

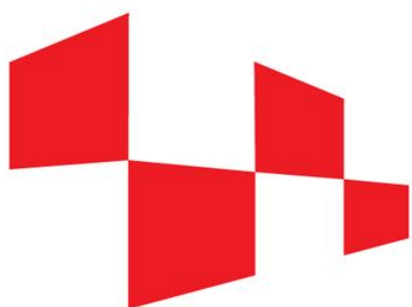
Prooceedings
of tho
Evoryday
Roading of
Literoture
Symposium

PERLS



Proceedings of the Everyday Reading of Literature Symposium (PERLS)

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Introductory note

<https://doi.org/10.17234/9789533792910.01>

This note and the volume of PERLS comes from the joint work of the individual paper authors and the three-person team who organized the titular symposium and then took up the duty to review and edit the volume. The reviewing and editing were performed without involving other peers, and the volume is being published in the in-house press of the institution where all three of us are employed at the moment. The main reason for such a small operation is that both the symposium and the proceedings are part of what is called an Installation Research Project framework, instituted by the Croatian Science Foundation, which founded the overarching research project *Remembering Literature in Everyday Life* (ReLEL or PoKUS in Croatian). One of the main goals of such projects, irrelevant of their topics, is to demonstrate that younger researchers such as doctorate candidates (Luka Ostojić), postdoctoral researchers (Velna Rončević), and those at the outset of tenure tracks (Lovro Škopljanać) are able to master certain academic skills, among which are the organization of a symposium and the publication of its proceedings. The volume before you is therefore the outcome of our endeavor to both provide a relevant and current academic overview on the topic of everyday reading of literature, and to demonstrate our ability to do so on our own as a team.

The *Everyday Reading of Literature* symposium was first announced in September 2024 with the introduction stating that the “most common activity pertaining to literature—being read by real people in everyday settings—has been the least researched when considering its sheer volume, spread and diversity of practices.” Following on this idea of enormous ground that such a symposium may cover, the Call

for Papers invited “presentations dealing with any aspect of reading literature performed by or involving readers in their everyday setting.” (See the EROL section on the PoKUS webpage, <https://pokus.ffzg.unizg.hr/en/>)

We had received and carefully reviewed quite a large number of abstracts, among which 32 were selected for the two days of the symposium, held at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, Croatia, over the first two days of September 2025. The details of the symposium may be found in its accompanying Booklet which is also available on the PoKUS webpage, and it includes the abstracts of all the presentations. The titles and at least one presenter are included in the program summary below, including our two distinguished keynote speakers, Rita Felski and Astrid Erll, who spoke to us on the topic of “Expert Readers / Amateur Readers: Applying the Principle of Symmetry” (Felski) and “Memory Studies in Search of the Reader” (Erll).

Not all of the presenters were able or willing to submit their work for the proceedings volume, but the 19 papers of those who have done so are divided into three roughly equal parts corresponding to the broad aspects of everyday reading which they chose to discuss. Therefore, PERLS deals with 1) historical and authorial (5 papers), 2) affective and emotional (7 papers), and 3) social and technological (7 papers) aspects of everyday reading of literature. Due to the virtual omnipresence of everyday literary reading, some of the papers exhibit a greater degree of overlap between two of the parts, but this categorization is still a decent indicator for anyone wanting to make sense of the multiple discussions which took place at the symposium. Those discussions have been distilled into the individual papers after effectively having been reviewed three times in three different phases—first as abstracts, then as oral presentations, and finally in the written form—but if any mistakes have found their way into publication, they should be ascribed solely to the PoKUS team.

Without burdening you with the trope of false modesty, it is safe to say that this publication is indeed the result of an inexperienced team, who nonetheless did their best to produce an academically sound and satisfying symposium and its accompanying volume of papers for anyone who is seriously interested in the topic of everyday reading of literature. The work presented here should thus be a good indication of the careful thought that the authors have put into researching unknown aspects of the history, emotionality, and technology of everyday reading. Along with the dedicated authors, we have hopefully been able to contribute somewhat to a topic that is as under-researched as it is intellectually demanding.

The PoKUS team:

Lovro Škopljanač

Luka Ostojić

Velna Rončević

Symposium program

September 1, 2025

Time	Room	Presenter	Presentation / Activity
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8-9	D4	PoKUS team:	Registration
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8:45-9	D3	PoKUS team:	Symposium opening
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9-10	D4	Elsje Fourie:	<i>Global Novels, Global Readers? Imagining transnational communities along the circuits of global literary consumption</i>
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9-10	D4	Sara Tanderup Linkis:	<i>Everyday Listening: How Audiobooks Transform Uses and Experiences of Literature</i>
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9-10	D3	DeNel Rehberg Sedo:	<i>Memoir Reading, Remembering, Reflecting on Social Media</i>
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9-10	D3	Martina Domines:	<i>Reading the trauma of eating disorders: Marya Hornbacher's Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia (2006) and Elena and Claire Dunkle's Elena Vanishing (2015)</i>
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10-11	D4	Alison Brown:	<i>Bound together: Understanding the wellbeing potential of participation in shared reading</i>
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10-11	D4	Patrick Errington:	<i>No Such Thing as Neutral: How Anticipated Reading Tasks Shape the 'Everyday' Reading of Poetry</i>
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10-11 D3 Antonia Vogler: *Compassionate Connections: The Role of Perspective-Taking and Pronouns in Shared Reading Groups*

10-11 D3 Julija Ovsec: *What do we feel when we read: Interpretation of Results of the Readers Survey*

11-11:30 A-102 Break: Refreshments

11:30-12:30 D4 Moniek Kuijpers: *Online Shared Reading Practices of Young Adults: A Q-Methodology Interview Study*

11:30-12:30 D4 Anna Murashova: *Online platforms and everyday reading: the Russian case*

11:30-12:30 D3 Corinne Sandwith: *Performative Citation and Everyday Reading: Towards a History of Black Reading Cultures in Colonial South Africa*

11:30-12:30 D3 Seyma Gumus: *Reading as an Everyday Practice in Nigar Hanım's Diaries and the Question of Female Readership in the late 19th Century Ottoman Literature*

12:30-14 Lunch break: Lunch

14-15 D4 Guido Bartolini: *Everyday Reading of Complicity in Fiction about World War II Occupation in Flanders*

14-15 D4 Antonia Došen: *Reading Habits of Jewish Families in Zagreb Between the Two World Wars*

14-15 D3 Ho Ting Chan: *The Quest of Life: The commentary of Miao Fu Xuan Píng Shi-tou Ji 妙復軒評石頭記 in Qing dynasty*

14-15 D3 Álvaro Ceballos Viro: *Reader's Finest Selection: Private Poetry Anthologies as Sources for Reception History*

15-16 D3 Rita Felski (Keynote talk): *Expert Readers / Amateur Readers: Applying The Principle Of Symmetry*

September 1, 2025

Time Room Presenters Presentation / Activity

8-9 D4 PoKUS team: Registration

8:30-9 D3 PoKUS team: PoKUS presentation

9-10 D4 Lukas Kosch: *The Transformation of Everyday Reading: Consequences of Modality and Materiality for Literary Reading Practices*

9-10 D4 Petra Bago: *Comparing Human and AI Literary Summaries: Insights from Lapitch*

9-10 D3 Kanupriya Dhingra: *Library Lives: Everyday Reading and Cultural Change in Delhi*

9-10 D3 Joanna Maj: *Reading as a Tourist Performance*

10-11 D4 Janet Handley: *Engaging with political violence in fiction: readers, readings, and responses*

10-11 D4 Victoria Pöhls: *"I don't know why that most horrible part comes up to me now" - Readers (Dis)Engagement with Texts representing Child Sexual Abuse*

10-11 D3 Ana Vogrinčič Čepič: *The materiality of reading and its affective implications in people's everyday lives*

10-11 D3 María Angélica Thumala Olave: *Remediation and attachment in the reading of eBooks. Illustrations from the United Kingdom*

11-11:30 A-102 Break: Refreshments

11:30-12:30 D4 Ave Palm: *"good book it made me want to die": The Affected and Affective Readings of a Controversial Early-20th-Century Queer Tragedy*

11:30-12:30 D4 Colette Gordon: *Enter Reading: Social Reading and the Early Modern Playtext*

11:30-12:30 D3 Elena Prat: *Identifying reading emotions: qualitative-quantitative study of a corpus of testimonies from French contemporary readers*

11:30-12:30 D3 Malcolm Noble: *Using affective bibliographical methods to recover everyday queer reading of Heartstopper*

12:30-14 Lunch break: Lunch

14-15 D4 Jane Qian Liu: *Reading The Sorrows of Young Werther in Early Twentieth-century China*

- 14-15 D4 Ze Yu: *Global Narratives, Local Interpretations: A Comparative Study of Reader Response on Qidian and WebNovel*
- 14-15 D3 Carrie Timlin: *Virginia Woolf and the New Common Reader*
- 14-15 D3 Robin-M. Aust: *Bragging about books you have(n't) read – Thomas Bernhard's library and the performance of erudition*
- 15-16 D4 Astrid Erll (keynote talk): *Memory Studies in Search of the Reader*

Part I Historical and authorial aspects

Reconstructing Readers' Tastes through Topic Modeling of Private Poetry Anthologies

Álvaro Ceballos Viro

Université de Liège

<https://doi.org/10.17234/9789533792910.02>

Abstract: Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many lay readers commonly transcribed poems that were meaningful to them by hand into notebooks. I call these cultural artifacts 'private poetry anthologies'. The heterogeneity of the anthologized texts in these notebooks makes it difficult to understand what uses or aesthetic preferences they responded to. I argue that topic modeling can be a useful digital tool for identifying thematic patterns specific to these materials. This article presents the results of analyzing eight such notebooks in Spanish language, using a control corpus of 54 poetic works from the same period for comparison. The results reveal that the private anthologies tend to emphasize sentimental themes, and that overall they are not outliers but rather tend to be close to the thematic mean of the poetry of their time.

Keywords: Spanish poetry, lay readers, topic modeling

1. Introduction

The challenges of studying the empirical reception of literature increase as we look further back in time. Going back just a few generations, there is no way to find out what readers in the past did with literary texts. We cannot conduct surveys or biometric tests on

readers from the Belle Époque, which is one of the periods I have studied most closely. There are a few rather indirect and often uncertain ways of reconstructing real everyday reading experiences, like marginalia (Sherman 2008), personal diaries or memoirs,¹ correspondence (Lyon-Caen 2006; Rohrbach 2017), and, occasionally, court records — I am thinking, of course, of Carlo Ginzburg's famous *Menocchio* and the way he dealt with the handful of books he managed to get hold of (1992), but also of Antonio Castillo's creative use of the Inquisition archives (2016). In this context, one documentary source that has been almost completely overlooked is what I call 'private anthologies of poetry'.

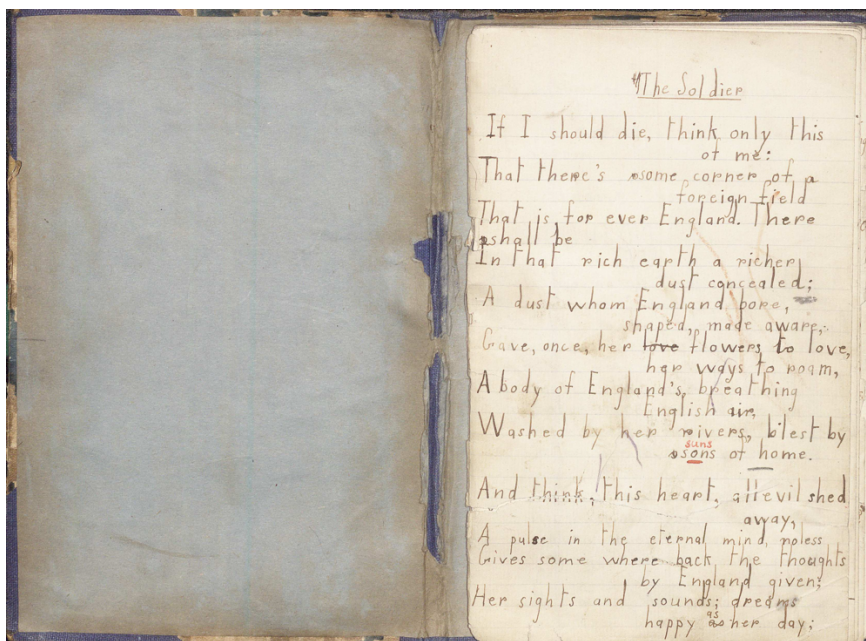
Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many lay readers commonly transcribed their favorite poems, or poems that were emotionally or epistemologically meaningful to them, by hand into notebooks. This cultural practice is linked to the popularization of the notebook as a technological device, initially put together from loose sheets of paper by the readers themselves, later purchased from a commercial company. It is not uncommon for desk products intended for other uses, such as diaries or bookkeeping notebooks, to be repurposed as a material support for private poetry anthologies.

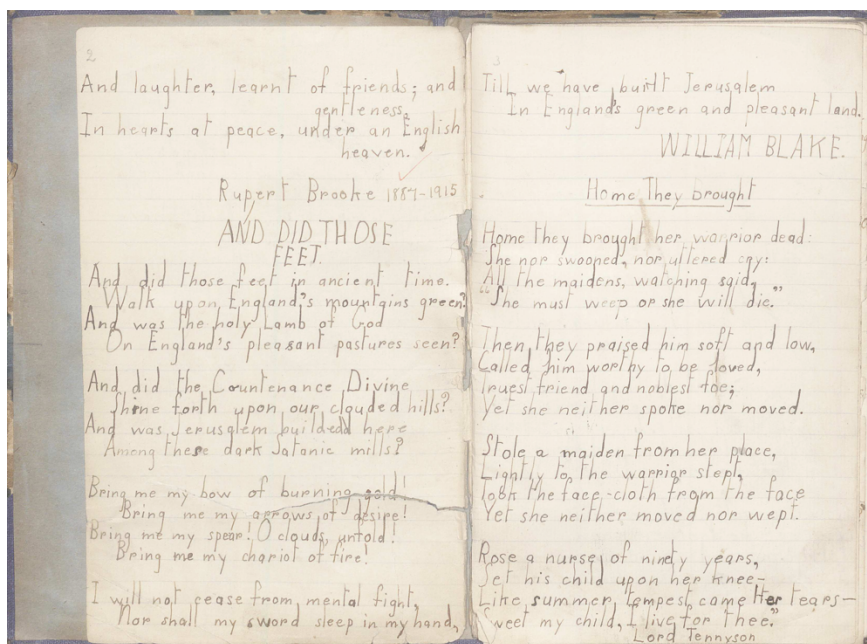
The well-known narratologist Gérard Genette recounts how his mother had a notebook in which she had transcribed a series of poems over the years, and how she made Genette himself read them aloud. Some of these poems had enjoyed enormous popularity in France in the 1900s; others rhymed with intimate, traumatic

¹ Like the 30,000 citations that attest to historical reading experiences documented by The UK Reading Experience Database, www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/index.php.

experiences — the death of a child — that the narratologist's mother had gone through (2006, 50-51).

Private poetry anthologies must have served a wide array of non-exclusive purposes such as preserving a fading repertoire of memorized works, conserving and appropriating hard-to-find texts, circumventing censorship, displaying one's cultural capital, etc. In any case, the poems *spoke* to their owners, and the owners *spoke* through them — even if only to themselves.





Illustrations 1 and 2:

An English private anthology from around 1948 (excerpt).

Interestingly, the identities of the transcribers are often prominently displayed in these private anthologies — on the title page, for example, or even at the bottom of each transcribed poem.

This makes the metaphor of the text *appropriation* through reading feel more tangible, as if the voice of the poem merged with the voice of the person copying it and naturally fitted into a mental experience that felt personal and intimate. One of the notebooks in my collection (Illustrations 1 and 2) contains, after many poems by Kipling, Yeats, Wordsworth, Browning, and, above all, John Masefield, a note dated 1948 that reads: "Gladys O. is my / name England is my nation / Heven [sic] is my dwelling place / Christ is my salvation / When I am dead and my / bones are rotten [sic] I'll leave / you this note for you to read /

when I am quite forgotten [*sic*].” Despite their naivety and — no doubt — the playful and ritualistic nature of these rhymes, they can be seen as a hint of how copying poems, mimicking an authorial pose, could satisfy a need for transcendence, ensuring that death does not completely erase one’s existence.

These collections offer a striking contrast to the established literary canon and linear narratives of literary history, uniquely blending high and low literature, incorporating works from different centuries, countries, and sometimes even languages. Typically, these transcriptions were not exact copies of an edited version, but often bore traces of oral transmission and selective memory. It is not uncommon to find crossed-out words, or jottings that correct memory lapses, or blank spaces intended for later completion of half-forgotten poems. On other occasions, however, it can be proved that a poem has been copied directly from printed material, and there are even cases where a poem torn from a magazine or a clipping from broadside ballads has been glued directly onto the paper.

What makes these private anthologies extraordinary is that they represent collections curated not according to historiographical or thematic criteria (as seen in commercial or critical anthologies), but rather based on a form of personal *attachment* to specific poems — in the multilayered sense Rita Felski gives to this term (2020). They share similarities with school practices (Escolano 2000, Eddy 2018), intimate writing, collectibles, German or Dutch *Poesiealben* (Walter 2019), writers’ reading notebooks (Minzertanu 2016), and other everyday writing practices. Despite their cultural significance, these notebooks have received little scholarly attention and have never been studied systematically.

These artifacts, devoid of commentary, are as captivating as they are opaque; it is challenging to make them speak about the everyday

uses of poetry, as such uses are revealed almost exclusively through the selection of texts.

Could it be that, beyond sharing generic, material, and formal characteristics, they also share semantic features? I hypothesize, indeed, that such collections feature specific semantic networks. I decided to subject some of these private anthologies to stylometric analysis, in order to identify patterns not immediately visible, hoping they could tell us something about the usual preferences of lay readers.

2. Experimental and control corpus

As a researcher of Romance languages, I selected eight notebooks written in Spanish between 1850 and 1940.² All of them have been digitized and transcribed on the Transkribus platform.³ I then added a control corpus consisting of 54 original poetry works published in Spanish between 1826 and 1939. Many of them come from digital libraries such as the Project Gutenberg or Wikisource, but I have occasionally transcribed digital versions of printed copies with the help of PDF2Go (a platform that offers AI-assisted OCR and, unlike others, does not store documents for later use). All titles in the control corpus are in the public domain. I tried to ensure that this control corpus was representative of the different poetic genres that circulated during the period. Therefore, it not only contains titles by the most widely read lyric poets within educated circles (such as Rubén Darío or Ramón de Campoamor), but also satirical poetry (a selection of the vast body of work by Luis de Tapia), light verse

² The scanned originals are available in the following repository: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/8NJXQ> (reference numbers 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 12).

³ I would like to thank Adrià Aguacil Portillo and Gerardo O. Dávila Llamas for their collaboration.

(Antonio Palomero, Juan Pérez Zúñiga), broadsheet ballads, regionalist and religious poetry, both Spanish and Latin American. Five of the authors represented were women (i.e., 9.25%) — consider as a reference point that, in 1922, only 32 of 407 published authors, old or new, Spanish or foreign, were women (i.e., 7.8%).⁴ The dates identifying the texts in the corpus are approximate: in some cases (for example, the poems by Rosalía de Castro, but also those by Pérez Zúñiga and Antonio Palomero), I resorted to volumes of complete or selected works that were originally written several years before publication. The control corpus totals 6.9 MB of plain text; the experimental corpus (the private anthologies) totals 0.496 MB (6.71% of the total corpus).

Depending on their source, the resulting files did not always maintain the correct verse breaks or line divisions, but this is not relevant to semantic analysis. All texts have been manually curated; I removed headers, page numbers, Roman or Arabic numerals, and editorial peritexts. I smoothed the most frequent diachronic differences (*fué*, *dió*, *pié*, *á*, *ó*, *é*, *tí*, *fé*, *-cion*, *-sion*). Even so, the result is not entirely systematic, and some texts still present dialectal marks that I did not want to remove.

I have relied on Claude Sonnet 4 for the orthographic normalization of four of the titles (those by Robustiana Armiño, the Marquis of Cerralbo, José Selgas, and Antonio Palomero). One of the private anthologies in the experimental corpus, written by someone on the threshold of literacy and riddled with misspellings, abbreviations, and transcription errors, has also been normalized using the same AI model; this has resulted in spelling and morphology comparable to

⁴ Self-collected data related to literary publications included in the bulletin *Bibliografía Española*. The women in my control corpus are Delmira Agustini, Robustiana Armiño, Rosalía de Castro, Antonia Díaz de Lamarque, and Ángela Grassi.

the other documents, at the expense of creative variants that, while not devoid of interest, often rendered the text unintelligible and prevented any comparison. For example: “Murmurando un manzo río / baño el prado con sociego [...] / tu in silencio anto mío / mi afligido pecho bañas” was transformed into this more coherent and probable passage: “Murmurando un manso río / baña el prado con sosiego [...] tú en silencio santo mío / mi afligido pecho bañas”. Delegating normalization to a probabilistic model produces a text that is both plausible and close to the corrupted version, avoiding the need to make case-by-case decisions that may lack consistency.

