on a national news channel and immediately know that the events are not actually happening, the story is not appropriate for r/nosleep” (Nosleep: Posting guidelines 2020). For example, this means that the stories cannot include characters such as celebrities, that the narrator cannot be a deity or a deity-like figure, and that the narrator cannot die or be incapacitated at, or in the end, of the story without a plausible explanation of how they are able to write on r/nosleep. The genre has requirements for the readers who want to comment the stories as well: the commenters are not allowed to question the plausibility of the stories by debunking, criticizing, or asking for proof (Nosleep: Comment guidelines 2016).

### 3 DATA AND METHODS

#### 3.1 Aim and questions

The aim of my study is to explore the genre conventions of r/nosleep stories, further focusing on their narrators. My research questions are:

1. What kind of narrators do the stories on r/nosleep have?

The posting guidelines of r/nosleep (2020) state that the narrators of the stories must be “physically and mentally capable of posting and that the events of the story cannot be proven to be false on a large scale”, which means most of the stories are written from a first-person point of view. However, there are other aspects of defining narrators than the point of view the story is written in – I would like to explore if there are similarities between the stories.

2. Do the r/nosleep stories share common characteristics in addition to the typical features of the horror fiction genre? Are they similar or different in comparison to other internet horror stories?

Nosleep stories are described as “original horror stories” on r/nosleep, meaning that they are written specifically for Nosleep by the users who post them (Nosleep: Posting guidelines 2020). Thus, it is known that the stories belong in the horror genre and thus, are written with the purpose to scare or frighten the reader. As stated previously, subgenres of horror tend to focus on the different ways to achieve the reaction in the reader, such as supernatural monsters – however, as discussed in the section 1.2.4 Horror fiction on the internet, in addition to the goal of scaring the reader, creepypasta stories seem to share other common features, such as the format the story is told in. I am interested in finding out what characteristics and conventions the stories on r/nosleep share, and if there are any more defining features to the genre.

#### 3.2 Data

The data of the study consists of short horror stories found on r/nosleep. The users can upvote or downvote the content posted on the subreddit, and the posts can be sorted and viewed by the number of votes. For my study, I wanted to analyze the most upvoted r/nosleep stories of all time. The popularity of the stories shows that they have received the approval of the

community, which in following means that they should be following the dominant features of the genre while simultaneously adhering to the rules defined by the subreddit, thus, making them good examples of the genre.

As this listing is susceptible to changes, the listing of the most upvoted stories that is used for this study is from May 8, 2020. On that day, the five most upvoted stories were

1. My sugar daddy asks me for weird favors (43 600 upvotes)
2. Something walks whistling past my house every night at 3:03. (28 200 upvotes)
3. She Sold Happiness in Glass Jars (26 900 upvotes)
4. A Shattered Life (23 300 upvotes)
5. The previous tenant of my new flat left a survival guide. I'm not sure I want to live here anymore. (20 700 upvotes)

All Reddit posts are automatically archived after approximately six months, which means that the post cannot be voted or commented on anymore.

### **3.3 Methods**

To analyse the narrators of the stories, I will be consulting works of literary theory, further focusing on Genette's theory on narrative discourse. Narrative discourse, according to Genette (1980: 29, ellipsis added), is "a study of the relationships between narrative and story, between narrative and narrating, and (...) between story and narrating". Genette used Tzvetan Todorov's three categories of narrative – tense, aspect, and mood – to redefine the narrative analysis in a systematic way. Genette's theory studies narrative on five different aspects: order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, from which the aspect of voice deals with the narrator. Even though Genette's theory is forty years old, it is still influential and has been often discussed and utilized, for example by Bal (2009).

The central elements of Genette's concept of voice include the time of narrating, levels of narrating, narrative person, functions of the narrator, and the narratee. As the element of the narratee refers to the person listening, reading, or otherwise receiving the narration, it is not analysed in this study. To conduct the analysis in practice, I am reading the horror stories through one at a time and focusing on the different elements of Genette's concept of voice on each readthrough. For example, I am starting with the most upvoted story, "My sugar daddy

asks me for weird favors”, and searching for text that involve the story’s time of narrating, followed by analysing the narrative person, and so on.

