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This pathbreaking book looks at everyday storytelling as a twofold phenomenon--a response to our desire for coherence, but also to our need to probe and acknowledge the enigmatic aspects of experience. Letting us listen in on dinner-table conversation, prayer, and gossip, Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps develop a way of understanding the seemingly contradictory nature of everyday narrative--as a genre that is not necessarily homogeneous and as an activity that is not always consistent but consistently serves our need to create selves and communities.

Focusing on the ways in which narrative is co-constructed, and on the variety of moral stances embodied in conversation, the authors draw out the instructive inconsistencies of these collaborative narratives, whose contents and ordering are subject to dispute, flux, and discovery. In an eloquent last chapter, written as Capps was waging her final battle with cancer, they turn to "unfinished narratives," those stories that will never have a comprehensible end. With a hybrid perspective--part humanities, part social science--their book captures these complexities and fathoms the intricate and potent narratives that live within and among us.