I chose to lemmatize with Stanza, an NLP library developed by Stanford, which I believe outperforms the more popular SpaCy. Despite occasionally maintaining gender agreement in Spanish adjectives, Stanza is more systematic in matching words to their lemmas, while the SpaCy library for Spanish (`es_core_news_lg`) is inconsistent with some verb forms, especially participles and gerunds. Although both libraries occasionally generate incorrect lemmas, SpaCy is more prone to doing so — producing pseudowords such as ‘enjamb,’ or ‘alegrísir’.

I applied a list of 238 stopwords, whose suitability for this already lemmatized corpus had been previously verified in Voyant. Given that the items in the corpus do not have comparable dimensions, I have divided them into 3,326 chunks with an average of 198.9 words — 200 words is an empirical sweet spot for LDA (*cf.* Cooper *et al.* 2021). This should make the analysis more robust and lead to more homogeneous topics.

3. Topic modeling

Topic modeling refers to algorithms that identify which words are likely to co-occur in a textual corpus. The best known of these

algorithms is Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). The result of this mathematical operation is a series of topics, i.e., lists of words that tend to interact in the corpus, many of which have a clear semantic or situation-based connection that we can think of as a proxy for a ‘theme’ in that corpus — ‘theme’ meaning the choice an empirical reader makes from one of the objectifiable isotopies in a text or series of texts.

Using the Mallet wrapper designed by Maria Antoniak,⁵ I trained an LDA model with different numbers of topics, ranging from 10 to 30. The number of topics with the highest coherence score — calculated using the Gensim library — turned out to be 30.

<i>number of topics</i>	<i>Coherence score</i>
10	0.4683
15	0.4694
20	0.4827
25	0.4724
30	0.4899

Of those 30 topics, 18 were manually validated, as they presented strong semantic and contextual coherence (topics 0, 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 28)⁶:

N o	WEIGHT	TOP WORDS	TOP WORDS (ENGLISH)	LABEL
0	0.27738	alma noche sombra tarde viejo triste blanco soñar luna sueño sol amor decir vida	soul, night, shadow, evening/late, old, sad, white, dream [verb], moon, dream	nighttime melanchol y

⁵ <https://github.com/maria-antoniak/little-mallet-wrapper/>

⁶ The entire corpus in plain text format, the pipeline used for the analysis, as well as the files with the topic modeling results can be found at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17054856>.

		hora	[noun], sun, love, say, life, hour	
1	0.12486	santo humilde dulce maría esperanza madre celestial virgen piedad consuelo dios pueblo ofrecer llegar vano	holy, humble, sweet, Mary, hope, mother, heavenly, virgin, mercy, consolation, god, people, offer, arrive, vain	Virgin Mary
2	0.0339	dios mar españa camino buen día señor corazón don hombre mañana soñar nada llevar ayer	god, sea, Spain, road, good, day, lord, heart, Mr./talent, man, tomorrow, dream, nothing, carry, yesterday	?
3	0.31165	gloria dios mundo alma hombre divino tierra luz sol inmortal cielo nombre santo día eterno	glory/heaven, god, world, soul, man, divine, earth, light, sun, immortal, sky/heaven, name, holy/saint, day, eternal	religious paradise
4	0.02402	libertad pueblo patria cabeza frente medio tirano levantar decir vez pampa pié américa mayo libre	freedom, people, homeland, head, front/forehead, middle, tyrant, raise, say, time [as in 'two times'], pampa, foot [old spelling], America, May, free	American liberation
5	0.09799	hombre sangre toro piedra boca dar hueso perro mano cuerpo corazón hasta carne hambre diente	man, blood, bull, stone, mouth, give, bone, dog, hand, body, heart, until, flesh, hunger, tooth	visceral quality
6	0.04413	ustar usté mucho cuatro cosa señora tomar calle tres mismo cualquiera persona soler buen seis	[?], you/sir, a lot, four, things, madam, take, street, three, same, any, person, usually, good, six	?
7	0.01655	indio gaucho andar mismo aunque cantar hombre vez hasta cuanto mucho pobre ansi sufrir fierro	indian, gaucho, walks, same [old spelling], even, sing, man, time [as in 'two times'], until, how, as ... as, much/a lot, poor, thus/so [old spelling], suffer, iron [old spelling]	<i>gauchesca</i> (gaucho literature)
8	0.63999	decir ver dar tanto mucho querer día pasar venir buen hombre así poner llegar poco	say, see, give, so much, much/a lot, want/love, day, pass, come, good, man, thus/so, put, arrive, little	?
9	0.06098	rey granada moro cristiano tal sultana muley torre zoraya decir alhambra mora árabe esclavo alhama	king, Granada, moor, christian, such??. sultan's wife, muley [sultan, Arabic prince], tower, Zoraya [Middle-East	Arab setting

			first name], say, Alhambra, moor woman, Arab/Arabic, slave, Alhama [Arabic place name]	
1 0	0.03036	marido san puerta muger viejo casa mujer cuarto punto mucho juan prado subir casar medio	husband saint door woman [old spelling], old, house, woman, room/fourth, point, much/a lot, Juan, field, go up, marry, half	?
1 1	0.27937	sombra ojo noche silencio voz luz puerta paso mano vez pie dejar tanto rostro brazo	shadow, eye, night, silence, voice, light, door, step, hand, time [as in 'two times'], foot leave, so much, face, arm	?
1 2	0.05914	hoy don lector vivir ayer tal vez nuestro juan gente luis aunque gran gato cierto	today, Mr./talent, reader, live, yesterday, such, time [as in 'two times'], our, Juan, people, Luis, although, big/grand, cat, certain/true	?
1 3	0.04084	amor querer amar beso mujer mía muero bello pasión amante vivir dulce corazon morir adorar	love [noun], want/love, love [verb], Kiss, woman, mine, I die, beautiful, passion, lover, live, sweet, heart, die, adore	hyperbolic passion
1 4	0.05605	nuestro españa raza nota filipino bandera rizal flor ideal nuevo español madre idea vivir américa	our, Spain, race, note, Filipino, flag, Rizal [Filipino national hero], flower, ideal, new, Spanish, mother, idea, live, America	colonial Spain
1 5	0.03728	rey princesa vuestro oro palacio noble oso toledo paje acmed alcázar señor caballero conde castillo	king, princess, your, gold, palace, noble, bear, Toledo, pageboy, Acmed, alcazar [palace], lord, knight, count, castle	courtly atmosphere
1 6	0.07239	don decir casa dios gran mucho padre dama caballero señor juan vuestro quedar pedir muerte	Mr./talent, say, house, god, great/big, much, father, lady, gentleman/knight, lord, Juan, your [plural], stay, ask, death	?
1 7	0.00521	andar andir probe frío sendico páece too allí cuatro tós jacer juar malo juan huaco	walk, walk [?], poor [vulgar], cold, trustee [vulgar], seems [vulgar], everything [vulgar], there, four, everyone [vulgar], do [vulgar], [?], bad, Juan, [?]	?

1 8	0.24411	flor amor rosa tanto ojo hermoso bello cantar blanco labio mujer sol niña dar belleza	flower, love, rose, so much, eye, beautiful, pretty, sing, white, lip, woman, sun, girl, give, beauty	female beauty
1 9	0.01167	clara calixto der cuba soldado industria arte galar peso árbitro regocijo vario cama fatiga ondi	Clara, Calixto, [?], Cuba, soldier, industry, art, [?], weight, arbitrator, rejoice, various, bed, fatigue, [?]	?
2 0	0.10878	tierra campo camino viejo sol agua blanco monte río verde tarde alvargonzález casa rama hijo	land, field, path, old, sun, water, white, mountain, river, green, afternoon, Alvargonzález, house, branch, son	rural setting
2 1	0.25094	sangre patria españa pueblo guerra nuestro gloria frente noble vuestro fuerte mano espada honor muerte	blood, homeland, Spain, people, war, our, glory, front/forehead, noble, your [plural], strong, hand, sword, honor, death	patriotic war
2 2	0.71982	amor alma vida triste corazón dolor tanto ver sólo siempre vez ojo mundo llorar querer	love, soul, life, sad, heart, pain, so much, see, only, always, time [like in 'two times'], eye, world, cry/sob, want/love	heartbreak
2 3	0.25394	mar viento cielo sol nube rayo ola inmenso monte tierra onda mundo nave luz mare	sea, wind, sky, sun, cloud, lightning, wave, immense, mountain, earth, wave, world, ship, light, sea?	seaside atmosphere
2 4	0.31678	flor dulce ver ave luz cielo allí sol agua fuente ala mil aura frente hermoso	flower, sweet, see, bird, light, sky, there, sun, water, fountain, wing, thousand, aura, forehead/front, beautiful	<i>locus amænus</i>
2 5	0.05569	don caballo espada caballero acero juan capitán inés diego ancho muerte fiero sol lanza arma	Mr./talent, horse, sword, knight, steel, Juan, captain, Inés, Diego, wide, death, fierce, sun, spear, weapon	cavalryman
2 6	0.08464	tanto vuestro duro virtud mal gente don alto campo vano oro fiera amistad monte envidia	as much, your [plural], hard, virtue, bad, people, Mr./talent, high, field vain gold fierce friendship mountain envy	?
2	0.00808	loro mico per cuyo mes	parrot, monkey, for [catalan],	?

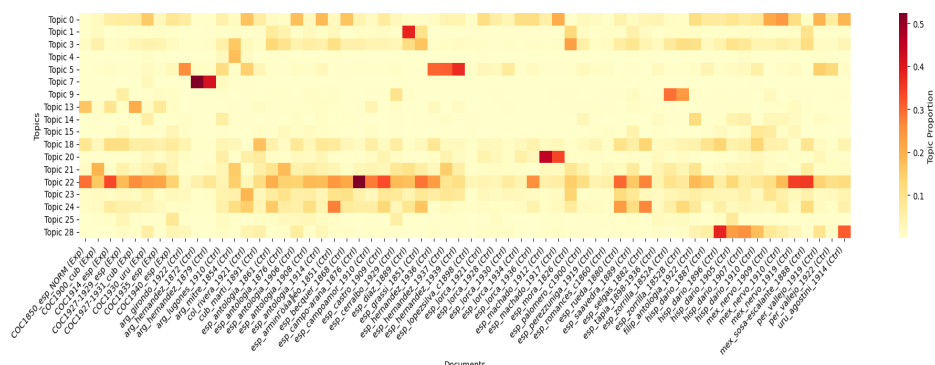
7		moro allá rico amb bella vaig puerto com pobre isola	whose, month, there, rich, with [catalan], beautiful, go [catalan], port, as [catalan], poor, island [italian]	
2 8	0.11229	rosa oro divino blanco gran vida verso musa luz flor boca alma ensueño mano ala	rose, gold, divine, white, great, life, verse, muse, light, flower, mouth, soul, daydream, hand, wing	romantic lyricism
2 9	0.07415	luna niño agua sangre amor cantar negro cielo aire amargo caballo venir ojo verde tres	moon, child, water, blood, love, sing, black, sky, air, bitter, horse, come, green, eye, three	?

Some of the incomprehensible terms in the table above ('ustar,' 'der,' 'galar') may be corrupted forms resulting from the lemmatization process; it should also be remembered that the corpus also contains diatopic (dialectal) or diastratic variants that might be difficult for an NLP library to identify. I hesitated to keep some of the topics, especially numbers 5 and 28. Topic number 5 is semantically obscure, but many of its words refer to animality and the physical materiality of the body; topic 28 does not belong to a clear semantic field or social script, but it does bring together many positively connoted terms commonly used in the expression of romantic feelings. I discarded topic 29, although anyone familiar with the poetry of Federico García Lorca will recognize several of his most recurrent and prominent symbols in it.

4. Results

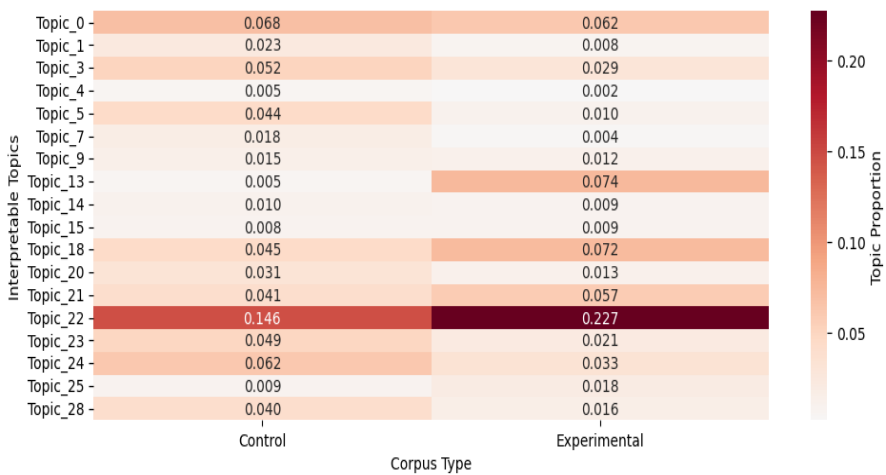
The heat map of these 18 topics reveals expected patterns: the prominence of the gaucho topic (7) in the works of Argentine José Hernández; that of topic 20 ('rural setting') in the two works by Antonio Machado; that of the Arabizing topic (9) in one of the volumes of works by José Zorrilla; that of 'romantic lyricism' in the works of

Rubén Darío... and the relative absence of *all of them* in the poems of the satirist Luis de Tapia and in the broadside ballads.

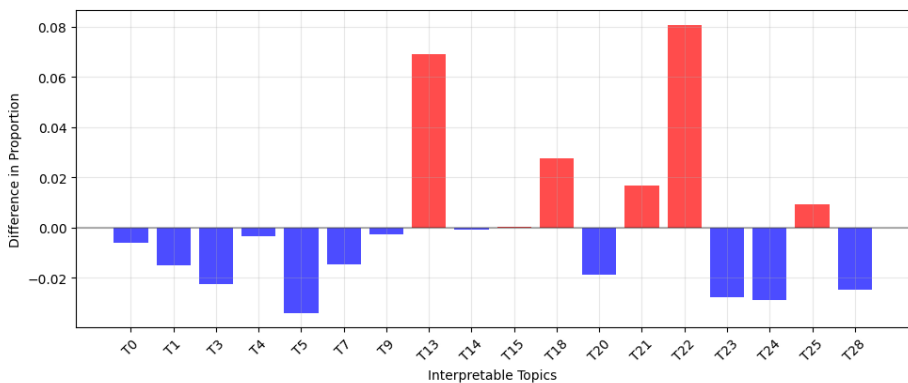


Graph 1: heat map of topic distributions

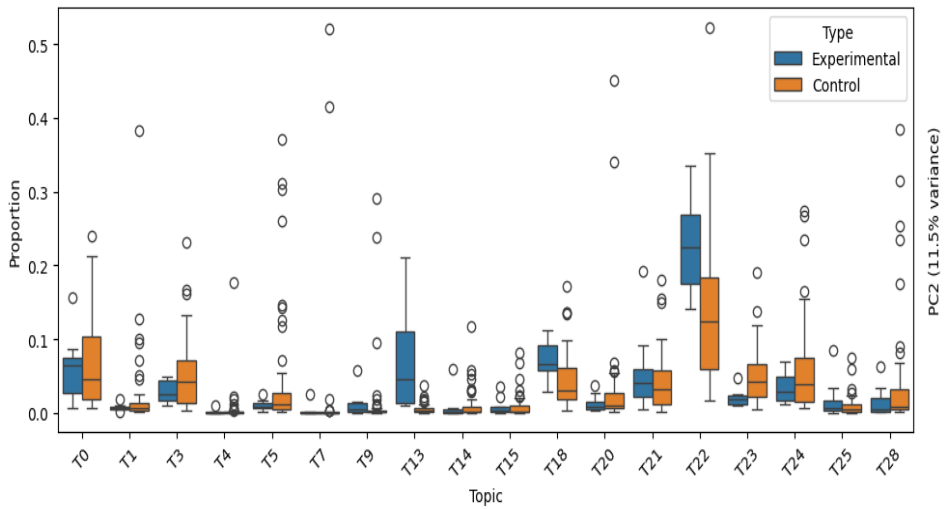
Five topics are more prominent in the experimental corpus than in the control corpus (Graphs 2 through 4). Each of them appears in different proportions across the private poetry anthologies (Graph 5). In this sense, topic modeling can also be used to identify specific preferences of particular readers, through materials such as those studied here. Notably, topic 22 (which I have titled ‘heartbreak’) is particularly prominent in all of them, while number 21 (‘patriotic war’), although present in others, is predominant in a notebook written in Cuba during the years of the Spanish–American War.



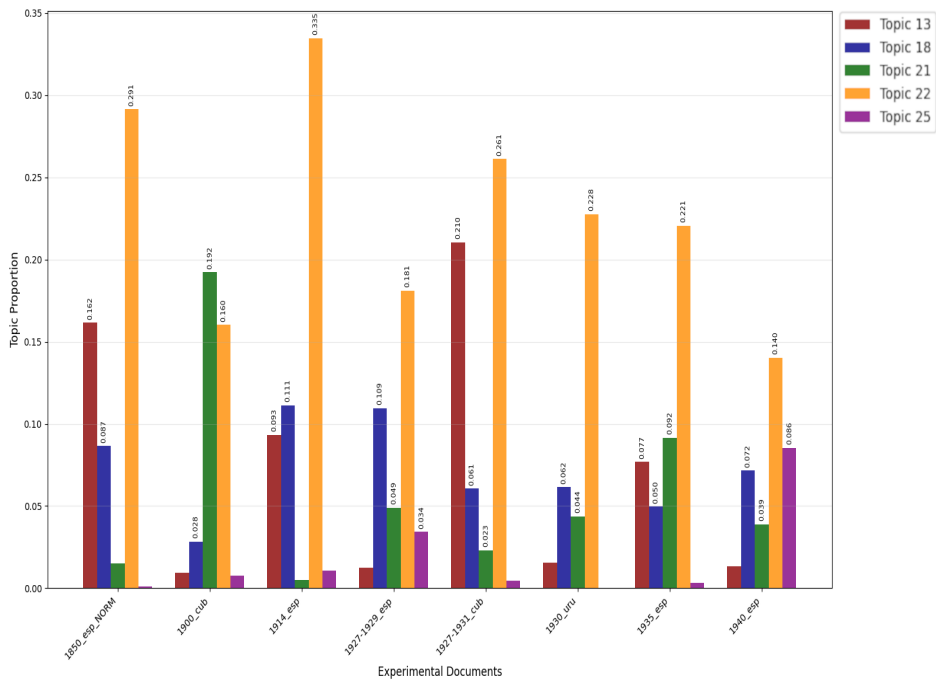
Graph 2: topic distributions, experimental vs. control corpus



Graph 3: topic prominence, experimental (red) vs. control (blue)