The time of narrating refers to the “temporal determinations of the narrating instance” (Genette 1980: 215). In other words, it is the narrator’s temporal position to the story they are telling. Genette presents four types of time of narration: subsequent, simultaneous, interpolated, and prior narration. Subsequent narration is the most common, as it is the typical past-tense narration. Simultaneous narration, as its name suggests, is done in present tense, whereas prior narration is predicative and done in the future tense. Interpolated narration, according to Genette (1980: 217), is done in between moments of action, such as in novels which rely on elements like letter correspondence or diary entries as narrative mediums and plot devices. The interpolated narration can be a mixture of subsequent and simultaneous narration, where the narrator describes what they have done and what they are feeling about it at the moment of writing.

The narrative person is the point of view the story is told from. As discussed in section 2.1.2, Genette uses the terms heterodiegetic, autodiegetic and homodiegetic to describe the narrative person and their position in the story. Narrative levels describe the possible embedded narratives within the narrative (Genette 1980: 228). Some narratives may include instances where the narrator tells another story within the story, such as reminisce past events. The first-level narration of a story is called the extradiegetic level, but if that story contains another story level, such as anecdotes a character in that story tells or the narrator’s memories of past events, they happen on intradiegetic level. Further levels of narration done in the intradiegetic level are called metadiegetic.

The functions of the narrator refer to the different roles the narrator can have in their process of narration (Genette 1980: 255). The first out of these five functions is the narrative function, which is the process of storytelling, and is present practically in every narration. The second function is the directing function, in which the narrator refers to the narrative text to mark its articulations and connections. The third is called the communication function, where the narrator addresses the narratee in some way, and the fourth is the testimonial function, where the narrator, for example, comments on the degree of precision of their memories, provides a source for their information, or expresses their emotional involvement in or towards the story.

The fifth and final function is the ideological function, in which the narrator comments on their narrative in an instructive or didactic manner. (Genette 1980: 255–256)

As genres can be defined based on different aspects of the text (Montgomery 2007: 42), I am going to see if the stories on r/nosleep share any similarities when it comes to their narrators by comparing the results I gather from the narrator analyses. I will be briefly defining the genre of r/nosleep horror stories based on the findings of the narrator analysis, the posting guidelines of r/nosleep, and any additional similarities I observe from the stories – as stated by Hart (1986, quoted by Bhatia 1993: 40), genre analysis is about pattern seeking. To conduct the genre analysis, I will be using Bhatia’s (1993) model of analysing unfamiliar genres. However, as the genre of r/nosleep short horror stories is not completely unfamiliar, as it can already be defined as a subgenre of horror fiction similar to creepypasta, the model of Bhatia will be applied only partially.

## 4 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### 4.1 My sugar daddy asks me for weird favors

“My sugar daddy asks me for weird favors” (henceforth “My sugar daddy”) by user EaPAtpb was posted on October 2019. The story is narrated by “a broke university student” who is looking for a *sugar daddy* – “a boyfriend who comes with financial benefits”, as defined by Urban Dictionary (2016) – in an online dating app. After finding one, the narrator must do bizarre favors for the man, whose name is Jack, in exchange for money. The narrator ends up spending the night alone at Jack’s house to receive a large sum of money and has to follow a list of complex rules, such as “if the door to the closet at the end of the hall is open, sleep in the library. If closed, sleep in any of the bedrooms”. After a night filled with creepy occurrences, Jack returns home and pays the narrator, who later realizes she failed to follow one of the given instructions. It is then revealed that Jack was out of town the whole time, and the man who arrived and paid the narrator was not the real Jack. The story concludes with the narrator receiving a text message from the impostor with a picture of him standing outside the narrator’s house, followed by the text “watch out”.

The time of narrating in “My sugar daddy” is done in the form of subsequent narrating or, in other words, in past tense, which is the most common form of narrating. This narrating style tells that the narrator is recounting past events, but as the story concludes with the impostor standing outside the narrator’s house, it seems the narrator immediately wrote down what happened, as they do not account for the time between the ending of the story, where the narrator’s life is in threat, and the time the narrator supposedly wrote the story on r/nosleep. Genette (1980: 222-223) discusses this effect and mentions how the fictive act of narrating – meaning the time the narrator takes to tell their story – is often considered to have no duration and appears to be instantaneous. In this light, the narrative level of “My sugar daddy” is extradiegetic, as the narrator seems to be still in the situation she is writing about and is not referring to it as a past event. The narrator is homodiegetic, meaning that they are a character in the story, and furthermore, autodiegetic, as they are the first-person main character of the story they are telling (Genette 1980: 245). When it comes to narrative functions, the narrator seems to focus on recounting the events, thus, on the narrative function.

