In the last few decades, a focus on characters and characterization in narrative biblical texts has grown to a significant degree. For the Gospel of John, there have recently been added two major collections of essays about characterization in the Fourth Gospel. All of this is part of a significant turn toward narrative approaches to the gospels in general and the Fourth Gospel in particular. It is within this larger scholarly interest that Michael R. Whitenton’s book enters, but in many ways it marks a notable shift and advancement in the discussion, setting out what might become a helpful way of reading all characters in narrative texts.

While certainly focusing on characterization (specifically the characterization of Nicodemus), the book approaches the issue from two novel perspectives: (1) it approaches reading narratives through the lens of modern cognition studies, and (2) it approaches characterization by using ancient rhetorical approaches to “prototypical characters.” After a helpful framing introduction, Whitenton’s second chapter dives into both of these critical issues to set the theoretical frame for his later analysis.

Whitenton begins with the larger issue of reading and cognition. He suggests that there is little difference in cognition between ancient and modern people, hence the way we understand texts will be quite similar. Moreover, he asserts that, “despite our academic tendency to treat characters as plot functionaries, real readers tend to engage them (even if unconsciously) as real people” (16).
In other words, we engage narrative texts as real worlds, in which we are open to characters changing, and we are open to being changed by them; they are, indeed, “rhetorical” in this manner. From this basic stance toward narrative texts, Whitenton then expands this by means of cognitive research. First he notes that, when we read, we make inferences based on preexisting knowledge: we experience the text in part by sensing analogies to our own experiences. Second, we enter stories to an extent as participants (a point made some years ago by Rhoads and Michie). Third, these factors mean that narratives lower a reader’s guard to their persuasive nature. Readers approach characters in texts as “real people,” and as a result we infer characteristics based on similar people we may know in our own life.

The cognitive basis for this approach to characterization is drawn from schema (symbolic) theory and embodied cognition, both of which deal with how we make sense of others in real life; it is only secondarily applied to the act of reading. The schema theory suggests that people make sense of other people on the basis of social schemata or cognitive stereotypes. That is, we carry around certain categories of characters that are our first approach to understanding others. In this approach, our assessment of others goes through a process of (1) initial categorization; then if subsequent contact supports this categorization it results in (2) confirmatory categorization. But if subsequent contact does not fit the original schema, there is a (3) recategorization. If the contact does not fit into any known category, we go through a process of (4) piecemeal integration to make sense of the other. Embodied cognition suggests that we perceive characters by a process of comparison/connection to our own experiences. Whitenton sees this as complementary to schema theory, and he argues that, “from an embodied cognitive perspective, when it comes to making sense and forming inferences about a person, their aims, motives, and so on, the line between ‘real’ and ‘fiction’ is much more porous than scholars tend to acknowledge” (38).

Using these cognitive understandings, Whitenton then applies these to the act of reading (and later specifically to the text of John). His approach, which he calls an “audience-oriented” approach to characters, asks the question: “Based on what we know of the human mind, how would ancient Mediterranean audience members understand characters, such as Nicodemus, in John’s Gospel?” (48). To answer this question, Whitenton carefully walks us through elements of reading in antiquity. First he emphasizes the oral-aural nature of ancient reading. In particular, this means that reading was linear and experiential, requiring an instant decision about meaning (since the oral story is continuing and reread and review is not possible). This then leads to the use of schema in assessing characters in a narrative and proceeds in a pattern as outlined above of initial categorization followed by confirmation or recategorization as the story proceeds.

The importance of the use of schema in antiquity is then supported in chapter 3 by engaging ancient literature that either defines or gives examples of such a schematic approach to characterization. Central to this is Theophrastus’s essay On Characters, which lists twenty-three different character types many of which highlight vices listed by Aristotle. While this is only one
Having set up a reading procedure based on cognitive studies and on ancient reading practices and ancient characterization, Whitenton then turns to a careful reading of the Gospel of John where Nicodemus occurs. The initial dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 regarding being “born again/from above” suggests an initial character-schema categorization of “obtuse/fool.” Nicodemus’s obvious failure to understand what being born ἄνωθεν means certainly allows this as a possible categorization. Whitenton frames the reader/hearer’s response as follows: (1) Nicodemus first appears as a learned Pharisee; (2) Jesus’s words are not hard to understand, especially for readers/hearers who have heard the prologue; (3) Nicodemus cannot understand Jesus. Thus, (4) he likely is a fool. But another likely character type that an ancient reader might have selected is the dissembler/liar, and this might have been the choice following a categorization as fool. In this category, Nicodemus’s misunderstanding would be understood as deliberate deceit. Indeed, Whitenton finds that the rhetoric of Jesus’s subsequent exchange and monologue seem to point to some suspicion about Nicodemus’s failure to understand.

In the subsequent chapters Whitenton follows the subsequent occurrences of Nicodemus in John’s Gospel: John 7 and 19 Whitenton argues that the reader/hearer of John 7 will have again perceived Nicodemus as a dissembler, but this time he dissembles on behalf of Jesus; that is, he still has the character type of dissembler, even while the purpose regarding Jesus seems to have shifted. In John 19, though, Nicodemus seems to shift character to a true Jesus-disciple, as Whitenton argues, “In Johannine parlance, Nicodemus seems not to have been ‘born of the spirit’ (3.6)” (116).

In chapter 6 Whitenton suggests that this characterization of Nicodemus would have served a rhetorical function. First, some readers/listeners might have identified with Nicodemus in John 3, particularly if they had strong affinities for Judaism. In such a case the transformation of his character might well have served to influence these readers toward Jesus. But Whitenton also explores the use of humor, especially humor as a persuasive device. He thus sees the humor of John 3 “cleverly sets audience members up for a fruitful ‘kerygmatic moment.’”

This was a particularly helpful and persuasive monograph by a rising New Testament scholar. Not only does Whitenton provide a plausible reading of Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel, but he provides a strong theory about how readers/listeners would approach characters in their reading process. This methodology, I believe, will be helpful in other character studies in the gospels.
Anyone interested in narrative studies, especially in the role characters play in gospel narratives, will find this a particularly important work.