Graph 4: topic distribution variability by document type



Graph 5: distribution in experimental corpus of topics 13, 18, 21, 22, and 25

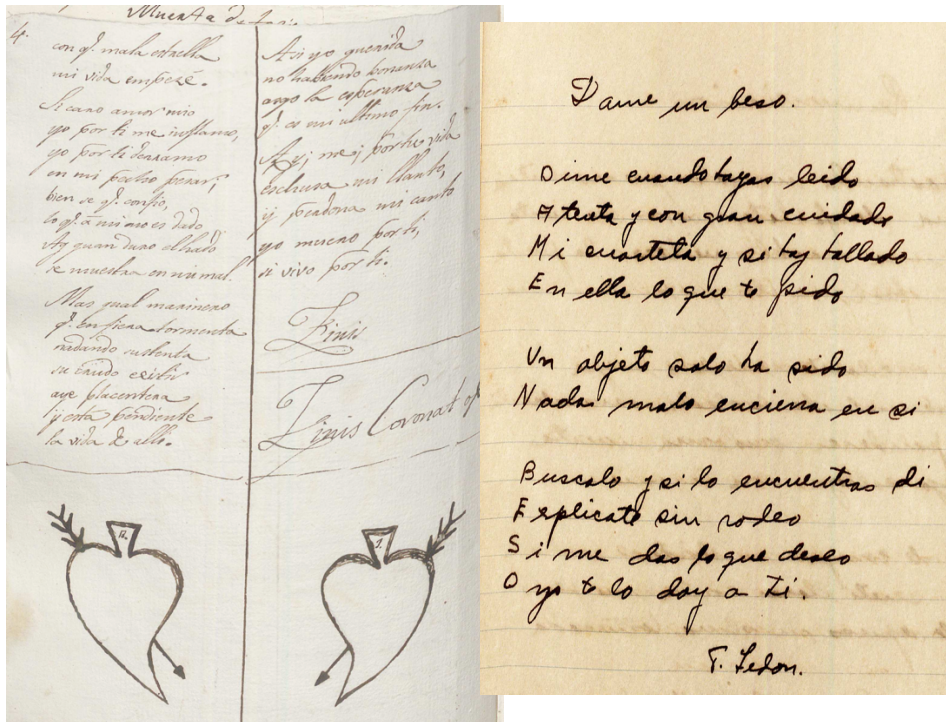
Only three of these five topics show statistical significance (with a one-tailed p -value < 0.05): topics 22, 13, and 18. By contrast, topics 21 and 25 should be discarded. Note, furthermore, that when applying a conservative correction for multiple comparisons (Holm), only topic 22 maintains robust significance (0.0290). The effect size (Cohen's d) of topic 13 is very large: this topic is notably present in several documents in the experimental corpus and virtually absent from the control corpus. The effect size of topics 18, 22, and 25 is also large.

topic	label	p-value	Cohen's d
13	'hyperbolic passion'	0.0195	2.550
18	'female beauty'	0.0167	0.750
21	'patriotic war'	0.2354	0.392
22	'heartbreak'	0.0058	0.804
25	'cavalryman'	0.1981	0.577

5. Discussion and limitations

I believe that the results are highly interpretable. All three statistically significant topics show a clear semantic relationship: 'hyperbolic passion,' 'female beauty,' and 'heartbreak' are three typical facets of Western love poetry, three dimensions of the same theme. Private poetry anthologies would reveal a perhaps expected preference for this type of content or musing. Indeed, some poems, perhaps even entire notebooks, appear to have been used in a context of seduction. This seems to be suggested by numerous clues in the oldest of the notebooks considered here, decorated with hearts and rich in love poems (Illustration 3), as well as by the gallant poems in the Cuban anthology — such as the one reproduced below, which reads, in

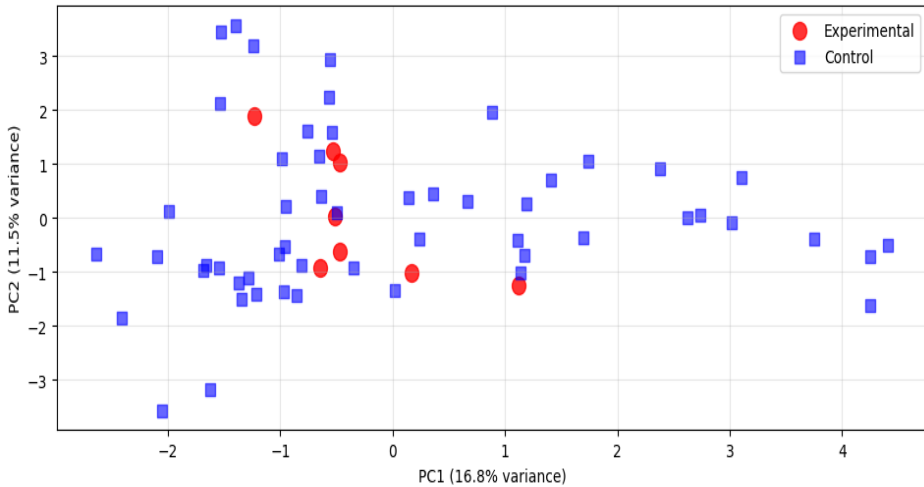
acrostic form, 'dame un beso' ('kiss me') and, according to a handwritten footnote, was sent consecutively to two young ladies (Illustration 4).



Illustrations 3 (l.) and 4 (r.):

Romantic features in two of the analyzed notebooks

These private anthologies also represent different trends in the poetry of the period, but overall they are not outliers. Principal component analysis (PCA, Graph 6) shows that, although they emphasize sentimental aspects, they tend to be close to the thematic mean values of the control corpus.



Graph 6: Principal component analysis (PCA): two-dimensional document clustering

These results are in line with a pilot study conducted with Dariah-Topics Explorer on half of the documents (Ceballos, 2025). However, I am well aware of the limitations of the present study. To begin with, the noise introduced by lemmatization shortcomings might be reduced by developing new and improved libraries for Spanish. The size of the corpus influences the robustness of the analysis, and I know that 62 documents, even though many contain hundreds of pages, are not sufficient to make strong claims about the preferences of poetry readers in the so-called ‘Silver Age’ of Spanish literature (*cf.* Calvo Tello and Rißler-Pipka 2022). Furthermore, I have analyzed private anthologies written in quite different periods and in very different regions (most of them come from Spain, but two were written in Cuba and one in Uruguay): the corpus would need to be considerably expanded to confirm the existence of transhistorical and

transnational similarities. Unfortunately, the scarcity of these archival materials makes it impossible to carry out a more ambitious study in the short term. Still, I believe that the results of this research show the great potential of this methodology when it comes to interpreting such elusive accounts of everyday reading as private anthologies.

Data available on

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17054856>

<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/8NJXQ>

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Reading in Practice: Citation as a Route to Black Reading Cultures in Early Twentieth Century South Africa

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Abstract: This paper centres the history of colonial reading and the figure of the colonial reader. It explores the history of reading and reading practice in segregationist South Africa in the inter-war years, arguing for the importance of citational practices in colonial periodicals as a route to difficult-to-access reading cultures, treasured books, intellectual lineages and reading dispositions. The study takes its starting point from the history of performative citation in several popular Black publications of the period – *Umteteli wa Bantu* (1920-1956), *The Workers' Herald* (1923-1929), *Bantu World* (1932-1955) and *Ilanga lase Natal* (1903-1965). Focusing on the citation practices of prominent activist-intellectuals as well as ordinary readers, it demonstrates how readers used the periodical press to tell the story of their reading lives and habits, thus providing unique insight into readers' intimate encounters with, and investments in, literary texts. It argues that colonial readers used books for a wide range of purposes: emotional solace, inspiration, political critique, scholarly argument and creative rewriting, showing how both politically moderate and more radical writers/readers – and men and women – drew from a similar stock of shared books and ideas. It ends with a discussion of how citational form presents itself as a key site of colonial transaction, anti-colonial resistance and Black agency; of

citation as a verbal artefact which encodes a moment of interaction, negotiation and reinterpretation in the colonial contact zone.

Keywords: periodical press, H.I.E Dhlomo, R.V. Selope Thema, Clements Kadalie, women readers, anti-colonialism, Black reading cultures

1. Introduction

This paper makes the case for the reconstruction of everyday reading via the practice of citation. Described by Ruth Finnegan as ‘this strange human propensity to repeat chunks of text from elsewhere and to echo others’ voices’ (2011, xii), citation has yet to find a place alongside more conventional forms of reading evidence used by scholars to reconstruct reading lives in history. As the vast scholarship on the subject bears testimony, it is to memoirs, library archives, marginalia, private collections, oral interviews, book clubs and literary and debating societies that historians of reading have tended to turn. In contexts in which archives are absent or incomplete, citational form provides an important source for the recovery of hidden reading histories, treasured books, intellectual lineages and reading dispositions. Echoing the focus of studies by Priya Joshi (2002), Stephanie Newell (2002) and Priyasha Mukhopadhyay (2024), this paper turns the spotlight on the history of colonial reading and the figure of the colonial reader. In particular, it draws out the history of reading in South Africa in the inter-war years, a period characterised by increasing capitalist industrialisation and urbanisation, the entrenchment of the racially segregationist state and on-going Black resistance. Focusing on several popular publications of the period – *Umteteli wa Bantu* (1920-1956), *The Workers’ Herald* (1923-1929), *Bantu World* (1932-1955) and *Ilanga lase Natal* (1903-1965), this study parses the history of performative citation in the Black counter public sphere

in order to shed light on the bibliosphere of Black reading in this period. As in Elizabeth McHenry's landmark study of reading cultures in the United States (2002), this paper centres the popular periodical press as an overlooked archive of reading, a site in which the traces of reading lives, circulating texts, textual attachments and prevailing modes of reading can be reassembled.

As several studies have shown, citation was a commonplace feature of Black rhetorical practice in the colonial period (Newell 2002, 2023; Hofmeyr 2006; Peterson 2008; Sandwith 2014; Johnson 2020). This was particularly true of the periodical press, a verbal-visual amalgam based on repetitive interpolation and intertextuality. In the South African context, as elsewhere in Africa, newspapers and public speeches provided the occasions for a conspicuous, even extravagant, citational practice and the wielding of quotes for a wide range of purposes. These multi-faceted discursive practices played out in a rich and diverse colonial printsphere in which weekly and monthly, multi-lingual papers targeted at Black readers competed for space in a context dominated by the white pro-capitalist and pro-segregationist press. While the scholarship on African print cultures and the periodical press in African contexts is extensive, scholarly interest in the history of reading in African contexts is still at an early stage.¹ This paper extends this body of work via a detailed history of citational form in the periodical press. It demonstrates how prominent activist-intellectuals and ordinary readers used the periodical press to tell the story of their reading lives and habits; it shows how periodicals shaped and supported everyday practices of reading and it sheds light on the various uses to which literature was

¹ Key studies in the history of reading in the African context include Nuttall (1994), Newell (2002), Hofmeyr (2006), Peterson (2006), Sandwith (2014, 2018); Dick (2007, 2011, 2012) and Johnson (2020).

put. As a history of contextualised reading in practice, the study of citational form provides unique insight into readers' intimate personal encounters and dialogues with literary texts; what Rita Felski has described as 'the mysterious event of reading' (2008, 11).

The question of readers' encounters with literature takes on a particular significance in colonial contexts where questions of western epistemological dominance are drawn into sharp relief – the automatic privilege given to Western literary-cultural forms (correspondent with the habitual erasure of the significance of oral cultures) and the ways in which the zone of culture became politicised as sites of 'civilised' performance, colonial dominance and varieties of cultural resistance (Newell 2002, Sandwith 2014, Orsini et al 2022). In contexts like these, the citation of canonical texts is opened to a wide array of meanings, including the demonstration of colonial cultural 'mastery'; of wide-reading, erudition; the conspicuous demonstration of accumulated Western cultural capital as part of the quest for political and economic rights; citational performance as a training ground for political leadership (Hofmeyr 2006); or just a practical way for non-status holding colonial actors to get ahead in life (Newell 2002). Postcolonial frameworks tend, understandably, to privilege modes of reading/re-reading that are irreverent, unorthodox, non-deferential or resistant. While the evidence of this study suggests that resistant or sceptical reading is by far the dominant mode of response, it is equally clear that reading practices also exceed this framework; that the practice of reading includes both suspicion and endorsement; critique and affective attachment.

2. Discussion

I begin with a resonant example from *Umteteli* newspaper by the journalist and African National Congress member, Richard Victor

Selope Thema whose article, entitled the 'New African', which appeared in 1928, included an interpolation from W.E.B. du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

Although the colour line is at present fenced with racial barbed wires yet there is no racial bar which prevents the mind of the new African from appropriating the intellectual and spiritual heritage of civilised mankind. 'Across the colour line', says Dr W.E.B. Du Bois, 'I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. [...] I summon Aristotle and what soul I will and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension'. Who can prevent the new African from moving among men and women of science, letters and art? To day the mind of the African is digging up the past histories of nations that have played and are playing their part upon the stage of the world. And as they examine critically the records of these nations, they come across the philosophy of Plato and Darwin, the writings of Homer and Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare and Milton. No colour bar can prevent the mind of the African from enjoying equality with the great minds of Europe, Asia and America. Why, the other day, in my humble residence in Doornfontein I enjoyed the company of Tagore, the Indian poet, Koo the Chinese social reformer and Kawaga, the Japanese Author. It is wonderful this mental fellowship with men of other races and other lands – And who can prevent it?' (*Umteteli* 21 July 1928, 3).

The presence of Du Bois' famous study in Selope Thema's arguments provides evidence of the pervasive resonance of African-American thinkers for South African activist-intellectuals and his importance as a touchstone for anti-colonial thinking. In this example, Selope Thema invites Du Bois into the pages of a South African newspaper in order to underscore the freedom of the Black reader to read what he or she will, an argument that does not mark a distinction between literary and 'non-literary' texts. His argument against race-based exclusion reveals some of the more common reasons for the quoting

of texts: citation as accreditation, exemplification, adornment and support. The quoted text – in this case, explicitly set off with quotation marks – seals the authority of the speaker, lends gravitas and force to the argument and imparts a certain affective resonance and lyrical flair. What is also apparent is the subtle process through which the initial sounding is replicated and recast, de-historicised, recontextualised and subtly re-oriented for new purposes. To quote a text, as Walter Benjamin notes, involves the ‘interruption of its context’ (2007, 151). Signs are unmoored and re-attached to new priorities and viewpoints; the text is ‘grafted’ onto a new semiotic chain, and thus made ‘liable to new context-specific meanings’ (Derrida 1988, 9) and ‘unexpected swerves’ (Butler 2017, 177). As Constantine Nakassis argues, acts of citation involve the ‘re-presentation’ of a discursive event, a replication which marks both its sameness and its subtle alteration. In this way, repetition ‘begets difference’ and ‘newness comes into the world’ (2013, 54). Texts which are spoken in the mouths of others become de-authorised, both in the sense that they are disconnected from their authors and in the sense that they become subject to a new authority.

Selope Thema’s interpolation of *The Souls of Black Folk* bears all the consequences of the iterability of signs and the transplanting of texts: the frisson that arises when discrete discursive acts are linked within the ‘same semiotic frame’ (Nakassis 2013, 56). Transported to 1920s South Africa and nested within a different rhetorical structure, Du Bois’ arguments are replicated and remade. As in du Bois’ scheme, the relationship that Selope Thema imagines between reader and author is companionable and uncondescending, a ‘moving arm in arm’. As in other examples from the period, reading is figured as convivial

fellowship.² In Seloje Thema's re-reading, however, the scene of encounter is transferred from the domain of the ideal to segregationist South Africa – not a magnificent 'gilded hall' but a space of racial interdiction in which a would-be participant might be threatened or expelled. Instead of 'moving alongside', the protagonist attempts to 'move among', a slight adjustment which hints at an untoward intrusion. With the three-fold repetition of the question, 'Who can prevent it?', the mood shifts from liberal pathos to resistant assertion. The scene of Black reading – the impoverished Johannesburg suburb of Doornfontein – is re-imagined as a space of transgressive pleasure; of intimate encounters with proscribed texts in defiance of political norms; the Black interloper is recast not only as equal interlocutor but as an assertive claimant of his human rights. In this more radical take on Du Bois' famous lines, the 'mind of the African' is placed at the centre of the frame, rendered as an active and unopposable presence, engaged in a 'critical examination' centred on 'digging up the past histories of nations'. Seloje Thema's citation thus invokes the image of a powerful critical agency at work and of ordinary reading practices as the scanning and assessing of Western intellectual-cultural achievement and, by implication, as resistance to its hegemonic hold. A reading of the citational trace in this instance offers insight not only into the disjunctures and unexpected swerves of citational form, not only into characteristic reading habits and dispositions but also to the 'force' of textual attachments (Felski 2008, 22). As Seloje Thema's example reveals, reading entails pleasure, recognition and critique; appreciation, affiliation and pragmatic appropriation.

² See, for instance, Rahab S. Petje, 'Books as Companions', Letter to the Editor, *The Bantu World*, 3 October 1942, 8.

Selope Thema's argument is underscored with a further citation, this time from the poem 'The Battlefield' (1878) by nineteenth-century American poet, William Cullen Bryant. Thema concludes, 'The new African is a creature that is emerging from oppression with vigour and vitality. He looks the white man in the face, and laughs at his puny efforts to fight against God's scheme of Creation, and with the Poet, he says: "Truth crushed to earth shall rise again/The eternal laws of God are here/But Error Wounded writhes with pains/And dies among His worshippers"'. In this instance, the Black reader and the white American poet are imagined as speaking in one voice and the fighting words of this well-known poem – which also became popular as a hymn – are drawn in as an indictment of South African cultural exclusion. The canonical writer is not only enlisted to the cause of Black rights but presented as an active sympathiser.³ In this process, Bryant's poem is remade as anti-colonial critique.

Looking more widely, what shadows and echoes of texts, proverbs, excerpts, songs, poems, scripture and scholarly works were to be found in the Black periodical press? What glimpses of ordinary reading cultures, reading dispositions, interpretive schemes, valued forms and affective attachments are revealed through the tracking of citation? And how are these used in the development of specific intellectual and political arguments? The Christian Bible, unsurprisingly, was a central site of readerly investment, inspiration and appropriation in the Black counter public sphere as biblical stories were seized as powerful analogies of the history of conquest, dispossession, discrimination, resistance and betrayal. Other significant literary touchstones were overwhelmingly Western and

³ 'The Battlefield', also known as 'The Truth Shall Rise Again', was sung as a hymn. It was quoted by Martin Luther King, 14 March 1968. <http://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/mlkaudio.htm>. Accessed 5 July 2025.

male, mapping closely onto the kinds of texts that would have formed the everyday staples of mission school reading in South Africa at the time and based on a pedagogy of reading as memorisation and recital. As I will demonstrate, however, the contents of the Black colonial library along with prevailing reading habits and attachments, extend far beyond the mission school template in which many Black writers and readers would have been schooled.

An imaginative reconstruction of the Black library in the segregationist period could begin with Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320), Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare's sonnets and plays (in particular, *Julius Caesar*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*); seventeenth-century British writers, John Dryden, James Shirley and James Graham; eighteenth-century English poets and novelists, William Cowper, John Gay and Henry Fielding; Romantic poets Wordsworth, Shelley and James Lowell and Victorian novelists, Thackeray, Dickens and Sir Walter Scott. Victorian poets play a particularly prominent role in the history of colonial reading and citation, in particular the likes of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Robert Herrick, Alfred Noyes, Arthur Hugh Clough and Robert Browning. Speeches and hymns were also favourite sources: those of seventeenth-century British preacher, William Secker, nineteenth-century Unitarian cleric William Ellery Channing along with the oft-cited lines from the hymn by Vaughn Williams: 'England Arise, the Long Long Night is over'. Also important were nineteenth-century essayists, Oliver Wendell Homes, Sir Walter Besant and nineteenth century Scottish author Samuel Smiles whose books, 'Character' and 'Self-Help' extolled the Victorian ideals of thrift, hard work and duty. The views of William Hazlitt ('Every word should be a blow') and Ben Johnson (on 'brief style') were frequently cited in arguments about good literary style and credible

journalism. Also widely cited were Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841) and *The French Revolution* (1837), J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Ruskin, H.G. Wells, and the speeches and writings of George Bernard Shaw and Benjamin Disraeli. From the Black diaspora, the voices of du Bois, Marcus Garvey (particularly his 'Declaration of Negro Rights and Constitution of Negro Liberty'), Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), the speeches of James Aggrey as well as the echoes of negro spirituals and the Harlem poets were important. The citation of indigenous sources was relatively rare but newspaper correspondents did, on occasion, invoke the work of South African authors (Robert Grendon, Sarah Gertrude Millan, John Buchan) as well as the wisdom of isiXhosa and Sesotho proverbs and sayings, some of which were rendered in translation.

The everyday practice of quote-wielding and the various investments and disarticulations it records should be seen in the context of a commonplace form of citational practice across various regions and historical contexts which involved the custom of collecting and organising quotations in written compendia (Finnegan 2010, 114). Quotation anthologies – such as the *Oxford Book of Quotations*, involve the practice of 'explicitly framing chunks of words and putting them on-stage as quotations'. In this way, well-known voices are not only 'brought out to re-sound in new settings' (Finnegan 2010, 197) but are also abstracted, fixed and rarefied as timeless and incontrovertible truths. This mode of instructive-inspirational citation – as motivation, homily and instruction – excerpted and authorised in dedicated collections and thus made accessible for everyday use was a conventional practice of the early twentieth-century period. Newspapers and periodicals were important sites for the staging of such quotable quotes, in this case in portable, small-scale, quotidian

and serialised form. In the Black periodical press (particularly, *Umteteli*, *Ilanga lase* and *Bantu World*), these mini-compendia of ennobling ideas took the form of short lists placed randomly on the newspaper page (possibly to fill an empty space) and framed in a variety of ways as 'Literary Gems', 'Selected Saws' and 'Quotations Worth Remembering'. The sources of wisdom were eclectic and largely conventional, including 'highbrow' examples such as Cicero, Goethe, Hume, Francis Bacon, Dr Johnson, William Godwin and Sir Philip Sydney as well as more popular writers like Browning, Dickens, Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson and the afore-mentioned Smiles. In keeping with the dominance of moralising gender policing in this period, such mini-compendia were considered especially appropriate for women readers, appearing frequently on the pages devoted to women's concerns in both *Umteteli* and *Bantu World*. As with other forms of citation, Western sources and male voices predominate. The rare exceptions include Christina Rossetti, Hannah More, Madame de Stael, George Eliot and, from further afield, Swami Vivekenanda, Saadi Shirazi and the Bhagavad Gita. In *Umteteli*, a once-off gesture to the African context, offering momentary relief from the stuffy indoctrination of the Western examples, saw the publication of a list of 'African Proverbs', taken from the Kenyan newspaper, *Habari* (*Umteteli* 17 September 1927, 3).