#### **4.2 Something walks whistling past my house every night at 3:03.**

“Something walks whistling past my house every night at 3:03.” (henceforth “Something walks whistling”) was posted in November 2019 by user Grand\_Theft\_Motto. The story is narrated by a 13-year-old child, who tells about the neighbourhood their family lives in: a good luck follows all the residents as long as they do not look at an unknown entity who walks the streets at night, whistling. The narrator recounts a time when their neighbours’ son, Holden, spent the night at the narrator’s house. Holden does not want to listen to the warnings about the whistler and opens the blinds at night to look at it. For the rest of the night, the family and Holden are tormented by constant knocking, but refuse to open the door. Afterwards, Holden’s family quickly moves away – the narrator describes how “not everyone who looks at the whistler dies, but even those that live have the light go out of them and the rest of their lives are full of misfortune” and speculates that Holden’s parents must have looked at the entity as well. The narrator and their family, however, are still living in the neighbourhood.

Where “My sugar daddy” seems to narrate the events immediately after they have happened, the narrator of “Something walks whistling” is clearly telling of past events. They switch between subsequent and simultaneous narrating, happening in present tense, depending on the

time they are referring to, such as “*We moved* into our house here to be closer to the hospital (emphasis added)” and “*I remember* what the original Welcoming Committee said to my parents when we moved in (emphasis added)”. In general, the present tense is also used to describe a habitual, regular actions, which is at least partly why it is present in “Something walks whistling”. The switching between times of narrating and the narrator’s way of reporting their thoughts and feelings at the end makes the story’s narration seem interpolated.

It seems that the incident with Holden, told in past tense, is a narrative within a narrative using the present tense. Thus, as “Something walks whistling” contains a story within a story, the narrative level is intradiegetic – the narrator is a homodiegetic character, present in the story, but they are recalling past events from outside of its setting. It is noteworthy that even though the narrator seems to be the main character and is present throughout the story, making the narration mostly autodiegetic, the neighbour’s child, Holden, seems to be in the centre of the story when the narrator tells about the night Holden spent at their house. The narrator does experience the scary repercussions of Holden looking at the whistler, but is more of an observer in a situation, and their own life goes on unaffected.

The narrator delivers their story with an almost conversational manner, taking pauses (“The whistler has the same tune every night. It’s...cheerful.”) and addressing the reader (“Remember how I said there are two odd things about where I live?”), thus utilizing the function of communication. The narrator also reflects on their choices in an emotional manner (“I wonder if I’d been slower, if she’d looked out the window that night...would I have looked too?” “I’m glad I don’t have to find out.”) which is a feature of the testimonial function of narrative. According to Genette (1980: 256), testimonial function refers to the “narrator’s orientation towards himself”, such as their own emotions and thoughts about the narrative.

### **4.3 She Sold Happiness in Glass Jars**

“She Sold Happiness in Glass Jars” by user named flard, posted in March 2019, is told by a man named Tim Brooks, who has grown weary of his life. Nothing is wrong per se, but Brooks states “I wouldn’t have referred to myself as a happy person”. He has a steady but tedious 9-to-5 job, a marriage that has become somewhat stale, and, in general, uneventful and monotonous life. This changes when Brooks sees a poster on the street claiming to sell

happiness and ends up buying a jar of it from an unknown woman. Brooks immediately starts to forget details about his life, and his life seems to forget him as well: suddenly someone else lives in his home, no one recognizes him, and he does not remember his wife or daughter's names. After spiralling into panic and despair, a text message from the mysterious woman who sold him the jar tells Brooks to break it. He complies and sees "the warm, yellow light from inside the jar spread rapidly across the ground and ascend into the sky". Immediately, Brooks finds himself back in his own bed with his wife, his life returned to normal – furthermore, his appreciation towards his life has returned.