Similar forms of instructive or inspirational quotation – appearing as justificatory preambles or argument-clinching epilogues – are to be found in editorials, opinion pieces and readers' letters. Such interpolations often drew on particularly 'affective' or 'elevated' verse (Atkins and Finlayson 2016, 172) in order to strengthen, dramatize and embellish. An article in *Bantu World* by the Rev. H. Phillips cements its lesson on the value of stoical endurance with the ringing lines from

Tennyson's 'Ulysses' (1842): 'To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield' (16 December 1933, 9). In another example, the virtues of individual effort and self-belief are underscored with lines from Robert Browning's Epilogue: 'One who never turned his back but marched breast forward, /Never doubted clouds would break, /Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph' (*Umteteli* 28 July 1923, 7). In similar fashion a single line from William Shakespeare's 'Spring' (from *Love's Labour's Lost*) – 'Merry Larks are Ploughman's Clocks' – is used to accentuate an argument about the values of industry and cheerfulness as an antidote to criminality (*Umteteli* 22 September 1934, 3). In keeping with prevailing mission discourse and its understanding of literature as 'a moralising force' (Hofmeyr 2006, 267), these pithy compendiums set the scene for the repetitive inscription of a Christian-capitalist moral code, emphasising honesty, industry, endurance, abstinence, thrift and the profitable use of time. Re-enacted in the popular press, these positive, often triumphalist, verbal segments extolling individual effort, hard work and stoicism are closely aligned with colonial narratives of racial 'advancement'. These are rhetorical structures with strong aspirations towards moral certainty and closure. Their duplication in the South African context has the troubling effect of re-presenting the long history of colonial violence as a progressive teleology of Black fortitude and eventual reward.

At the same time, Black readers and writers were also repeatedly drawn to the affective resources of Shakespeare and the Romantic and Victorian poets for the articulation of suffering and despair, moral condemnation, political critique and alternative worldmaking. The history of Black citation, and the genre of the obituary in particular, reveals strong affective links to poems such as Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' (1850) and 'The Lotus Eaters' (1832), Shelley's 'Adonais'

(1821), Swinburne's 'A Year's Burden' (1870), John Shirley's 'Death the Leveller' (1696-1666), Walter Scott's 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel' (1805), Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*, William Ernest Henley's 'Invictus' (1888) – particularly, its resonant final lines, 'I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul' – and the Biblical book of Lamentations.⁴ Thus, F.Y. St. Leger Plaatje adapts Brutus's speech in *Julius Caesar* in order to cement his critique of white party politics in South Africa: 'O Judgement! Thou art fled to brutish beasts, /And men have lost their reason'. In another example, 'Resurgam', resolves his arguments about the problems besetting African political organisations with the hopeful concluding lines of Arthur Hugh Clough's poem 'Say not the Struggle Nought Availeth' (1855): 'Far back through creeks and inlets making/Comes silent, flooding in, the main' (*Umteteli* 25 August 1923, 4). Shylock's famous 'hath not a Jew' speech in *The Merchant of Venice* supplied the ballast for many public sphere debates about racial equality, sometimes repeated verbatim but more frequently adapted. As Clements Kadalie argued in 'A Call to the African Race': 'We are men just as our European friends are, we have limbs just like them. We can suffer as they do, and we too are possessed of a heart that can be tender and true' (*Umteteli* 14 April 1923, 4).⁵ Alexander Pope's oft-cited line, 'A little learning is a dangerous thing' from *An Essay on Criticism* (1709) was frequently invoked against the white capitalist press; particularly the ways in which Africans were condemned to alterity in racist public discourse (*Umteteli* 23 July 1921, 2). James Thaele, Kadalie's one-time associate and founder editor of the radical union paper, *The Workers' Herald*, drew on an eclectic citational store to re-read South African

⁴ See Johnson (2020, 53-54) for more details on Clements Kadalie's appropriation of this verse.

⁵ See also Sol T. Plaatje's reworking of this speech as 'hath not a K***r eyes? Hath not a K***r hands ...' (cited in Peterson 2008, 89).

political events via the dramatic scenes and speeches of classical antiquity (Virgil and Cicero), the Pauline sermons and the Biblical stories of Ahab and Elijah, Moses and the Egyptians and Judas Iscariot.

The popular periodical genre of the critical essay saw many examples of colonial quote-wielding in the segregationist era as quotations from multiple sources were pulled in as amplification and support. Particularly striking was a pervasive practice of accumulative or accretive citation – often in the form of citational preambles or epilogues – in which arguments were leavened, concluded and framed by a variety of quotes. In these examples of scholarly citation, South African political and social issues were placed in dialogue, and made consonant, with other contexts and commentators; opened out to a virtual assembly of critical interlocutors. Alan Kirkland Soga, a founding member of the ANC and former editor of the newspaper, *Izwi Labantu*, writing under the pseudonym, 'Resurgam', provides a striking example. His lengthy contributions to *Umteteli wa Bantu* throughout the early 1920s wove dense textual webs and digressive arguments through intermittent quotation from Biblical texts, nineteenth-century biographers such as John Morley, the Romantic poets, Swinburne, Shelley and Ruskin, the work of the South African poet Robert Grendon and untranslated isiXhosa sayings, all of which testify to his eclectic reading practices and habits of memorisation. A similar reading/citing practice is to be found in the journalism of Selope Thema and H.I.E. Dhlomo, well-known Johannesburg-based journalist for *Bantu World* and *Ilanga lase Nata* as well as a playwright, poet and librarian.

Selope Thema's essay on 'The Friendship of Books' draws on works by the Scottish missionary Joseph Oldman (1874), Anatole France's *On Life & Letters* (1922), Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship* (1840)

and *The Souls of Black Folk* in order to advance an early exploration of the value of books for Black readers (*Umteteli* 27 July 1929, 2). Selope Thema's disquisition on reading repeats many of the standard arguments of the period – books are repositories of truth, points of contact and friendship, records of human travail and triumph, a means of escape, a means to access the 'higher things of life' and a source of inspiration and courage. He also draws on France's resonant idea of books as a form of 'witchcraft', with the power to disturb and remake. A later article quotes from liberal American race theorist, Edgar Gardner Murphy's *The Basis of Ascendancy* (1909) in order to theorise the psychological consequences of racial oppression and the problem of internalised racism, concluding that those who are 'ostracised and looked upon as a beast of burden in the land of his fathers' is likely to feel like 'changing the colour of his skin and running away from his race' (*Umteteli* 11 February 1928, 2). Selope Thema's reading/citational practice exemplifies the widespread practice of purposeful and directed reading in which history is approached as a lesson for the present; in which stories of suffering and overcoming are read as parallels to the contemporary colonial scene.

H.I.E. Dhlomo's library was equally diverse. In his article, 'History and Human Behaviour' (*Umteteli* 24 September 1932, 4), Dhlomo builds a critique of Western historiography by invoking the work of British-born psychologist William McDougall. As is the convention, the argument proceeds via a range of sources, George Santayana's *Sense of Beauty* (1896), Herbert Spencer's *An Autobiography* (1910) and Voltaire's ringing line 'I have no sceptre, but I have a pen'. Dhlomo is critical of the failure of Western historians 'to look behind the scenes of the history of Bantu-European contacts'. Captivated by the 'thrilling, colourful pictures', they have not 'taken the trouble to study

how the picture-producing mechanism operates'. Yet they 'weave theories as to how they think it works'. Against a historiography centred on surface spectacle and the collection of facts, Dhlomo advocates a practice of reading Western historical texts against the grain, of reading 'between the lines to get to the facts', and of 'making our own history from the history we read'. In this argument, Western scholarly resources are not only mined for an alternative history but become the prompts for re-thinking Western scholarship itself. Unlike the dominative homilies explored above, Dhlomo's use of citational form is evidence of an inherently critical disposition in which authority is not ceded to canonical texts. As a further elaboration of his argument suggests, Black reading practice is also understood as a kind of tactical and surreptitious action, involving the theft of emancipatory ideas left carelessly lying around by whites: 'The white man has given away his best weapons, ideas. It is too late to stem the rising tide of colour. Nothing can stand against the forces of ideas and thought' (*Umteteli* 24 September 1932, 4).

Such examples of free-wheeling, accretive citation were also to be found in letters written by ordinary readers. Jos C.K. Dlula, for example, builds an argument for Black political representation using J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*, the Biblical book of Samuel, the speeches of Disraeli, the Rev G.L. Richardson and Samuel Smiles in order to make the point that the forms of so-called representation available for African people are a means of 'exterminat[ing] them indirectly' (*Umteteli* 16 December 1922, 5). While scholarly citation is often used as a form of credentialization, the examples from Dlula and Dhlomo point to a far less deferential practice. Cited speech is more often reproduced not as authoritative last word but approached as a sympathetic or usable resource, called in, marshalled, controlled and merged to form a new script of the writer's own making. Acts of

writing in the colonial context take shape as dense, textual assemblages or creative composites of ready-to-hand materials. In this process, canonical texts are surveyed, appropriated and plundered and choice verbal fragments are re-arranged and composed according to new and unanticipated logics.

The Black periodical press also yields frequent examples of citational swerve when quoted material is put to use in the analysis of local political issues, situations and conditions as fragments and snapshots from remote contexts were re-directed, transposed and re-oriented.⁶ Selope Thema, for instance, installs the myth of Laocoon as a powerful visual figure for the history of slavery and the economic exploitation of Africans on white-owned farms: 'What the serpent was to Laocoon slavery with its entwining folds and its slow torture has been to humanity' (*Umteteli* 23 December 1922, 3). A reader who used the pseudonym, 'Muntu' adopted a similar practice: Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality' about the passing of a rural idyll is transposed and adapted to a critique of the devastating effects of the Urban Areas Act which saw Black people expelled from their homes and pushed into segregated locations:

And their bitterness of soul in parting with old friends and sites cannot
be described, for to them
'It is not now as it hath been of yore, –
Turn whereso'er (they) may,
By night or day,
The things which (they) have seen

⁶ See also Hofmeyr on the way in which Shakespearian texts in particular 'offered an allegorical resource through which [Black intellectuals could] comment on the oppression of apartheid Africa' (2006: 259). In the forums of the Black intelligentsia such as the famed Lovedale Literary and Debating Society which ran from the nineteenth century to at least the 1950s, Shakespeare 'became a way of talking about politics' (2006, 259).

they now can see no more. Anyway, 'should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never be thought to min'?'
(*'Muntu'* *Bantu World* 9 June 1934, 9).

In this example of creative transposition, we note the shift from the personal to the communal voice and the way in which Wordsworth's lines are conjoined with those of the Scottish folksong 'Auld Lang Syne', also slightly adjusted in order to speak to the loss of former communities. In similar fashion, in an article by prolific Johannesburg letter writer and journalist, Walter Nhlapo, Longfellow's epic poem, 'Hiawatha' about a Native American hero and Christian convert makes an unexpected appearance as part of an argument against the immiseration of Black South Africans as a result of taxation: 'Oh the famine and the fever!/Oh the wasting of the fame/Oh the blasting of the fever/Oh the wailing of the children/... All the earth is sick and famished' (*Bantu World* 7 May 1932, 2). And Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall', a melodramatic poem about unrequited love, is made to speak to the plight of a young African woman who was blinded by a white farmer's son in a shooting incident (*Bantu World* 1 July 1933, 8).

Some of the most interesting examples of citational swerve come from Clements Kadalie, the Nyasaland-born, mission-educated leader of the largest workers' union at the time, the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU). As David Johnson has argued, Kadalie's writing and speeches had a strongly appropriative and syncretic character, drawing on Marcus Garvey's 'Back to Africa' rhetoric, Biblical stories and Marxist vocabulary. An article written to commemorate the shooting of 23 workers in Port Elizabeth on 23 October 1920 (*Workers Herald* 22 October, 3), includes the rewriting of the poem 'In Flanders' Field' by Canadian World War I poet, John McCrae. As Johnson demonstrates, the quiet substitution of 'In

Flanders Field' with 'in trenched graveyard' significantly alters the force and direction of the poem: 'Instead of addressing the reader in the voice of the First World War's dead soldiers [...], Kadalie's adaptation assumes the voice of Port Elizabeth's murdered black workers' (2020, 53). Flanders fields become a 'trenched graveyard'; protesting workers are granted the status of war heroes; and workers' struggles against economic exploitation are ascribed the scope and gravitas of a world conflict. In defiance of racist erasure, the poem in its altered version 'insists upon the equivalence of white and black deaths, and proclaims the humanity of black victims of police violence' (2020, 53).

As suggested, Western literary resources were used to amplify and explore conditions of inequality and states of discrimination in South Africa; they also provided the terms in which just social futures for Black South Africans could be imagined and form the departure points for alternative theorising: thus 'Resurgam' draws on eighteenth-century Irish lawyer and orator John Philpot Curran's words as a way of measuring the gap between current conditions and an anticipated justice: 'And we wait for the time when it can be said of the Black man, "His soul walks abroad in her own majesty; and he stands redeemed, regenerated and disenthralled by the irresistible genius of universal emancipation"' (*Umteteli* 10 January 1925, 3). In other cases, the full force of citational indictment emerges in the form of deliberate omission. Thus, in another critique of racism in white letters to the press, H.I.E. Dhlomo's brother – who wrote a decade's worth of satirical columns for *Bantu World* under the guise of R. Roamer Esq. – asks whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer...' and leaves it at that. The omission of the well-known conclusion – 'or take arms against a sea of troubles' – grants these words a particular taboo value, thus heightening their presence (and possibility) through

omission (*Bantu World* 17 November 1934, 8). If Black readers worked with and against canonical texts in order to turn them towards the cause of Black emancipation, others also installed them for more conservative projects. Political activist Selby Msimang provides a key example. In several articles to *Umteteli* in the 1920s, Msimang drew on quotations from John Ruskin, J.S. Mill, Robert Herrick and Fielding's *Tom Jones* to advance his critique of colonial politics. At the same time, he also interpolated Edmund Burke's 'Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol' (1777) and Milton's political treatise *Tenure of the Kings and Magistrates* (1649) in order to build a conservative critique of populist revolts and irrational 'mob force' (*Umteteli* 9 May 1925, 4).

Newspaper citation includes several examples which exposed the disjuncture between canonical perspectives and the realities of colonial oppression. The ringing declaration from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 'What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties!' appears out of sorts when set within the context of British Imperialism and the history of 'brute force'. As Selope Thema concludes, 'It is no wonder that those of 'us who are not yet "civilised" are puzzled as to the superiority of civilised man' (*Umteteli* 13 July 1921, 2). In a similar rhetorical move, a letter from L.H.P. from Benoni near Johannesburg interpolates the rousing forms of Victorian poetry to register the limits of the discourse of assertive endeavour in the context of racial discrimination. Taking up the struggle for decent wages on the part of Black teachers, L.H.P. invokes several lines from Longfellow's 'A Psalm of Life' in order to characterise the feelings of excited anticipation felt by newly-graduated teachers; in particular, their desire to 'leave behind them':

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,

A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

However, as the writer interjects, 'let us draw a kindly veil over the glaring irony that dogged their aspirations'. Far more appropriate for the inevitable discrimination they would face in segregationist South Africa are the words from that 'splendorous poem', 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' by Tennyson: 'Their's is not to reason Why/Theirs but to do and die' (*Bantu World* 18 August 1934, 8).

If the Black periodical press provides ample evidence of the reading of western texts against the grain, it also alerts us to the many occasions when canonical texts were actively refuted or radically re-read: H.I.E. Dhlomo's materialist critique of Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1903) supplies a pertinent example (*Umteteli* 14 March 1931, 2-3); as does Hazael M Maimane's refusal of Thomas Henry Huxley's racist views about the eternal subordination of 'our dusky cousins' (*Umteteli* 22 July 1922, 4). Some of the most striking examples of creative adaptation of Western sources by Black writers are the examples of the rewriting of Biblical sources. Josiah Maphumulo, prolific journalist for *Ilanga lase Natal*, offers advice to his 'oppressed patriots' who face daily police harassment by means of a radical elaboration of a verse from the Biblical book of James: In Maphumulo's re-reading, the original verse, 'Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord...' is merged with a verse from Psalms 96: "'Be patient, then, brethren, till the presence of the Lord" who will adjust matters righteously...lifting up him that is poor and him that hath no helper, and taking vengeance on all evil-doers' (*Bantu World* 29 December 1934, 8). In this example, the original call to patience is reshaped as retributive prophecy; its biblical cadences and prophetic gravitas appropriated for a more radical argument about the uplifting of the

poor and the promise of vengeance on all evil-doers. Finally, the most flagrant rewriting of a literary text has to be Kadalie's re-interpretation of the conservative novel, *Bayete!* by William Heaton Nicholls as an heroic story of African resistance and the necessity of organised, collective action. As Johnson demonstrates, this was in direct opposition to 'author's declared intention to warn complacent white readers about the imminent dangers of a revolutionary black uprising' (2020, 55).

Several examples attest to the ways in which male writers harnessed the resources of a misogynist Western canon to remind women of their subordinate social status. Some women readers offered resistance by turning this powerful cultural capital against men. Albertina M. Sikiti, for example, condemns Walter Nhlapo's consistently misogynist arguments in *Bantu World* 'as absolutely repugnant' by invoking Dr Johnson's famous critique of the intellectual pretensions of the 'pedant' (8 August 1936, 12). Mrs A.S. Makubalo, in turn, drew on Aesop's fable 'The Fox and the Crow' for her critique of male sexual predation and the force of 'sweet words' designed to 'take the "Cheese" out of [a woman's] mouth' (*Bantu World* 16 November 1936, 14). Other writers were inspired to look further afield: popular *Bantu World* journalist and theatre impresario, Johanna Phahlane, writing under the pseudonym, 'Lady Porcupine', crystallises her defence of women's character against several misogynist attacks in *Bantu World* with a quote from revolutionary Italian activist, Giuseppe Mazzini's *The Duties of Man* (1860) whose words, she says, are 'more winged and weighty than any of my own could be'. With Mazzini, Phahlane urges her (gentlemanly) audience to consider women 'to be your equal in your civil and political life' while also reworking Mazzini's words to cement its application for the discourse of African emancipation: 'be ye the two human wings that

lift the soul towards the ideal we are destined to attain – Marching – Forward – to Africa’ (*Bantu World* 11 January 1936, 8). Another well-known Johannesburg figure and newspaper contributor, Ellen Pumla Ngozwana closed a series of articles on ‘Female Emancipation’ with the stirring final lines of Henley’s poem ‘Invictus’. Ngozwana’s article is striking for the connection she makes between women’s oppression and the ideology of racial supremacy. Against the ‘feeling of inferiority’ arising from a racist society, Ngozwana offers Henley’s heroic image of a soul that is ‘unconquerable’; a head that is ‘bloody but unbowed’ (*Bantu World* 1 June 1935, 12).

That Black readers looked for inspiration beyond the Western canon is also evident. The lines from a Negro spiritual ‘I dunno what my mother want to stay here for/’Cause this ole world’s no friend to her’ re-appears in the pages of *Umteteli* as a starting point for ANC veteran and writer Sol T. Plaatje’s arguments against contemporary African hostility to the presence of ‘Blantynes’ or migrant workers in South Africa (*Umteteli* 3 March 1928, 5). Plaatje’s arguments in favour of African hospitality trace various examples in history, and invoke the Sesotho proverb: ‘Mo-laea Kgosi o aba a e itaela’ (If you make the rules, know that they are applicable to you too).⁷ In this example of citational form, Black diasporic and local proverbial wisdom provide the frame for an early South African argument against xenophobia. A further example comes from an account by Kadalie on the origins and development of the ICU, entitled ‘The Romance of African Labour’ (*The Workers’ Herald*, 14 September 1926, 1): he writes, ‘[A]ll over South Africa one heard a joyful prayer from people who had lived in darkness for the last three hundred years since ‘Dark Africa’ was exploited by foreign adventurers’. He then interjects with a verse from a hymn, written by Barbados-born Arnold J Ford, a Garvey supporter

⁷ Grateful thanks for Connie Makgabo for this translation.

who compiled *The Universal Ethiopian Hymnal*, the hymnbook of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

O Africa, awaken!
The morning is at hand
No more art thou forsaken
O bounteous Motherland.
From far thy sons and daughters
Are hastning back to thee.
Their cry rings o'er the waters
That Afric' shall be free!

Like many Garveyites, Arnold Ford held the view that Africans would be awakened from their slumber by the 'sons and daughters' of former slaves who would bring the message of emancipation to Africa. Kadalie's interpolation of this hymn reinforced this message, cast Kadalie in the role of liberator and affirmed powerful solidarities across the Black diaspora.

3. Conclusion

Citational form provides insight into what books have become internalised, memorised and inhabited as the result of a particular kind of cultural education or milieu; it is an indication of what has come to be cherished and respected, what has been sought out and actively drawn in or, more prosaically, what happens to be at hand. As several examples indicate, the words of others come to be regarded as both communal and personal possessions; at times not even formally cited but unobtrusively merged with the new speaker's voice. As is also evident, this practice was the habit of both ordinary and more socially prominent readers, both male and female. The reproduction of verbal form in the pages of the Black newspaper indicates the expectation, if not the existence of, a shared cultural and

moral community; the ways in which citation also worked to confirm and perpetuate these ties. Apart from a greater emphasis amongst political radicals on the ideas of Lenin, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and Marcus Garvey, the wider evidence of Black reading cultures in inter-war South Africa points to a common stock of books and writers, a shared bibliosphere that was drawn on, appreciated, responded to and appropriated by radical and more conservative writers alike.⁸ The Black colonial library made no evaluative distinctions between literary and non-literary texts and, while it was strongly oriented towards Western literature (both canonical and popular), it is also evident that critical, creative and appropriative reading practices were not restricted to these sources. As the increasing interest in African-American literature attests, the Black colonial bibliosphere played an important part in strengthening and performing existing connections and solidarities with the contemporary Black diaspora. Although women readers/writers were far less disposed to the wielding of quotes in their articles and letters to the editor – and occasionally resisted the authority this practice represented – there is nevertheless evidence that they drew from the same reading store as their male counterparts.

Beyond imaginary assemblages of lost libraries, the history of citational form offers insight into the particular dynamics of readers' encounters with books in the colonial period. It sheds light on the strong bonds that were forged between ordinary readers and their books and the multiple ways in which books were read, used and

⁸ Citational form in the Soviet-inspired journals *The International* and *The South African Worker/Umsebenzi* reflect a slightly different corpus, including citations from the works of William Morris, Upton Sinclair and Jack London. These are suggestive of the wider Left-wing culture from which these journals drew and to which they had access through the Soviet International (For more details, see Johnson (2020: 71-103)

remade: as political critique, moral judgement; as sources of solace, inspiration and resistance and as sounding boards and departure points for the development of theoretical perspectives and scholarly arguments by authoritative, often sceptical, Black readers. The books that made up the colonial Black library in this period provided the ground on which anti-colonial theory would take shape. Colonial citation practices point to a long history of non-sanctioned and unanticipated engagements with western-colonial authorities as marginalised colonial actors both exploited the authority of high-status interlocutors to support and embellish their arguments and refashioned these sources in the service of alternative intellectual-political projects. Du Bois' (and Seloape Thema's) description of Black reading as the summons of an equal serves as a fitting model for this practice; a model which also asserts the rights of the subaltern reader to access any available intellectual and literary resources; in short, to read what he or she likes.

It is no accident that the citation practices explored in this paper occur mainly in the English sections of these multi-lingual newspapers, nor that they are principally directed at the Western library. In the examples discussed above, citational form presents itself as a key site of colonial transaction, decolonial praxis and Black agency; citation as a verbal artefact which encodes a moment of interaction, negotiation and reinterpretation in the colonial contact zone. As Partha Chatterjee argues, citation is an important part of the 'fascinating story of the encounter between a world-conquering Western thought and the intellectual modes of non-Western cultures' (1986, 41). Colonial citation can be understood as the 'consumption of things English' (Gikandi 2001, 357); the movement of African subjects through the 'anatomy of colonialism and their meticulous translation of colonial culture into the idiom of self-making' (2001, 357). Without

subsuming all instances of subaltern citation within an anti-colonial or de-colonial frame, it is nevertheless possible to read newspaper citation as a site in which Western epistemologies are opened up to the possibility of alternative renditions and untoward readings; a practice in which a Western optic is both centred and de-centred. The history of citation reveals the extent to which Black reading and writing cultures were in many respects defined by a reading practice which redirected Western texts to the service of both anti-racist and anti-colonial argument. As such, it underscores the prominence of commanding, critical and sceptical reading practices in which texts were apprehended for new purposes and read in errant ways.

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"good book it made me want to die": The affected and affective readings of a controversial early-20th-century queer tragedy

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Abstract: Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) was published during a period marked by tensions between modernity and conservatism. The novel's sentimental style and dramatically tragic conclusion have drawn both criticism for its excessive melodrama as well as appreciation for its emotional resonance. The intense affectivity at the centre of many conflicted readings makes the book a useful point of reference through which we can examine the reactions that a contentious text can create in both professional and non-professional readers. This paper explores the present-day lay readers' reception of *The Well of Loneliness* on the book-reviewing website Goodreads and highlights how they express strong affective reactions in their written reflections in a distinctly non-professional way. The colourful, impressionistic and often performative language used to describe embodied emotions presents fascinating discussion points about how people engage with literature and each other.

Keywords: *The Well of Loneliness*, queer literature, Goodreads, online book reviews, lay reading

1. Introduction

Radclyffe Hall's infamous novel *The Well of Loneliness* was first published in 1928 and subsequently banned for its earnest plea for the acceptance of people with non-normative sexuality and gender. Written at a time when modernist views on literature clashed with the post-WWI British government's interest in censoring publications with perceived harm to the national consciousness, the book became a rallying point in the fight against the increasing censorship, but, at the same time, it was criticised for its "middlebrow" oversentimental narrative style. The overall heightened emotional quality of the story, combined with the theatrically tragic ending, has both invited derision for its artless melodrama and admiration for its emotional impact. Since then, the novel's intense affectivity, alongside its controversial depiction of sexuality, has been at the centre of many conflicted readings. This makes *The Well of Loneliness*, in several ways, an excellent frame of reference through which we can examine the divergent reactions that a contentious text can create both in the past and present, particularly with references to the different expectations of literary criticism and everyday reading.

The questions of professional vs. lay reader, or "good" and "bad" reading, have been extensively debated in English language literary theory in the last decades (e.g., Emre 2017; Felski 2020; Guillory 2022). It has become a point of interest how non-professional readers are often referenced in literary studies but seldom studied directly. The common reader habitually remains an impersonal and abstract hypothetical, construed of the author's own perception of an amateur audience – personal experience or generalised strawman figures are utilised for the purposes of cultural critique. At the same time, the multiplicity of real reader-response is left unaddressed due to its complexity. Because of this, researchers are increasingly interested in how to study everyday lay reading, especially to discover how it is

different from and similar to professional literary critique. While the latter is distinct in its grounding in theory or historical awareness, both types of reading are characterised by how the reader identifies with the text (Halpern 2008). What does distinguish the two, however, is the genre-based principles on which the production of the different types of reader-response operates. Since it is difficult (if not impossible, in this context) to examine what happens inside a person's head, the study of the process of reading is usually possible only through the retrospective product of the reader's reflections. Expectations of professional detachment govern the writing of literary analyses, whereas lay reading is often represented by its openness to emotion-based responses. Consequently, in the context of this paper, lay reading is not considered so much as a stable identity (i.e., someone is a lay reader), but as an *act* that a person engages in, no matter their professional background, that results in a particular mode of expression defined by genre conventions as well as their interpretive communities.

For the purpose of exploring lay reading, the book cataloguing website Goodreads offers unprecedented access to an intimate account of readers' engagement with literature. In contrast to the reviews on the site of its parent company, Amazon.com, Goodreads book reviews are more "content-oriented" and "journalistic", focusing on the experience of reading rather than being just "purchase-oriented" product reviews (Dimitrov et al. 2015). Despite the increasing influence of external factors on the site's book reviewing culture (such as the various commercial interests of the publishers, or the platform itself, that can result in strategic review manipulations), the user-generated content on Goodreads is still an advantageous source for the study of reader-response and, as Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo (2019, 248) demonstrate, it provides an opportunity for

researchers to encounter emerging forms of discourse. Additionally, Goodreads is not only a website for independent book cataloguing, where its users can add books to their own virtual libraries, but it is also a site for social networking, where people can interact with each other and discuss what they have read. The user-generated reviews are not just personal notes but form a basis for the site's main functionality of providing book recommendations. In this sense, all Goodreads book reviews exist as a part of a communal project, created *by* readers *for* readers, a site for "socially networked reading" (Nakamura 2013). The generic features of Goodreads reviews are, accordingly, influenced by the social nature of the online platform where they are published. The combination of lay reading's emotional and experiential engagement with literature and the attention-oriented nature of 21st-century social book reviewing creates a fertile ground for the development of unique affective registers, which become especially apparent in the reviews for culturally significant sentimental tragedies like *The Well of Loneliness*.

Different readers' responses to the aesthetics of this queer classic have long contended on the artistic value of this work, dividing people's opinions beyond social and political standpoints. After briefly tracing the controversial reception of Radclyffe Hall's queer classic from its publication in the early 20th century, this article will explore the present-day lay readers' reception of the novel to discover how people express their reactions to the work's heavy emotional content. The discussion is based on a qualitative analysis of 1629 online book reviews posted on Goodreads from April 2007 to October 2024 and forms a part of a broader project examining the 21st-century reception of *The Well of Loneliness*. The data was manually tagged in an inductive and open coding process to map emerging categories while recognising the individuality of different readings. A small

selection of the findings is analysed here. How people perceive the novel's emotional tonality and aesthetic style, what responses are elicited, what attitudes are evoked and what stances the readers take – these aspects are some of the main questions that people set out to address when writing reviews and are thus central to the online review genre as a whole. The discussion will particularly focus on how readers express strong affective reactions in their written reflections, triggered by identification and empathy. The term affect is used here to underline the interconnected nature of both mind and body in experiencing emotions both as conscious mental reactions and autonomic embodied sensations. What happens when readers leave themselves exposed to the full impact of an emotionally loaded literary text instead of striving for analytical detachment? The colourful, impressionistic and often performative language used to describe seemingly indescribable embodied emotions demonstrates a distinctly non-professional approach to reading and presents fascinating discussion points about how people engage with literature.

2. The controversial affect of *The Well of Loneliness*

Soon after the publication of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* in the summer of 1928, the book was banned after a notorious court case under the United Kingdom Obscene Publications Act of 1857. According to the so-called "Hicklin test" applied in these cases, a publication is obscene when it has the tendency "to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences" (Williams 1955, 632). The legislation had been created in the mid-19th century to stop the spread of pornography imported from the continent, but because of its very vague definition of obscenity, the Act could be used to exert targeted

social control in a broad range of ways (see, e.g., Potter 2013). Many readers who pick up *The Well of Loneliness* today are surprised (and some, disappointed) to find an utter lack of explicit sexual content that one might assume to find in a work labelled as “obscene”. Indeed, the novel is seen as unexpectedly old-fashioned and chaste. The content that was considered so immoral as to be banned by the conservative censors in 1928 was the topic of gender non-conformity and homosexuality. As James Douglas (1928, 10), a conservative journalist, infamously wrote in response to the novel after its publication: “I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul.” Calling for the Home Secretary to prosecute this work of fiction, Douglas’s incitement drew polemicised attention to the otherwise well-received book, which, in turn, prompted an unprecedented examination of women’s same-sex desire in public discourse, establishing the work’s notoriety and popularity, as well as cementing the novel’s status as the “lesbian bible” for years to come.

The Well of Loneliness, unlike other novels at the time that featured women’s same-sex desire, was banned precisely because of its clear articulation of the issue, which left no doubt about its intention and interpretation. It was crafted to promote tolerance for the people labelled as immoral by Douglas and his conservative peers – a “propaganda novel”, as Hall herself called it (Roche 2019, 81). The book retells the life story of a British aristocrat named Stephen Gordon, who feels ostracised from society because she does not feel comfortable with social expectations for women: she dresses in masculine fashions, engages in pastimes that were popular among men in this period, and she feels passionate love towards other women. By conveying Stephen’s struggles, Hall wanted to introduce the readers to the misfortunes of sexually non-conforming people, to

invoke sympathy and argue that “sexual inversion” – as the contemporary medical science called it – should be accepted in society. She cries out to her readers:

How long would God sit still and endure this insult offered to His creation? How long tolerate the preposterous statement that inversion was not a part of nature? For since it existed what else could it be? All things that existed were a part of nature! (Hall 2014, 368)

The novel is emotionally heavy-handed, deeply religious, and conveys anguish and desperation. Despite Stephen finding a community and love with a woman called Mary, the book ends on an unhappy note, with Stephen sacrificing their relationship so that Mary could live a more socially acceptable life by marrying a man. In the final paragraphs, Stephen has a vision of a horde of ghostly inverts pleading for acceptance and compassion:

‘God,’ she gasped, ‘we believe; we have told You we believe... We have not denied You; then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, O God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!’ (Hall 2014, 399)

The earnestness of *The Well* and the mode in which it was delivered, using a virtuous main character and a traditional romantic bildungsroman style, the format of which was easily digestible and understandable to the general reader, was precisely what made the novel so dangerous in the eyes of the prosecution. Hannah Roche (2019, 16, 81–82) argues that Hall uses the “domain of the heterosexual and familiar” for the queer content of the novel in a tactically successful ploy to advocate her message. Indeed, the 1929 defence of the book in American courts succeeded precisely because it emphasised the role the novel’s oversentimental Victorian narrative played in moderating its disagreeable aspects (Taylor 2001, 275). The

presiding magistrate in the UK case recognised that “this book has some literary merit”, which makes the “poison” of the novel all the more “palatable” and “insidious” (Biron 2002, 41). Even James Douglas (1928, 10) admits that the “veil of sentiment [flung] over their depravity”, the book’s “cleverness” and “seductive” nature increase its “moral danger”. Interestingly, during the court proceedings, it was not the author, the publishers or any of the forty literary professionals willing to come to the witness stand that dictated the meaning and value of *The Well of Loneliness* as a work of literature. Their statements were deemed inadmissible before they could be voiced, and the authority of interpretation was wholly in the hands of the court officials, who relied on the retelling of the text, the Home Secretary, and other conservative opinion leaders – people who we might call, in this context, amateur readers of literature.

It is ironic how the novel found opponents on both sides of the political spectrum: conservatives, while appreciating its literary qualities, found its sexual politics unacceptable, and more liberal literary figures, while vehemently defending Hall’s right to publish her book, were put off by the conservatism of the text itself. Obviously, the Victorian sentimental style with its elevated emotional intensity was not exactly what the modernist literary critics considered good quality “highbrow” literature at the time (on ‘the battle of the brows’ see, e.g., Brown and Grover 2012). Virginia Woolf famously described it as follows:

At this moment our thoughts centre upon Sapphism – we have to uphold the morality of the Well of all that’s stagnant and lukewarm and neither one thing or the other; *The Well of Loneliness*. (Woolf 1978, 555)

She is referring to how the novel aspires to be a work of the highest artistic quality but really is a middling novel for the “middlebrow”

masses. It is, in her words, a “meritorious dull book” (Woolf 1980, 193) – laudable for its depiction of a topical issue, worthy to be defended on principle, but, nevertheless, a dreary and uninteresting read. Leonard Woolf (1928, 593) had expressed a similar sentiment in his published review in *The Nation & Athenaeum*, that Hall demands to be judged by high standards and, according to those, the novel is a failure: it is “formless” and “chaotic”. He describes how

It is emotionally that the book loses way, and a sign of this is Miss Hall’s use of language. (...) [A]s the book goes on, life and emotion die out of the language, and Miss Hall drops into journalese or the tell-tale novelist’s clichés, when she wants to heighten the emotion. (Woolf 1928, 593)

The criticism here is not that the novel has a heightened emotional tone, but that the way that Hall conveys this emotion is formulaic. This response is in line with the early 20th-century modernist literary criticism’s focus on intellectually engaged reading, which did consider affective responses in cultivating aesthetic judgements but emphasised the active and rational role that a reader should have in the process, instead of remaining a passive recipient of formulaic ideas (see, e.g., Pease 2000, 166–72). While the overall feedback to the novel at the time, other than the conservative, homophobic moral outrage, often complimented the work’s earnestness and beauty, it is this kind of criticism of the book’s style that has persisted and is quoted to this day.

Since the original publication and reception of *The Well of Loneliness*, the book has gone through a varied and often controversial history. Because of its reputation as an important part of a queer literature canon, its primary readership has developed into one looking for identification. The novel has been variously described by many lesbian readers as a foundational text, becoming a central

object for critical discourses concerning lesbian culture and identity formation, regardless of whether it is presented as a subject of criticism or praise. As Doan and Prosser note (2002, 16), it is considered to be one of the most famous representations of lesbianism in literature, while at the same time being also seen as an “infamous misrepresentation” that solidified homophobic and misogynistic ideas about lesbianism in the popular consciousness. With the rising lesbian feminist movements in the 1970s, the book was heavily criticised for its depiction of lesbianism as a morbid case of female masculinity, but also for its failure to imagine sustainable relationships between women (e.g., Rule 1975; Faderman and Williams 1977) – it was seen as “a narrative of damnation” (Stimpson 1981, 364). Subsequent analyses have taken more complex standpoints regarding how to position the text in its contemporary historical context (e.g., Newton 1984; Whitlock 1987), have recognised its innovation in developing a literary language of lesbian eroticism (e.g., Gilbert and Gubar 1989) and have introduced crucial butch and transgender readings of the novel (e.g., Halberstam 1998; Prosser 1998). Nevertheless, the discomfort created by the author’s explicit anti-Black racism, privilege blindness and her utilisation of 19th-century pathologising and heteronormative medical sexology has remained a backdrop for most critical readings.

The aesthetics of *The Well of Loneliness* have not been examined as extensively as its conceptualisations of gender and sexuality, but the established contrast with modernism has highlighted chiefly the novel’s artistic qualities as lacking (e.g., Scanlon 1996). Terry Castle’s (2002, 394–95) exclamations in the afterword of a critical collection on the book reflect a widespread conflicted reading of the text’s form, calling it “monstrously

overwrought” with its “enunciatory awfulness” where “specimens of gruesomeness abound”:

How bad, bad, bad is Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*? Like many bookish lesbians I seem to have spent much of my adult life making jokes about it, as if to fend it off once and for all. After all, it *is* quite possibly the worst novel ever written, crammed full with so many ghastly passages one is hard-pressed to choose one's favourite hideousness among them. (Castle 2002, 394–95)

The stylistic aspects only seem to emphasise the novel's handling of non-normative sex-gender subjects as “miserable, unwanted people, who have no right to love, no right to compassion because they're maimed, hideously maimed and ugly” (Hall 2014, 186). Looking at the general attitudes towards the book today, the critique raised in the 1970s of the negative portrayal of lesbian relationships still finds some resonance in the broader cultural climate of the 21st century, where people believe that queer fiction should emphasise positive representation instead of constantly reproducing stories that end in tragedy.

3. Lay readers' attitudes

Lay readers' book reviewing, as established, operates on principles different from professional literary criticism and academic research. The success of a novel as a work of art, in this context, is grounded in a subjective attunement to the text, not necessarily the intellectual appreciation of its language-use or narrative structure. Looking at online book reviews, thus, often gives us a more immediate, intimate and deliberately *self*-reflective account of a reader's engagement with literature. People's opinions of *The Well of Loneliness* naturally vary from laudatory praise to utterly damning indictments. However, examining a larger scope of reader-response

allows researchers to detect broader trends in a book’s reception. By the numerical ratings alone, *The Well of Loneliness* has an average rating of 3.76 stars on a 5-star scale by over 19 thousand Goodreads users (at the time of writing, September 2025), indicating that the overall response to the novel is mostly more positive than negative. To gain more insight into what opinions lie behind these assessments, I tagged various attitudinal markers that readers used when examining the dataset of 1629 Goodreads reviews. In summarising the findings, I utilised a categorisation system inspired by Martin and White’s (2005) framework for mapping attitudes, modifying the semantic groupings according to this dataset’s particularities. For example, a useful distinction in the book review genre is between the affect that readers *ascribe* to the work that they are reviewing and the affect that they feel like the work *evoked* in them while reading. The presentation of the examples in **Table 1** demonstrates one possible way to summarise the wide range of attitudes expressed towards a book in a corpus of reader-response.