"She Sold Happiness in Glass Jars" is almost consistently told in the form of subsequent narration. There is, however, a few sentences with simultaneous narration which seem to be related to the narrator's thoughts, such as "Don't get me wrong, I *loved* Kelsey. I *mean*, I still *do*. We just *don't have* that spark anymore (emphasis added)". The story, like "My sugar daddy", appears to have been written immediately after the events have concluded ("Today was going to be a good day."), making the narration extradiegetic. The story is also homodiegetic and autodiegetic, as it is narrated by Tim Brooks, who is the main character. The functions of narrator in the story include, in addition to the narrative function, the function of communication, as Brooks addresses the reader in a conversational manner ("Don't get me wrong"). Brooks also seems to defend his actions and thoughts ("I'm not trying to throw a pity party for myself. I'm just saying...") to the narratee, which seems like a manifestation of the testimonial function.

#### 4.4 A Shattered Life

"A Shattered Life" by user M59Gar from January 2018 tells the story of a man, who is supposedly attacked by an unknown entity in the forest. Later, he loses his grasp on time and blames it on the entity consuming pieces of his life. The narrator describes how he begins to "jump between times" in his life – suddenly, months or years have passed without him noticing, and he misses important moments, such as the birth of his son. When the narrator finds himself in the body of his elderly self, meeting his grandchild who he has never seen, he decides to share his situation with the grandson, who in return promises to help him. The narrator continues to jump in time until he meets his now adult grandson, who has become a scientist and helps him remove the entity – an extra-terrestrial parasite – from his body. This repairs the man's shattered life, and he is returned in time to the beginning of the story, when

he was young and about to meet his future wife. The story concludes with an author's note, which seems to be written by the man's grandson. He explains that he helped his grandfather write down his life's story and reveals that the grandfather suffers from Alzheimer's disease, strongly suggesting that the story was a description of the progression of the illness, making the narrator unreliable.

The story features a consistent subsequent narration excluding the author's note in the end, which is written in the form of simultaneous narration. This adds contrast between the story, written in the form of a memoir, and the postscript showing that time has passed, and perhaps to show the reader that the narrator of the afterword has changed. As the story seems to be narrated by the main character but written by his grandson, it could be said that the narrative of "A Shattered Life" has two levels: the first, extradiegetic level is the grandson writing the author's note and typing the story dictated by the grandfather, and the second, intradiegetic level is the grandfather's actual narrative. In addition, the main character looks back at his actions and narrates the story as a memoir, such as "But of course I wouldn't be writing this if it hadn't gotten worse", foreshadowing upcoming events, which is another sign of the story's intradiegetic level. As many of the other stories, the narrator of "A Shattered Life" also has the communicative function: the story starts with the expression "I don't know when you're going to read this, but I can tell you when it started", thus the reader is addressed and acknowledged. The narrative person is homodiegetic, and autodiegetic at least on the intradiegetic level, where the grandfather tells his own story.

#### **4.5 The previous tenant of my new flat left a survival guide. I'm not sure I want to live here anymore.**

"The previous tenant of my new flat left a survival guide. I'm not sure I want to live here anymore." (henceforth "The previous tenant") by user newtotownJAM was posted on Nosleep in July 2019. The story is the first part of a series, which as of October 2020, consists of 18 chapters. The narrator of the story is a young woman who has moved into a new apartment with her boyfriend. The narrator finds a lengthy letter left by the previous tenant, which consists of strange and ominous suggestions, rules, and warnings – a survival guide, as put in the title – related to the apartment. The story concludes with the narrator being worried after his boyfriend has not returned home from work, and realizing that the boyfriend must have

broken one of the letter's rules, which states that the communal lift is not to be used between 1:11 and 3:33 am.

“The previous tenant” maintains the fashion of subsequent narration style, which is used quite consistently throughout the story. However, the narrator seems to tell the story after it has just happened, ending it with “It’s getting late and he still isn’t home -”, which is an example of simultaneous narration, done in present tense. As the narrator has described the events of her day and in the end of the narration describes her current feelings about it, the time of narration could be classified as interpolated. When it comes to the level of narration, the story is extradiegetic as the events have just happened. However, the letter left by the previous tenant, an elderly woman named Prudence Hemmings, could be argued to function on an intradiegetic level of narration. Even though the letter does not feature a clear story on its own, it contains knowledge and anecdotes outside the main character’s “consciousness” and is clearly written from another character’s point of view.