Table 1: Examples of how readers’ attitudes towards *The Well of Loneliness* are described in the Goodreads reviews. The number of coded segments with these descriptors is shown in the brackets.

Category	Examples
Affect	
ascribed affect	“sad*” (138), “tragedy/-ic*” (96), “powerful” (38), “miserable/misery” (28), “melodrama*” (23), “drama*” (21), “pain*” (22), “emotional” (18), “bleak” (15), “melanchol*” (12), “angsty” (9), “sentimental” (9), “intense”(7), “cheesy” (5), “drippy/-ing” (5), “hopeless*” (5), “passionate” (5), “dreary” (4), “hopeful” (4), “pitiful” (4), “brutal” (3)

evoked affect		<i>"depress**" (113), "heartbreak*/-wrenching" (107), "cry" (43), "moved/moving" (42), "pain**" (22), "frustrat**" (37), "sad**" (33), "touch**" (26), "annoy**" (22), "devastat**" (19), "tear" (16) "hurt" (14), "upset**" (14), "tiring/tire**" (13), "sympath**" (11), "empath**" (9), "anger/angry" (8), "comfort**" (8), "sob" (7), "uncomfortable" (7), "disturb**" (6), "insufferable" (6), "mad" (6), "irritat**" (5), "exhaust**" (4), "unbearable" (3), "emotional" (2), "hopeful" (2)</i>
Judgement		
novelty		<i>"first" (61), "(still) relevant" (34), "dated" (29), "groundbreaking" (29), "outdated**" (26), "modern**" (22), "revolution**" (17), "pioneer**" (16), "timeless**" (16), "ahead of its time" (14), "old-fashioned" (11), "landmark" (9), "old**" (9), "refreshing" (7), "breakthrough" (3), "milestone" (3), "trailblazing" (2)</i>
normality		<i>"universal**" (14), "strange" (10), "unique" (10), "weird" (9), "cliché**" (8), "bizarre" (4), "rare**" (3), "odd" (3), "unusual" (3)</i>
tenacity		<i>"brave**" (40), "courage**" (34), "bold**" (9), "daring" (6)</i>
authenticity		<i>"real**" (51), "honest**" (33), "auto-/biograph**" (30), "accurat**" (14), "raw" (14), "explicit**" (10), "frank**" (8), "straightforward**" (6), "open**" (5), "sincere" (5), "forthright**" (3)</i>
propriety		<i>"racist/-m" (111), "classist/-m" (18), "misogyn**" (17), "privileged" (16), "homophob**" (15), "problematic" (15), "sexist/-m" (12), "feminist/-m" (7), "flawed" (7), "heteronormative" (6), "transphob**" (3)</i>
Appreciation		
reaction	engagement	<i>"interest**" (185), "boring/bor**" (67), "fascinat**" (61), "relate/relat**" (59), "dull**" (28), "compel**" (23), "tedious**" (20), "engag**" (18), "resonat**" (14), "connect**" (12), "grip**" (9), "charm**" (8), "thought-provoking" (8), "evocative" (4), "haunt**" (5), "immers**" (5), "entertaining" (4) "en-/thrall**" (4), "mesmerising" (3)</i>
	partiality	<i>"love" (129), "enjoy**" (115), "like" (82), "great" (65), "glad" (60), "dislik*/not like" (33), "favourite" (29), "hate" (29), "disappoint**" (23), "good" (25), "the best" (23), "grateful" (19), "nice" (10), "bad" (9), "thankful**" (7), "shit/crappy" (6), "terrible" (6), "dissatisf**" (4), "horrible" (4), "the worst" (4)</i>

composition	style	"repeat*/repetiti*" (28), "poetic" (22), "dense" (18), "over-written/-wrought/-blown" (15), "meander*" (13), "clunky" (10), "flat" (10), "heavy-handed" (9), "(overly) descriptive" (8), "flowery" (6), "purple" (6), "dry" (5), "rambling" (5), "stilted" (5), "wordy" (5), "clumsy" (4), "lyrical" (4), "stiff" (4), "awkward" (3), "monotonous" (2)
	length	"slow*" (71), "drag*" (40), "too/over(ly) long" (32), "slog*" (14), "lengthy" (12)
	complexity	"complex" (17), "difficult*" (16), "easy" (14), "confus*" (13), "hard" (13), "readable" (9), "accessible" (8), "complicated" (3)
value	general quality	"importan*" (133), "well-written" (49), "amaze/-ing*" (39), "wonderful*" (39), "excellent*" (36), "significan*" (30), "incredible" (27), "brilliant*" (26), "fantastic*" (15), "impact" (11), "masterpiece" (11), "value/-able" (9), "impressive" (7), "outstanding" (7), "awesome" (5), "worthwhile"(5), "extraordinary" (4)
	aesthetic quality	"beauty/-ful*" (185), "lovely" (21), "poignant*" (20), "vivid" (17), "gorgeous*" (13), "insightful" (13), "profound*" (11), "sweet" (8), "stunning" (5)

According to various readers on Goodreads, Hall's novel has not lost its relevance even in the 21st century. On the one hand, when we look at the category of composition, many people still describe it as, for example, "*repetitive*", "*overwritten*", "*clunky*", "*clichéd*", "*purple*"; the novel is seen as an "*overly long*", "*dense*" and "*slow*" book that "*drags*". This, consecutively, leads to their reactions of boredom and disappointment. If the book is criticised, it is usually done so for (apart from its ethical issues with racism, classism and other "*outdated ideologies*") its perceived deficiencies in form. To some reviewers, however, the novel is also very "*accessible*" and it "*is written in such an easy, readable style*" that "*encapsulates a lifetime's worth of experience in crisp, clear language*", when considering the complexity of the composition. They perceive it to be "*honest*" and "*accurate*" in terms of authenticity, often influenced by their interpretation of the novel as an autobiographical account of Radclyffe Hall's own life experience,

which, in turn, makes them appreciate it as a *"brave and poignant piece of writing"*. Many readers recognise that the book fulfils its purpose as a plea for equality even now. As one user writes: *"What makes this book so good is not necessarily the story, though the story is well written and engaging, but the emotions it provokes. This is what I think allows it to age so well."* The reader's affective resonance with the text is what makes it memorable, allowing them to experience intense reactions that, while not always positive, certainly make the reading unforgettable.

The way people identify with the text and the characters plays an important role in the way this resonance is developed during reading. Using Rita Felski's (2020) categorisation, four strands of literary identification can be differentiated: alignment, allegiance, recognition and empathy. When people express their alignment with the narrative and its characters, their accounts of their engagement with the story are highlighted when they, for example, describe being *"compelled"* by the main character, seeing things through her eyes and feeling *"connected"* to the story, or, conversely, describing it as *"myopic"* or *"random"*. The main influence in this aspect is the work's length, structure and descriptive style, especially when it concerns the introduction of new characters and the readers' attunement to their perspectives. People's value-based allegiance to the story's moral messaging is often determined by their preexisting beliefs and moral judgment – almost none of the readers who choose to review *The Well of Loneliness* express overt homophobia, though some people criticise, for example, the *"emotional arm-twisting"* of the book, which seems over the top and makes the conflict seem more artificial. Many reviewers, however, convey their support of the main character, frequently expressing their personal connection through domestic imaginaries, "what if" scenarios or direct addresses to the characters

or situations, instead of intellectual argumentations. Quite predictably, many readers relate to the book's message through their own (queer) identities, but several people also use this as a basis to critique the novel's representation of marginalised people, its misogyny, chauvinism, snobbishness and racism. Even when they are in allegiance with the book's message about sexual minorities, they are repelled by its numerous problematic attributes that undermine positive beliefs about social justice. Though the lack of moral allegiance affects many readers' engagement with the story, a large part of the readership has, nevertheless, found recognition in the novel – they see it as “*relatable*” and “*feel seen and understood*”. Many of these descriptions of identification give the impression of intense affective responses and are thus some of the most memorable aspects of these reviews. The formation of these types of connections speaks to how literature solidifies and makes comprehensible specific modes of being and feeling – words on a page can become credible human beings through the processes of recognition, aided by imagination and self-reflection.

Throughout these different strands of identification, the question of empathy has always remained central in the reception of *The Well of Loneliness*. However, even if people rationally concur with the message of the story and believe its main characters should be pitied, they are not necessarily fully resonating with the story and experiencing the intended compassionate affective reactions. Not all readers are receptive to the text's affective manipulations: they may be sympathetic (i.e., *feel for* someone), but not necessarily experience an empathetic response (i.e., *feel with* someone). One reader, for example, describes the main character as “*a morose, depressed ... and depressing ... character whom it is difficult to like because of her dreary unhappiness but easy to pity because of why she's unhappy*”.

Representations of sympathy are, admittedly, not as intriguing as representations of empathy, particularly in the genre of online reviews where examples of the latter are notably prevalent.

In analysing the categories of ascribed and invoked affect (see **Table 1**), we can see how the boundaries between them are very much blurred. On the one hand, some of the ascribed affects can create adverse reactions. For example, the perceived emotional tone of *The Well of Loneliness* as over the top, "*melodramatic*", "*cheesy*", "*drippy*" or "*dreary*" can evoke frustration or irritation, tiredness or even anger in the reader. On the other hand, an absorbed reading can create a particular resonance with the affective developments in the book to the point that the reader experiences them at the same time. In this case, when the book is seen as a "*tragic*", "*painful*" and "*sad*" novel, then this, in turn, creates sadness, depression, upset and pain in the reader. Many of the descriptions of evoked affect are very intense: e.g., a painful heartbreak that can even result in crying, a consequence of being moved by the story. Readers compliment the novel on its ability to convey and inspire "*great emotion*" in them (e.g., "*I was so consumed in this book and she writes it with so much description, that I felt like I was there and was feeling the emotions of Stephen*"). Even when these emotions are ostensibly negative, the readers express their enjoyment of this aspect of literature that can make them feel intense feelings and see it as a mark of skilful writing. They call it "*wonderfully, beautifully depressing*" or exclaim that "*it hurt so good*" – the painful emotions are welcomed and seen as aesthetically pleasing. The reviewers' aesthetic appreciation and valuation of the novel are closely connected to their empathetic affective responses. This is characteristic specifically of lay readers whom I studied, who use many unique devices to convey their empathetic reactions.

4. Affected and affective reviews

Empathetic reactions to *The Well of Loneliness* expressed in the online reviews are often tied to the affective weight of the vocabulary used. Some reviews explicitly verbalise the emotions that readers felt when reading the book, utilising commonly used emotion-related vocabulary. Many reviewers, however, have used much more figurative language to describe the various affective journeys the literary text has taken them on. For example, when a reviewer writes that “*nobody speak to me for several business days i’m so upset*”, they are utilising an amusing formulaic phrase that activates the reader’s imagination; this, in turn, expands on our understanding of the “*upset*” that the reviewer is feeling, amplifying its intensity. Similarly, saying that “*If anyone needs me, I’ll be crying in my room and eating ice cream all day*” adds a humorous dimension to the grief that the novel has created, depicting an emotion through a culturally recognisable trope that allows us to visualise its impact. When a reviewer comments that the book “*made me so sad that i went for a walk in the rain to cry and get me knees wet on ferns and what have you*”, they are not just telling their readers that the book induced a feeling of sadness in them but the specific imagery evoked with the imaginative scenario invites others to experience this emotional state, as if it were an especially melodramatic cinema reel that expresses a character’s melancholia. It also reflects the melodramatic style of the novel itself, both showing the effect it had on them while also ironically joking about it. It is evident how the writing of online reviews takes on a particularly performative function, especially when utilising humour for engagement. The irony is highlighted by the citational references to cultural tropes. Describing highly subjective responses can thus become quite a creative endeavour since the reviewers not only want

to convey their own emotional reactions, but they also want to create some second-hand affective associations in their audience that, in turn, can generate social capital through promoting engagement. The review then simultaneously expresses the reader's affected reading of the novel as well as being an affectively loaded text of its own.

In expressing this affective load, specific stylistic phrasings stand out – physicality, in particular. Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo (2019, 254) note that the use of body metaphors is characteristic to the “Goodreads vernacular”, which illustrates how the development of social connections on the site is influenced by descriptions of embodied reactions. On numerous occasions, the reviewers' reactions to *The Well of Loneliness* are conveyed through expressions that refer to violence, physical ailments, illnesses, aggression or destruction. According to the reviews, the book can variously “cut”, “punch”, “hit”, “slap”, “smack”, “strike”, “shatter”, “rip” and “tear” at you, your heart, your soul and even your face and gut in various ways (e.g., “tore my heart to pieces, then sewed them back together, then shattered it completely; stung in many awfully familiar ways”). It can “destroy” you, “fuck [you] up”, “mess [you] up”, “ruin [your] life”, “[blow you] away”, and have you “in absolute shambles”. The text can make you “physically ill” and “ache”, make your “blood boil”, cause “emotional damage”, have you “REELING”, “rolling around on the floor and screaming”, or give you a “literary hangover”. It can even “literally” kill you. Some readers have even felt so affected by the novel that they express the desire to throw the book either against the wall or out of the window in anger or frustration at the state of things (e.g., “It really is the kind of book that the more you read, the more miserable you get, the more you think ‘FUCK GENDER’ and want to heave the whole fucking thing at the wall just for something to smash”). One reader admits that their empathetic

resonance with the plight of the characters in the novel has inspired the desire for a passionate revolt against the system: *"at the end of this book after I went looking for some rocks, I was overcome with a sense of empowerment; screw the establishment, screw what people think and above all screw being the martyr!"* None of these descriptions are meant to be interpreted literally. The aim of these often very violent and physical imageries, however, is to figuratively convey the immense intensity of the complex affective responses to the novel that cannot be expressed the same way with simple emotion vocabulary. At the same time, this striking language of aggression grabs the readers' attention. It is, thus, inevitably part of the performative nature of the review writing on an online platform because it makes the reviews resonate especially forcefully.

It is clear then that *The Well of Loneliness* provokes powerful responses in people that are often related to intense negative feelings of sadness. Several readers have thus indicated what kind of effect this affective state might have on one's psychological well-being. According to the reviews, the book can *"[give you] depression"*, make you *"want to die"*, *"hate [yourself]"* or not *"glad to be alive"*. One reader reflects that *"if i read this in a slightly worse place in my life i genuinely would've ended my shit i can't even lie"*, and one notes that you should not be reading this book when reducing your antidepressant dosage as it might cause your mood to worsen and even make way for suicidal thoughts. This adverse effect on the reader's self-perception or well-being is sometimes related to their views of the book's queer representation, making people note, for example, that *"we shouldn't take the book word by word and fall into a pit of despair"*. Other times, however, it is a part of the aesthetically appreciated feeling of hurt that accompanies a relatable tragedy. One reviewer writes: *"I found this gut wrenching, self-pitying, and entirely too*

emotionally accurate. I could not read this again as it brought me to an all together dark and familiar place; but, the writing was phenomenal". Despite this type of appreciation, people generally suggest reading the book when you are in a good mood, so as not to internalise the negative affectivity.

While these recommendations might be meant as genuine warnings to people with vulnerable mental states, the overall tone of some of these remarks also implies that they are meant half in jest, especially if you look at the exaggerated definitiveness of adverbs like *"genuinely"* and *"literally"*, as well as the interesting combinations of compliments and morbidity (e.g., *"good book it made me want to die"*). This can be seen in, for example, five-star reviews that simply state *"this is so fucking sick and twisted"*, *"This book can go to Hell"*, or as one reader notes, emphasising the irony of the positive assessment stemming from an affectively negative state, *"Maybe this book should be banned because I felt SAD and I WEPT and I didn't LIKE THAT! Five stars."* In these ironic ways, the readers tend to convey serious ideas that reflect their opinions and feelings when reading the text, as well as their recommendations to other potential readers who might struggle with handling their empathetic responses. At the same time, the irony of these remarks allows them to keep a certain distance and not put themselves in an entirely vulnerable position where they discuss deeply personal issues. It can also imply that the readers are not entirely convinced by the sentimentality of the novel, in which case, the irony is one way to make fun of the embellished and amplified emotional tone. The dry exaggeration and dark humour are a means through which to performatively articulate what otherwise might remain an unattractive combination of *"it was very sad"*.

5. A queer affective archive

While readers on Goodreads do criticise *The Well of Loneliness's* composition, its clunky style that veers into overwritten melodrama and that can create strong aversion in the reader, for many reviewers, it is precisely the novel's blatant and easy-to-understand affective manipulations that make the sorrows of the characters feel immediate even in the 21st century. People can find themselves unsettled by historical depictions of queer sexualities – because of their conceptual otherness or for imagining non-normative sexual expression as ultimately unsustainable – and wish to counter them with modernised narratives of liberation and affirmation. Yet, many readers still value engaging with these intense aspects of negative queer feeling because they are open to an emotionally loaded reading experience. They invite the catharsis of tragedy that allows them to become immersed in what they see as a social reality for many people or allows them to process an already familiar sense of social rejection. Although positioning the novel within the traumatic queer *past* on the imagined timeline of linear progress, reviewers recognise its continued topicality, how it is “*still relevant*” in today's culture. This recognition of an enduring social struggle of marginalised people, but mainly the familiar affect of dejection that accompanies this on an individual, human level, makes the fictionalised struggle seem universally relatable.

Heather Love (2007) has discussed at length how the affective power of negative queer representation still compels queer readers in ways that more positive stories do not. This “backwardness” with its focus on the bleak conflicts accompanying the development of modern sexual identities forms an important body of affective remembrance that reflects the lived experience of many queer people and has become an important motif in queer culture. Love (2007, 4)

describes it as an essential “archive of feeling”, applying Ann Cvetkovich’s (2003, 7) concept to describe works such as *The Well of Loneliness* that act as “repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception”. The emotional resonances in the Goodreads reviews speak to the tangled nature of past and present as well as public and private, blurring the distinctions. Issues of non-normative sexualities addressed openly in the past still resonate both intimately and socially in the present, not only because of perceived affective universalities but also because of people’s desire to see themselves as a part of a history, to build a queer genealogy and kinship, to “feel historical” (see Nealon 2001, 8). Thus, a public history is processed on the level of personal feelings. At the same time, as Wallace (2016, 71) argues, contemporary reading practices can make queer readers “feel public, even in private”. The public displays of affected and affective readings of *The Well of Loneliness* on Goodreads are a next step in socialising the already paradoxically shared yet private nature of reading.

The unique conditions that have cultivated the online book review genre have aided in the development of a curious new language for expressing intimate emotional reactions for a broader audience. The reviews are not just written for personal reflection but for other readers, making the reviewer employ tools that attract attention and convey an affective load of their own. The figurative language surrounding violence and strong physical reactions especially stands out in creating this impact. One cannot help but consider this theatrical mode of expression as a part of a distinctly queer reader-response. The use of shock and self-aware irony, after all, as important components of poking fun at both the dramatics of the novel as well as the reader’s own reactions to it, can be compared

to a camp performativity, the frequently citational language being a characteristic of camp sensibility (see Harvey 2002). Invoking the notion of campness also allows us to position these readings in the context of “the battle of the brows”, where the emotionally heavy-handed sentimental novel is seen as a “lower”, less-intellectual form of art that gratifies the (mass-culture) reader through a sensation-oriented experience (on the relationship between camp and the ‘middlebrow’ see Humble 2012). Though Hall’s novel in the 21st century certainly has more cultural prestige as a historically significant queer literary classic, the unreasoned affective engagement with literature is still perceived to be an inferior form of aesthetic appraisal, irrespective of whether one considers *The Well of Loneliness* heteronormative or queer, conservative or modern(ist). In this case, the responses that aloofly claim “*Well rip my freaking heart out I guess*” or exaggerate an emotional response in a camp manner give an indication of the readers’ cognisance of how this type of engagement is positioned, using this attitude to create distance between the expressed empathetic reaction and their truly intimate feelings. This language of exaggeration is its own unique form of queer parody.