As the narrator is the story’s main character, the narrative person is homodiegetic and autodiegetic, although the beginning of the story is partially narrated in “we/us” form instead of first-person point of view, referring to the girlfriend and boyfriend as a couple. The narrator of “The previous tenant” does use the communicative function, although not as clearly as some of the other stories’ narrators. The narrator does not address the reader directly, such as in *A Shattered Life*, but does have comments in the story that could be interpreted as either thoughts or communication, such as wondering “what if it’s all true?”. However, the communicative function becomes more apparent as the story progresses. On r/nosleep, the stories are often part of larger series, and the narrators are seemingly posting their situations online to seek advice from the community of readers. Thus, on the second part of the series, “The previous tenant of my new flat left a survival guide. I think I’m going to need more than a guide.” (2019), the narrator acknowledges the comments left by the readers on the first part and states “I thought I’d better update you guys” – also acknowledging that time has passed.

## 4.6 Nosleep as a genre

Table 1. Narrators of Nosleep stories.

	My sugar daddy	Something walks whistling	She Sold Happiness in Glass Jars	A Shattered Life	The previous tenant
time of narration	subsequent	interpolated	subsequent	subsequent simultaneous	interpolated
narrative levels	extradiegetic	intradiegetic	extradiegetic	intradiegetic	extradiegetic
narrative person	homodiegetic autodiegetic	homodiegetic (autodiegetic)	homodiegetic autodiegetic	homodiegetic (autodiegetic)	homodiegetic autodiegetic
narrative functions	narrative	communication testimonial	communication testimonial	communication	communication

As the rules state that the stories are supposed to be presented as personal experiences, it comes as no surprise that all the stories in the data are narrated from a first-person point of view, making them homodiegetic and mostly autodiegetic. A limited point of view is usual for horror and thriller fiction, as it helps to intensify the reading experience (Saricks 2006: 119). The form of subsequent narration style, which was used in all of the stories at least generally, is also explainable by rules: as the stories must be plausible, personal experiences, it is only natural that the narrator is talking about past events. Stories also featured interpolated narration, which is a combination of subsequent and simultaneous narration, and includes narrator's commentary on the past events. Simultaneous narration was used to differentiate between past and current events.

Two stories feature intradiegetic narration, i.e. they contain a story within a story, but "Something walks whistling" is the only one with the intradiegetic level as an essential part of the narrative where most of the frightening events occur. As is typical to the horror fiction genre, the stories include twists, such as in "A Shattered Life", and cliffhanger endings, such as in "My sugar daddy" and "The previous tenant", in which the narrator faces a scary situation, such as someone threatening them, which makes it seem like they are posting on r/nosleep looking for help or advice. A cliffhanger can be, as Saricks (2009: 116-117) states, designed to leave the ending of the horror story purposefully vague and unsatisfactory, but it also has a more practical purpose. In "The previous tenant" the cliffhanger ending indicates that the story is not finished and encourages the reader to look forward to the next chapter.

The genre description of creepypasta mentioned the use of lists and rules as a common story element. This seems to be carried on in the nosleep genre as well: both “My sugar daddy” and “The previous tenant” feature specific lists filled with rules and guides, while “Something walks whistling” is also centred around a rule to follow. One other prominent textual element seems to be the use of text messages instead of conventional spoken dialogue, which is a very contemporary variation. In addition, one interesting notion is the formatting of the stories’ titles: “A Shattered Life” and “She Sold Happiness in Glass Jars” represent the more typical story titles as they are relatively short and more obscure, whereas the other three titles are very lengthy and descriptive. This seems to relate to the platform, as titles such as “Something walks whistling past my house every night at 3:03.” come across like titles of internet forum posts seeking advice more than titles of short stories or novels.

The platform of the stories – an internet community – helps to explain the strong presence of the function of communication in the data. As the premise of r/nosleep is that the narrators are posting their own stories on the platform, it in itself could be classified as an act of communication. The writers expect their stories to be commented on, and they know the commenters will treat the stories as true and will most likely provide advice or suggestions to the narrator. Many of the other aspects of narration which were used in the data helped to increase the realism of the stories. The stories which featured interpolated narration or multiple levels of narration did take in notion the “temporal dimension” mentioned by Genette (1980: 222) – if someone writes a story, it takes time, and often this time that has passed between the narration and the time that the narrator has spent telling it is not accounted for. For example, “My sugar daddy” does not account for the time between the end of the story and the time the narrator posted the story on r/nosleep. On the other hand, the stories featuring an intradiegetic level and/or interpolated narration do explain the passing of time, which makes them more realistic: for example, the narrator of “A Shattered Life” explains they are recalling events from their past, like writing a memoir, and the narrator “The previous tenant” describes what has happened to her previously on the same day.

Based on the data, the type of horror most popular in the r/nosleep stories seems to be the fear of the unknown and psychological horror. The rules of r/nosleep (2020) state that “stories that include fantastical elements, such as mythical creatures” are allowed, and even the narrator can be a monster. “My sugar daddy”, “Something walks whistling”, “A Shattered Life” and “The previous tenant” all feature some sort of menacing entity or entities, but do not include

typical, tangible monsters, such as vampires or werewolves, which is the line Saricks (2009: 112) draws between horror and psychological thriller. Thus, the fear is created with the element of the unknown by choice, which in some stories is also enhanced by the introduction of rules to follow – the reader will wonder what will happen if the narrator does not comply to the rules they are given. Some of the introduced entities are more concrete, such as the whistler in “Someone walks whistling”, while some are more obscure, such as in “The previous tenant”, where the apartment building itself seems to be the source of the scary incidents which then manifest in multiple different ways. On the other hand, “She Sold Happiness in Glass Jars” and “A Shattered Life” are more focused on the psychological horror, such as losing control of one’s own life.

According to Saricks (2009: 119), psychological thrillers and horror stories often feature unreliable narrators. The subject matters of the genre, such as weird, unexplainable occurrences and the narrators’ incapability of continuing their everyday life might make the readers suspect that the narrator might not be telling the truth, or that the incidents could be a manifestation of their decreasing mental health. The data did feature one unreliable narrator, as the narrator of “A Shattered Life” was revealed, or at least suggested, to be suffering from Alzheimer’s disease instead of fighting with an extra-terrestrial, time-stealing entity. The trope of unreliable narrator is perhaps not often used in Nosleep genre because the rules demand that everything must be treated as true events – thus, there is no room for questioning the narrator’s reliability, and it needs to be specifically brought up by the writer or the narrator instead.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The focus of the current study was to research what kind of narrators the stories of r/nosleep have and if the stories share common characteristics in addition to the genre features of horror fiction. The stories on r/nosleep are regulated by a comprehensive set of rules, and they state that the Nosleep stories should be presented as personal experiences, and that the narrators should be physically and mentally able to post the stories online. Thus, the role of the narrator is quite significant in Nosleep horror – the first-person narrative is almost a requirement of the genre. Based on the data, the narrators do seem to always have a central role in the stories, as

the narrators are always homodiegetic, and almost in all cases, autodiegetic as well. Thus, it can be concluded that the stories do follow the rules of r/nosleep on this part and are therefore fitting examples of the genre. The Nosleep narrators often utilize the communicative function, which means that they address their audience or “talk” to them in some way in the narrative.

The Nosleep stories seemingly aim to frighten or scare the reader with the means of psychological horror, even though the rules of r/nosleep do not limit the type of horror suitable for the platform to only psychological horror. In practice, the fear-inducing elements of the stories were subjects such as losing control of one’s life and the fear of the unknown, which also included the utilization of unknown entities. In creepypasta stories, the type of horror does more often include gore, murders, and supernatural monsters, such as Slenderman. In addition, the narrative person is not defined or restricted in any way in creepypasta, which means there are more possibilities for the narrative point of views than in Nosleep stories.

The Nosleep stories are very contemporary in their manner of often including elements such as the use of text messages and presenting themselves as typical internet forum posts, which is apparent from communicating with the readers and titling the stories to resemble internet forum posts. These changes increase the authenticity of the stories and make them seem more realistic, which was also achieved by some of the choices regarding the time of narration and narrative levels. Even though the interpolated narration was used only in two out five stories, it seems to be especially suitable for the Nosleep genre: it offers the readers a chance to advise the narrator in their situation, as the events have happened in the recent past, and simultaneously makes the story seem more plausible as it accounts for the time between the end of the story and the time the story was posted online. It would be interesting to see if interpolated narration and multiple narrative levels would be more consistently used in a larger data sample of Nosleep stories.

A look of Nosleep stories has offered a glimpse into what kind of horror fiction is popular today, at least on the internet. The present study was qualitative study with the data consisting of the five most popular r/nosleep stories based on the number of upvotes on the forum, but the subgenre could be studied more extensively as well. Genette’s study on narrative discourse analysis is expansive and other elements than those in the aspect of voice could be researched – perhaps focusing on the genre of internet horror fiction in general.

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