I have demonstrated how readers of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* on Goodreads have expressed their emotional engagement with the novel in a mode I believe to be unique to lay reading. These particular examples are only one small part of a diverse body of reader-response, notable in the way they represent an intriguing openness to the tragedy of the story, which has been criticised as melodramatic and over-written. This oft-critiqued sentimentality is instead seen as a welcomed aesthetic experience that allows the reader to empathise with the social message of the novel, to feel the pain and sadness of the main character’s struggles

and relate to the plight of marginalised people in the early 20th century as it is universalised through fiction. For these readers, looking back in this way is not just a matter of reconciling past grievances, but it is a way of relating and reflecting their own emotions through the medium of fiction, a way of being affected in a powerful way. Additionally, the genre of online book reviews and recommendations has cultivated a platform for a collective engagement with literature that produces its own language of performativity. To convey the intensity of the embodied affect that the reader's find themselves immersed in, they use creative, figurative expressions that echo the intensity of the original text. If a reader embraces reading a tragedy, they will revel in having their heart ripped out and crushed as an essential part of the journey and they will let you know about it in their review in a way that invites you to experience it yourself.

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Reading Habits of Jewish Families in Zagreb Between the Two World Wars

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Abstract: The paper explores the private libraries of Jewish families in interwar Zagreb, discovered during the renovation of the Museum of Arts and Crafts building. Zagreb's Jewish families created private book collections reflecting their social status, intellectual pursuits, and cultural orientation. Particular attention is given to the libraries of the Deutsch Maceljski and Marić families, whose volumes entered the Museum as confiscated property following the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia by the fascist Ustaša movement in 1941. The analysis of the content and provenance of these books enables the reconstruction of reading habits and the cultural identity of Zagreb's Jewish elite during the interwar period. The library of Hilda Deutsch Maceljski bears witness to female intellectualism and emancipation and can be considered a paradigmatic example of a "world literature" library, while the collection of her daughter Vanja reveals the educational and aesthetic standards of the upper bourgeois class, marked by internationalism. The library of industrialist Milan Marić reflects a cosmopolitan spirit and scientific curiosity, integrating technical, historical, and artistic literature. The

paper also examines book acquisition paths – ranging from Zagreb bookstores and foreign publishers to auction catalogues – interpreting them as indicators of social capital and cultural prestige. The preserved libraries today represent a crucial source for understanding the cultural and intellectual history of Zagreb’s Jewish community.

Keywords: private library, expropriation, cultural history, Museum of Arts and Crafts

1. Introduction

During the renovation of the building of the Museum of Arts and Crafts (MUO) in Zagreb, important sources were discovered that shed light on the reading habits of Jewish families living in Zagreb between the two World Wars. Unlike Poland, where 748 Jewish libraries were documented in January 1930 (Shavit 1982, 103), Zagreb did not have such a diversity of public libraries before the Second World War (Rothmüller 1931, 6). Instead, Jewish families in Zagreb created private book collections that today reveal their meticulous collecting activities and a strong literary curiosity. Parts of the collections were found in several unmarked boxes stored in the Museum of Arts and Crafts, where they ended up as collateral victims of the war, becoming part of the confiscated Jewish property after the establishment of the fascist Independent State of Croatia (in Croatian: *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska – NDH*) in 1941. Their expropriated belongings were intended to erase not only their biographical details but even the very thought of their existence, daily lives, and intellectual pursuits. Considering the countless potential personal connections between the collector and his books (Benjamin 2022) and the importance of written word in Jewish culture (Oz and Oz-Salzberger 2012), this paper also aims to counteract the dehumanization of the book owners.



Fig. 1. Books found in the Museum of Arts and Crafts, Zagreb in January 2025. Photo: Antonia Došen.

2. The Fate of Jewish Property in the Independent State of Croatia

The Nazi ideology of Germany, led by Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), exerted a profound influence on the political landscape of Southeastern Europe. Following the German invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941, Hitler's Germany supported the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia under the leadership of Ante Pavelić's Ustaša movement, a puppet regime operating under the supervision of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Within the Independent State of Croatia, individuals of Jewish denomination were subjected to systematic persecution, discrimination, and mass murder, modeled directly on the racial legislation of Nazi Germany (Goldstein and Goldstein 2024, 122-128). As early as 1941, racial laws were enacted that stripped Jews of their civil rights, prohibited them from employment in state institutions, schools, and public life, and compelled them to wear yellow insignia

(the Star of David). The exclusion of Jews from public life was accompanied by registration and identification measures targeting Jewish families, while their property was placed under a policy of so-called “Aryanization” – their homes, businesses, and factories were confiscated and transferred to “Aryans” or Ustaša officials.

A large number of Jews were arrested, deported, and murdered in Ustaša concentration camps such as Jasenovac, Stara Gradiška, and Jadovno. It is estimated that over 24,000 Jews were killed within the territory of the NDH, including approximately 9,000 Jews from Zagreb (Goldstein and Goldstein 2024, 27; 568). Through these actions, the NDH actively participated in the Holocaust and in the genocidal policies orchestrated by Nazi Germany.

Through a series of legal and statutory provisions enacted in 1944, 1945, and later, the property of Jewish families – including their libraries – was officially registered as state property. In alignment with the Republic of Croatia’s ongoing efforts to restitute confiscated Jewish property, the Museum has, in recent years, undertaken dynamic initiatives to make the fate of Jewish-owned collections transparent. This is also the case with the most recent findings of Jewish book collections. Without delving more broadly into the legal aspects of the preservation of Jewish family libraries, the primary goal of this paper is to reconstruct and contextualize their origins and content and refer to them as testimony to the social history of that period.

Hundreds of books found in the Museum bore inscriptions such as “MAC”, “M. M.”, “Rei”, “PSCH”, “Jab”, and “Pl”, from which some were earlier recognised as abbreviations or initials of Jewish families known for their collecting activities. Comparing them with the *Report on the Number and Character of Private Collections* (KOMZA 428/46) dated 18

November 1946, that listed owners of the objects deposited in the Museum, it became evident that the books belonged to family libraries of Robert Maceljski ("MAC"), Milan Marić ("M.M."), Dane Reichsmann ("Rei"), and many more. An insight into the contents of various publications indicating an interest in Jewish topics, additionally confirmed that the books were owned by Jews. In this paper we are addressing private book collections of two families – Deutsch Maceljski and Marić – as private libraries that had their designated location in family homes where they were carefully stored. We are focusing not only on their libraries, but also on their personal lives and social background that inevitably shaped their reading habits.

3. Jewish Families within Zagreb's interwar Cultural Landscape

The process of industrialization that swept through Croatia in the second half of the nineteenth century profoundly reshaped Zagreb's social and cultural landscape. A crucial factor in this transformation was the emergence of a new economic elite – merchants, bankers, entrepreneurs, and industrialists – who championed bourgeois society and capitalist politics. According to Iskra Iveljić (2007, 414), this period was marked by two cultural models: on the one hand, wealthy Croatian bourgeois families who emphasized modesty and diligence, and on the other hand, entrepreneurs of foreign origin who emulated aristocratic lifestyles. This phenomenon is described (Iveljić 2007, 418) as the feudalization of the bourgeois elite, visible in the adoption of noble titles, purchase of aristocratic estates, and construction of suburban villas. This pattern is particularly relevant for Jewish families, the Deutsch Maceljski family among them.

3. 1. Deutsch Maceljski Family

The rise of the Deutsch Maceljiski family began in 1860, when Filip Deutsch opened a timber trading company. With increasing demand for construction timber, the business flourished. As with many Zagreb entrepreneurs, Filip's sons and grandsons soon joined the enterprise, turning it into a "family business", a process characteristic of families of foreign, predominantly Jewish origin (Iveljić 2007, 239). By the late 1910s, the Deutsch family was ennobled with the Hungarian-Croatian title "Maceljiski". Between the two world wars, the family became well known in Zagreb's business, cultural, and philanthropic life. While their public reputation was considerable, there is relatively little information about their everyday domestic life. Therefore, the private libraries presented in this paper represent a valuable source for understanding of the lifestyle of Jewish families in interwar Zagreb.

A glimpse into their private life was provided by Ivica Šute (2021, 309–330), who studied their film in *Filming the Orient: The Deutsch-Maceljiski Family and their Cruise over the Eastern Mediterranean in the 1930s*. The film documents a journey by Albert, one of Filip's sons, and his wife Tilde aboard the passenger ship "Queen Maria" in 1933, during which they travelled along the coasts of Palestine and Egypt. They filmed short segments that were later shown at private gatherings.

Another prominent family member was Robert Deutsch Maceljiski, who, apart from being a major timber merchant and industrialist, was also known as an avid art collector. Robert married Hilda Stern, born into one of Zagreb's oldest and wealthiest Jewish families. Her father, Žiga (Sigmund) Stern was an entrepreneur, banker, and heir to a leather factory, who committed suicide on 21 April 1941, due to pressures on his business operations and the legal discrimination he experienced under the Ustaša regime (Goldstein and Goldstein 2024, 123).

Although little is known about her Hilda's education, she undoubtedly had all the conditions necessary to integrate into the intellectual elite of interwar Zagreb. Like other affluent local Jewish families, the Sterns practiced marriages with partners of similar cultural and social background, and Hilda's marriage to Robert Deutsch Maceljski followed this tradition (Knežević n.d., 15–16).

Robert and Hilda had one daughter, Vanja, born in 1923. She was the only family member to survive the Holocaust, as her parents were deported to Auschwitz in May 1943 and perished there (Brandl 2022, 101). Vanja survived by fleeing first to Italy, then to Israel, later settling in Switzerland and eventually in the United States, where she lived until her death in 1996.

Vanja attended the "Private Coeducational Gymnasium with Public Rights of the Association for Individual Upbringing and Education of Youth in Zagreb", led by Ada Broch. This school was primarily attended by members of the bourgeois middle class, though some students from wealthier families also enrolled. Records from her teachers describe her as "ambitiously driven to the point of illness, always fearful of bad grades, very diligent and orderly. Conduct: calm, not fond of large groups... Circumstances: raised in a household overloaded with lessons in music, dance, languages, etc." (Boršić and Skuhala Karasman 2023, 144).

Until recently, the Deutsch Maceljski family was primarily remembered for art collecting, particularly Robert and his uncle Albert (Alujević 2019). It was only with the discovery of books in the Museum of Arts and Crafts that it became evident that Hilda also cultivated a carefully curated personal library and that their daughter Vanja owned a collection of children's literature.

According to testimony by painter Milivoj Uzelac, whom Robert patronized, the couple deposited part of their art collection in the Modern Gallery as they foresaw the looming danger. Igor Zidić (2006, 23) believes that Robert had a special arrangement with Ivo Šrepel, the director of the Modern Gallery at the time, to safeguard his most intimate collection, including a portrait of his daughter Vanja. The remainder of the family's movable property was, by order of the Ministry of Education in 1942, transferred to the Museum of Arts and Crafts. It is highly probable that Hilda and Vanja's libraries were relocated to the Museum at the same time.

3. 2. Milan Marić

The Zagreb industrialist and Turkish consul in Zagreb, Milan Marić (1885–1945), was a prominent and respected member of the Jewish community. He studied economics and chemistry at the universities of Paris, Berlin and Leipzig. In 1938, he converted from Judaism to Catholicism (Goldstein and Goldstein 2024, 73). His original Jewish surname was Mayer, which he and his brother changed to Marić (Goldstein 2004, 489). Together, the brothers managed the company *"Hinko Mayer i drug"*, founded by their father, Hinko Mayer.

In Zagreb, he resided in a villa at Tuškanac, an elite district with residences of distinguished and wealthy families, where he undoubtedly kept his private library. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he was in Belgrade and successfully escaped to Istanbul to avoid the persecution. His wife Lotte was Aryan of German origin (née Holer/Holz), and survived the war in Zagreb before emigrating with their son – first to Israel and later to Canada. Milan Marić died in exile on 20 July 1945 (Mirnik 1995, 107).

The library of Milan Marić entered the Museum of Arts and Crafts together with other confiscated property of various families. It included not only books but also a number of artworks. The collecting activity of Milan Marić, and consequently his library, has not yet been the subject of research at the Museum. According to reports from 1941 and subsequent investigations, a number of artworks from the Marić villa on Josipovac, owned by his brother Artur Marić, were delivered to the Museum of Arts and Crafts, which at that time served as a central collection point (MUO Archive, 214-1941). A further group of artworks and cultural-historical objects from the Werner villa at Tuškanac, owned by Milan Marić, arrived later, after 1941 (Pasini Tržec 2021, 100–102).

Given that the collection of Milan Marić was described as one that “ranks among the most valuable in the country, and is certainly the most discerningly and abundantly assembled of, all collections in Zagreb” (Pasini Tržec 2021, 101; according to Murgić’s Report from 1941) various paintings were, upon arrival at the Museum, entered into the inventory of the Painting Collection of the Museum of Arts and Crafts. The book inventory, however, has not been found, and the existence of the library is mentioned only briefly in a report by the then director of the Museum, Vladimir Tkalčić, who requested that Marić’s library also be transferred to the Museum, “where, by its nature, it primarily belongs”. (HR-HDA-216, box 1454, 373/1941).

The initial intention to preserve the integrity of the collection during its transfer to the Museum and to use it for the enrichment of the Museum’s holdings was evidently not maintained, as the books were separated from the other artworks and stored in the basement premises. There, they remained undiscovered for more than half a century, and probably even longer. The reason for placing the objects

in the basement can be found in a 1943 letter by Ivan Bach, the acting conservator at the time, who invited private owners to deposit their artworks in the Museum's basement, which had been arranged as a shelter from air raids (Koprčina 2024, 178). The library discovered in the Museum's basement can be attributed, based on preserved initials, to Milan Marić, not to Artur Marić.

4. Corpus of Preserved Private Libraries

The affinities of members of Jewish families toward specific types of publications reveal a literary inclination that reflects both their private and professional lives. While in Poland, among more than three million Jews, the majority of the population belonged to the lower middle class, small business owners, and the proletariat (Shavit 1982, 103), in Croatia being Jewish implied a certain degree of interconnectedness within religious, educational, and social circles that largely belonged to the upper middle class. This particular profile of library owners is also mirrored in their preferences for certain topics. Therefore, to fully understand this corpus of preserved personal libraries, it is necessary to examine the various types of publications thematically and substantively encompassing children's literature, fiction, as well as scholarly works in multiple languages.

4. 1. The Library of Hilda Deutsch Maceljski

Books from the private library of Hilda Deutsch Maceljski bear her *ex libris*, which eliminates any doubt about ownership. Her *ex libris* is a white paper label, usually affixed to the first pages of the books, dominated by a stylized family coat of arms of the Deutsch Maceljski family, with the inscription "Hilde v. Deutsch-Macelj" written at the bottom. There is also a handwritten number at the bottom of *ex libris*, indicating that the library has unfortunately not been preserved in its

entirety. The last number recorded on the ex libris is 461, while only 276 books have been preserved.



Fig. 2. Hilda Deutsch Maceljski's *ex libris*.

Although some numbers on the labels are illegible, once the list of books was compiled, a logical grouping of authors became apparent. All the books are in German, mostly published during the 1920s in major publishing centers such as Leipzig, Munich, and Berlin. The majority are works of fiction, primarily novels, but there is also a considerable number of plays and poetry collections, as well as books on Asian cultures, such as *Mein Sumatra Buch* by Helge Kaarsberg and *Menschen in China* by Dorothea Hosie.

In addition to fiction and cultural studies, the library reflects Hilda's interest in history, sociology, and psychology, with a notable number of female authors. In a rather symbolic way, the first book in Hilda's collection is *Die Geschichte der Menschheit* by the Dutch-American author Hendrik van Loon, written for his children. The second book is *Wirinea* by the Soviet journalist and writer Lydia Seifullina, a short

story promoting women's emancipation. Her library also includes works by other female authors who advocated women's rights and education, such as the German writer Malwida von Meysenbug, Swedish feminist and suffragist Ellen Key, and German feminist Lily Braun.

It may be concluded that Hilda Deutsch Maceljski was familiar with the ideas of the first wave of feminism, which emphasized not only formal equality but also the importance of education – a value that, judging by Vanja's upbringing, Hilda and her husband clearly understood and embraced. It is therefore not surprising that her library, although to a lesser extent, also contains books on motherhood and healthcare, published during the time when Vanja was a child. Interestingly, the collection also includes Sigmund Freud's *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*.

4. 1. 1. Hilda Deutsch Maceljski's Library as an example of *Weltbibliothek* (World Library)

Most of the books in Hilda's library are hardcover editions, some of which are today considered collectible items. Among the remarkable editions are works by Lafcadio Hearn on Japanese culture, which appear to have been popular at the time, since several copies were also found in the Reichsmann family library. However, a closer examination of the collection shows that Hilda's primary criterion for acquiring books was literary quality. In addition to literary works, she read letters, biographies, and historical novels, especially those devoted to writers and artists such as Goethe, Schiller, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Clara Schumann, and Dürer.

Hilda's library consists of classics such as Homer, Dante, and Goethe, as well as collected works by Maxim Gorky, Shakespeare, and August Strindberg. At the same time, it includes first or early editions of

contemporary authors such as Stefan Zweig, Franz Werfel, Alfred Döblin, and others. Many of these works were not translated into Croatian for decades, which once again testifies to the social and cultural status of the family in interwar Zagreb. For example, Hilda owned an edition of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* from 1930, published only a year after its original release, while the Croatian translation appeared only in 1979.

Her choice of books confirms that she acquired high-quality and contemporary literature, including works by or about Nobel Prize laureates in Literature such as Maurice Maeterlinck, Romain Rolland, Knut Hamsun, Anatole France, George Bernard Shaw, Sigrid Undset, Thomas Mann, and Sinclair Lewis. There is also a noticeable presence of American and British authors, particularly among the earlier entries, including Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and H. G. Wells. Other frequently represented authors include Felix Salten, Anton Wildgans, Gustaf af Geijerstam, and Romain Rolland.

It was precisely Romain Rolland who was among the first to develop the concept of a *Weltbibliothek*, or "world library", a collection encompassing literary works from around the globe. This idea was also linked to the establishment of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1901. Although the political and socioeconomic circumstances of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s were not favourable for realising such a project, the concept of world literature (*Weltliteratur*) gained new relevance, drawing inspiration from Goethe's ideas (Mani 2017, 131–177).

In 1929, Hermann Hesse published an essay titled *Eine Bibliothek der Weltliteratur* commissioned by Reclam Verlag to promote its Universal-Bibliothek series. In this essay, Hesse adapted Rolland's concept to a more feasible and intimate form – that of a private library (Mani 2017 147–151). He argued for an individual approach to world

literature through personal selection, access via translations, and the potential for personal growth through reading (Hesse 1929). In many ways, the collecting strategy of Hilda Deutsch Maceljski corresponds closely to Hesse's idea of *Weltliteratur* library.

Unfortunately, with Hitler's rise to power in 1933, German publishing – one of the most productive in the world by 1925 – fell under strict state control and became an instrument of National Socialist propaganda. The idea of *Weltliteratur* was distorted and misused, excluding all works deemed undesirable by the regime (Mani 2017, 152–176). The State Office for Public Libraries of Saxony published in the 1935 issue of the magazine *Die Bücherei* strict guidelines specifying which books were to be banned from public libraries. Among the first listed were “works by people who commit treason, emigrants, and authors of foreign countries who fight against or disparage the new Germany” (Mani 2017, 154; *Die Bücherei* 1935, 279). This list included Romain Rolland and H. G. Wells, both represented in Hilda's collection, as well as Heinrich Mann, Emil Ludwig, and Ferdinand Lassalle, whose works Hilda also read. The list further banned “decadent, subversive, and publicly harmful literature of ‘civilizational literati’”, including T. Mann, Zweig, and Wassermann (Mani 2017, 155; *Die Bücherei* 1935, 280). Of course, works by Jewish authors were also prohibited, while many others in Hilda's library could be classified under remaining undesirable categories.

The extent to which the Nazi rise to power in 1933 influenced Europe as a whole, including Zagreb, is perhaps best reflected in the fact that the latest dated editions among Hilda's preserved books are from 1932. Her library thus became a poignant reflection and foreshadowing of the Deutsch Maceljski family's fate.

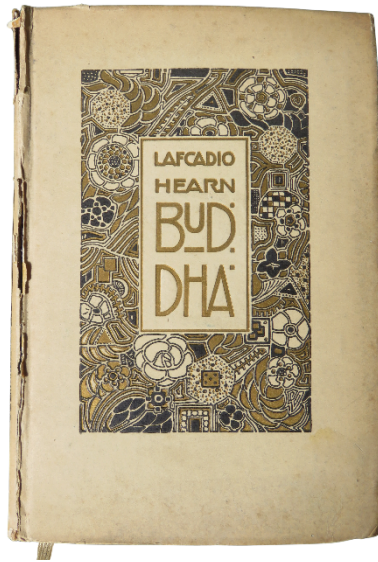


Fig. 3. *Buddha: Neue Geschichten und Studien Japan* / Lafcadio Hearn. Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt Rütten & Loening, 1920.

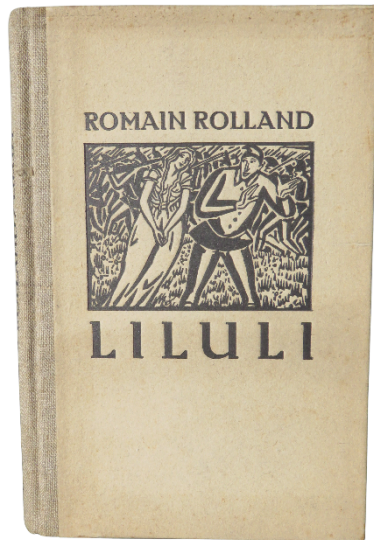


Fig. 4. *Liluli* / Romain Rolland. Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt Rütten & Loening, 1924.

4. 2. Croatian Children's Literature

Children's literature, in its development, undergoes a series of examinations and evaluations by adults before it reaches its ultimate recipient – the child (Majhut 2005). It remains under the constant influence of various ideologies, thereby becoming an instrument for achieving specific educational, instructional, commercial, and political objectives. Children's literature is both productive – that is, a “product” of prevailing conceptions of the child and childhood – and produced, as it simultaneously absorbs and reflects contemporary social notions and stereotypes (Hameršak 2011, 32).

Croatian children's literature, during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, experienced a kind of poetic transition, marked by the growing influence of a current advocating socialist realism and the corresponding rejection of the fairy tale and, more broadly, of the fantastic in literature (Lovrić Kralj 2014). However, this conflict did not significantly affect the popularity of the fairy tale, as such stories continued to sell “in the then very popular small booklets containing up to four fairy tales each”. (Lovrić Kralj 2014, 64). At the same time, a definitive division emerged between canonical and trivial children's literature (Lovrić Kralj 2014, 200–201). Canonical literature was socially sanctioned and intended for children by publishers, authors, or editors, whereas trivial literature consisted of adventure, western, crime, sentimental, and dime novels, as well as comic books.

4. 2. 1. The *Zeitgeist* of Vanja Deutsch Maceljski's Library

In her research on the everyday life of the economic elite in the second half of the nineteenth century, Iveljić examined the upbringing of children and adolescents. Under the influence of Enlightenment thought, it was considered essential to encourage

children's curiosity and to shape learning through entertainment and play. A Dionysian conception of the child prevailed – that of “fragile beings incapable of resisting evil on their own. Therefore, they require the constant supervision of adults, who serve as a moral collective. This fear that children and youth might easily fall under harmful influences is visible not only in etiquette manuals but also in children's literature” (Iveljić 2007, 306–307). Yet, while the image of the “fragile” child in need of protection was widely propagated, capitalism simultaneously identified children and their parents as ideal consumer subjects.

In the library of Vanja Deutsch Maceljski, eleven books can be definitively identified as her property based on her signature and dedications most frequently written by her mother, Hilda. For the remaining forty-seven books, attribution to Vanja Deutsch Maceljski can be assumed through an analysis of their peritextual elements. The findings of this analysis suggest that her library cannot be regarded as a reflection of children's reading habits in interwar Zagreb, but rather as a manifestation of the *feudalization* of the bourgeois elite (Iveljić 2007, 238; 414) – that is, the adoption and integration of aristocratic characteristics into the lifestyle of wealthy industrial families.

In 1933, when Vanja was ten years old, an anonymous survey of 10,000 pupils aged eleven to thirteen was conducted in Zagreb and Belgrade. According to the survey, the most widely read books among Zagreb's children were the works of August Šenoa (Majhut 2022, 109). The library of Vanja Deutsch Maceljski, however, does not contain a single book in Croatian or by a Croatian author. A linguistic analysis of the fifty-eight books reveals a clear dominance of English-language works – fifty-one books in English, one textbook, several children's

magazines and a collection of fairy tales in German, as well as two annual issues of a magazine in French.

Foreign children's books consistently preceded Croatian ones – both in terms of market availability and in the literary-historical development of children's literature (Majhut and Lovrić Kralj 2020, 18). In the case of Vanja Deutsch Maceljiski, it may be assumed that much of the material in her library was not available in Croatian translation, which necessitated the purchase of foreign editions. However, this also reflects the standards and prestige valued by the upper class.

4. 2. 2. The Contents of Vanja Deutsch Maceljiski's Library

Within the collection of Vanja Deutsch Maceljiski, a notable feature is the presence of English-language children's annuals, which are not otherwise represented in Croatian children's literature. Her library contains several such annuals, for instance, three volumes of *The Bruin Boy's Annual* (1930, 1931, 1935) and four volumes of the *Puck Annual* (1931, 1932, 1933, 1935). These annuals are richly illustrated compilations of stories, fairy tales, poems, and comics, thematically revolving around children's adventures, fantasy, and animals.

Several volumes are specifically directed toward girls and girlhood, such as *The Lilac Book for Girls* (1930), *Schoolgirls' Bumper Book* (1931?), and *The Golden Story Book for Girls* (1934). These are primarily collections of stories, verses, and articles intended for young girls and their everyday experiences.

Among the German-language books, the collection includes a language primer and *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* by Johann Karl August Musäus, a compilation of German folk tales retold in a satirical tone. The book is printed in Gothic script and contains a handwritten dedication on the inside cover: "Meine liebste Vanja! Wilma". Also present are bound volumes of the children's magazine *Der*

Schmetterling. The 1933 volume bears Vanja's signature, whereas the 1935–1937 volumes do not indicate ownership. However, based on paratextual evidence – including a label of the Zagreb bookbinder Bogomil Šoban, who evidently bound the volumes – it may be assumed that they belonged to Vanja Deutsch Maceljiski. Similarly, several bound issues of the magazine *Kiebitz* from 1934 to 1936 were found. Although ownership is not explicitly marked, it is likely that they too were part of the same library.

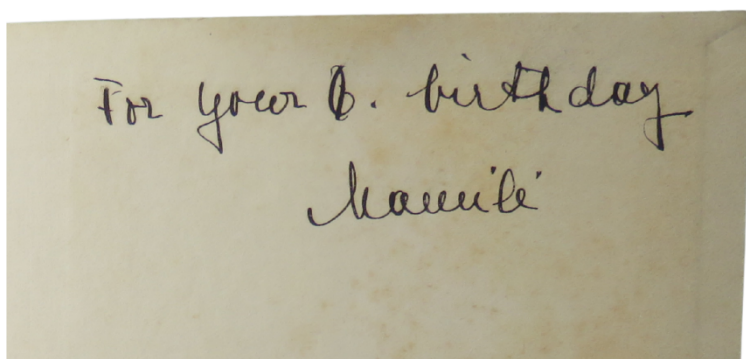


Fig. 5. Hilda's dedication to her daughter Vanja for her birthday, found in one of the books.

Both *Der Schmetterling* and *Kiebitz* belong to the category of so-called advertising children's magazines that appeared in the interwar period in the former Austro-Hungarian territories. Initially only a few pages long and distributed as complimentary additions to certain products or purchases – presumably in Vanja Deutsch Maceljiski's case through bookstores – they later evolved into genuine children's periodicals, as attested by the bound volumes preserved in the library (Blumesberger 2007, 48).

The collection also contains two bound annual volumes of the French magazine *La Semaine de Suzette*. The 1933 volume bears Vanja's

signature, while the 1936 volume, though unsigned, carries the same bookbinder's label, allowing the assumption of shared provenance. The presence of this magazine is somewhat unusual, as *La Semaine de Suzette* was intended for Catholic girls. Published from 1905 until 1960, with a brief hiatus during the Second World War, it featured poems, stories, comics, and patterns for making doll clothes (Literatura dimenticata n.d.).

Comparing the culture and upbringing of the bourgeois elite in the second half of the nineteenth century with that of the twentieth century, Iveljić notes that children in the twentieth century “participate in the formation of their own identities; they occupy a central position within the novelistic discourse and succeed in attaining a degree of autonomy from the adult world” (Iveljić 2007, 308–309). However, Majhut observes that children's literature tends to be resistant to change and generally conservative (Majhut 2005) – a tendency also evident in Vanja Deutsch Maceljski's library. Her reading appears to have been carefully supervised and directed toward intellectual effort, particularly in language learning. This is especially evident in the inclusion of German- and French-language magazines. It may therefore be inferred that *La Semaine de Suzette* served primarily as a language-learning tool, while its Catholic orientation was either irrelevant or relevant only as far as it promoted modesty.

What constitutes a certain discontinuity with contemporary Croatian children's literature is the presence of richly illustrated English annuals, though their content does not diverge from the poetics of the period – sentimental stories, tales about animals, children's adventures, and simple verse. Similarly, the books oriented toward girlhood and young women do not represent a generic innovation, since the 1930s in Croatian children's literature saw a proliferation of

such works (Bakić 2020). What is new, however, is the inclusion of comics, a genre still in its infancy in 1930s Croatia and often regarded as pulp literature. The comics found in Vanja Deutsch Maceljiski's library appear within children's magazines and were most likely used for language acquisition.

The analysis of the collection reveals the hallmarks of an upper-middle-class upbringing that invested considerable effort in the moral and intellectual guidance of children. By the 1930s, Vanja herself was entering adolescence – a period in which Croatian children's literature was beginning to formulate new conceptions of adolescence, as seen in Joža Horvat's *Sedmi be* (1939) and Zora Rukelić's *Iz dnevnika jedne djevojčice* from 1938 (Zima 2016, 118–137). Yet, her library contains no works of adolescent themes, suggesting an intention to preserve the innocence of childhood.

Thus, through her library, Vanja Deutsch Maceljiski emerges as a "prototype" of the Apollonian child – "a being whose emotional and spiritual qualities surpass the corrupted world of adults" (Pleić Tomić 2015) – natural, spontaneous, innocent, and intense. Her maturation, in both literal and metaphorical terms, represents a kind of *expulsion from paradise*.

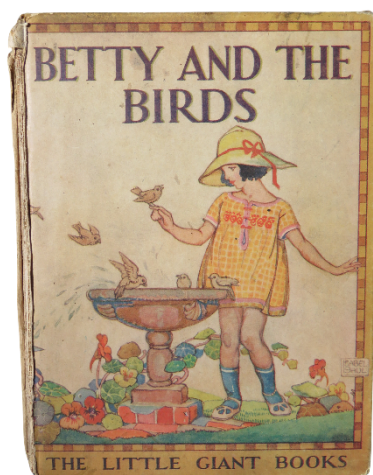


Fig. 6. *Betty and the birds*. London: Humphrey Milford, 1928.

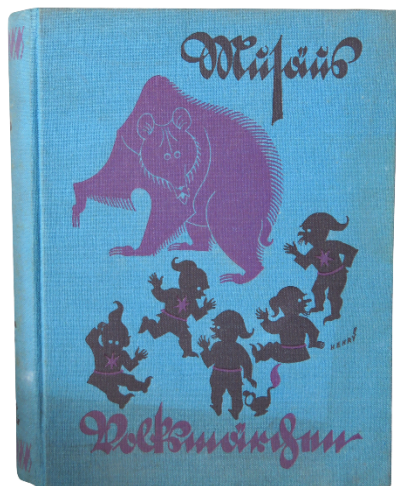


Fig. 7. *Volksmärchen der Detuschen* / Johann Karl August Musäus. Stuttgart: K. Thienemanns, [1925?].

4. 3. Milan Marić Family Library - scientific and specialized literature

Approximately three hundred books are marked with the initials "M.M." or, in some cases, the lowercase form ("m.m."). Among them is Marić's own authored work, *Die Landwirtschaft der Königreiche Kroatien und Slavonien*, through which he contributed to the limited body of literature on agriculture in Croatian regions of that period. The association between these markings and his name is further substantiated by the presence of works such as *Compendium der vergleichenden Anatomie* (1893), whose flyleaf bears the autograph "Milan Mayer / caud. agr. / Leipzig 1905." In addition to his initials, various numerical inscriptions appear on the books, suggesting that

they were catalogued in several stages and assigned numbers according to different inventories. These numbers likely corresponded to archival entries for individual publications, although such records have not been preserved.



Fig. 8. *Die Landwirtschaft der Königreiche Kroatien und Slavonien* / von Milan Marić. [S. l.]: [s. n.], [1907?].

An examination of the preserved holdings from Milan Marić's library reveals a substantial number of auction catalogues issued by distinguished auction houses such as Sotheby's in London, as well as those from Vienna and Budapest. Examples include *Illustrated Catalogue of the Furniture, Marbles, Bronzes, Clocks etc. in The Wallace Collection* (London, 1920), *Catalogue of an Extremely Choice Collection of Chinese Porcelain, Superb Jades, Ivories and Corals* (London, 1936), *Az Ernst=Múzeum aukciói XXXVII. Dr. Mezey Ferenc hagyatoka* (Budapest, 1927), and *Verschiedener Berliner Kunstbesitz* (Berlin, 1934).

The auction catalogues devoted to painting often display creased or annotated pages at the sections dedicated to the French school, an

observation of particular importance for research into the provenance of artworks now held in the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb. This includes, for instance, "Bacchanal" by Charles Le Brun, which scholars suggest was "likely purchased at a sale in Vienna around 1920" (Pasini Tržec 2021, 100; Lossky 1938, 417) although this could not be verified. It also remains uncertain whether the buyer was Artur or his brother Milan Marić, as contemporary newspapers mention only "Dr. Marics" from Zagreb as the purchaser. The auction catalogues marked with Milan Marić's initials found in his private library thus offer valuable evidence of his collecting activities.

Marić also acquired and read works by prominent art critics, curators, and historians such as the French author Raymond Escholier (*Mahmadou Fofana*, Paris, 1928), as well as publications in the field of art history, including *Az Országos Magyar Iparművészeti Múzeum Régi Ezüst Kiállításának Leíró Lajstroma*, *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* (Paris, 1925), and *Exhibition of French Art 1200–1900* (London, 1932).

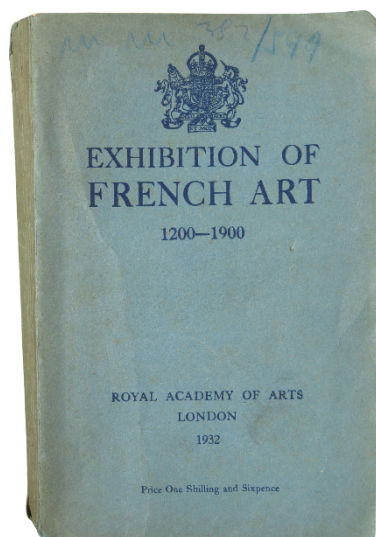


Fig. 9. *Exhibition of French Art: 1200-1900*. London: Piccadilly House, 1932.

Technical manuals such as *A Petroleum Handbook* (compiled by the Staff of the Royal Dutch-Shell Group, London, 1933) and *Die Schmiermittel-Anwendung: Mineralölindustrie Handbuch* by Markward Winter (Hannover, 1928) were indispensable to the Marić family's business, as they owned the Sisak Refinery. His collection also included the extensive trilingual *Jubilee Book of the State Railways of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia 1919-1929* (Belgrade, 1929), almost certainly due to his position as president of the First Southwestern Border Local Railway Company in Zagreb.

As the Turkish consul in Zagreb – who ultimately took refuge and passed away in Istanbul during the war – Marić was obliged to master the Turkish language. His library included study materials such as *Türkisches Lesenbuch mit Glossar* and *Türkisch-deutsches Gesprächbuch*, both authored by J. Németh. His interest in foreign languages,

supported by business ventures extending beyond the borders of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, is further evidenced by bilingual dictionaries. Travel guides and travelogues were particularly popular in the Marić household. Examples include the illustrated *Führer durch Jugoslavien* (1929), *Der Lago Maggiore* by Renzo Boccardi (Zurich–Leipzig–Vienna, 1929) and *Le Livre du Voyageur* (Paris), as well as *Cambridge and its Colleges* by A. Hamilton Thompson, and *Illustrierter Führer durch Dalmatien* (Vienna–Leipzig, 1915). His collection also contained works from the fields of history and popular social sciences.

Several volumes devoted to genealogy were also preserved, such as *Gothaisches Genealogisches Taschenbuch der Gräflichen Häuser* (editions from 1898, 1925, 1931, and 1932), among which the 1914 edition dedicated to aristocratic-Jewish marriages (*Semigothaisches Genealogisches Taschenbuch aristokratisch-jüdischer Heiraten*) stands out.

Marić kept abreast of contemporary advances in historical scholarship, as demonstrated by his ownership of publications concerning the ancient Near East, such as *Kyros der Große* (1912) by Justin V. Prášek and *Vor 5000 Jahren. Ausgrabungen von Ur (Chaldäa): Geschichte und Leben der Sumerer* by Sir Charles Leonard Woolley, the first popular presentation of the Ur excavations to a wider readership in the late 1920s. His interest in national history is reflected in *Alt-Warasdin: Sitz des Warasdiner Generalats* (Varaždin c. 1900).

He also owned works exploring cultural history, including the widely circulated *Moderne Kultur-Kuriosa* (1926) by Dr Max Kemmerich, which examines “curious” aspects of modern civilization through subjects such as law, the military, marriage, morality, hygiene, medicine, religion, and honour. Another example of popular literature in his collection was *Horst Broichstetten's Eheleute und Kirchenleute* (Berlin–

Leipzig, 1915), a compilation of stories, anecdotes, and cultural portraits.

Publications such as *Atatürk's Turkey* by M. Svetovski (Belgrade: Balkan Institute, 1938) and *Gemälde des Wiener Kongresses 1814–1815* by Gustav Gugitz (Munich, 1914) demonstrate Marić's intellectual curiosity and engagement with both historical and contemporary developments shaping modern society.

His refined taste as a collector extended to bibliophilic editions, such as *Plan sentimental de Paris* by Henri Béraud, illustrated by Jacques Boullaire and featuring a portrait of the author by L. Madrassi. The edition, enriched with drypoint engravings, belongs to the *Les Images du Temps* series. Another significant acquisition was the illustrated collection *Le Livre moderne illustré*, published in interwar France, which popularized literature through elegant graphic design in Art Deco style. From this series, Marić obtained *Tel qu'en lui-même* (Paris, 1936). He also owned the first bibliophilic edition of *Riquet à la houppe et ses compagnons* by Raymond Hesse, illustrated by Gus Bofa with forty-six illustrations (Paris, 1923).

In addition to the previously mentioned *Compendium der vergleichenden Anatomie* from his student years, Marić owned a series of technical publications issued by the Leipzig publisher Eugen Marx – collectively known as the *Chetebi* series, comprising 423 volumes – intended to disseminate and popularize knowledge among non-academic audiences.

An analysis of the preserved book collection from Milan Marić's library reveals a multifaceted intellectual and cultural profile of a collector whose reading interests encompassed a broad range of disciplines – from art history, archaeology, technology, and economics to linguistics, history, and literature. The richness of the collection, the diversity of its editions, and the presence of auction catalogues and

bibliophilic volumes testify to Marić's status as an educated, European-oriented, and cosmopolitan figure, as well as to his engagement with the cultural, economic, and social currents of the early twentieth century.



Fig. 10. *Geschichte der deutschen Juden: ein Hausbuch für die jüdische Familie* / von Adolf Kohnut; illustriert Th. Kutschmann. Berlin: Deutscher Verlag, 1898

5. Acquisition Paths of Jewish Family Libraries

After examining the family libraries of Deutsch Maceljski and Marić, it is interesting to consider the ways in which their private collections were assembled. A common feature of all the libraries studied is that their collectors and owners were polyglots who, in addition to Croatian, primarily used German and English, while other languages such as French, Italian, and Hungarian were also represented.

In the context of children's literature, already by the late nineteenth century, "booksellers successfully entered the commercial race to attract young buyers, with bookstores such as Albrecht & Fidler, Kugli

& Deutsch, and Senftleben & Mučnjak becoming important sites of everyday childhood, offering not only books, picture books, and periodicals but also various types of games and toys" (Iveljić 2007, 310–311). A similar development occurred after the First World War: advances in printing technology led to "the expansion of alternative sales networks through newsstands" (Majhut 2022, 98), effectively removing adult intermediaries from the process of purchasing and approving what children would read. As a result, "for the first time, the publisher-bookseller came into direct contact with the child-customer" (Majhut 2022, 100).

The economic crisis that affected the world in the 1930s also impacted the book market in Croatia. Geca Kon, a Serbian bookseller and publisher, attributed the crisis in Croatian bookselling to a different approach of the Croatian public toward books (Majhut and Lovrić Kralj 2020, 53). According to Kon, Serbia did not experience a crisis because Serbian readers were oriented toward domestic literature, whereas the Croatian reading public preferred foreign books. He emphasized that while every Croatian bookstore had a section with foreign books, they lacked a corresponding selection of domestic titles (Majhut and Lovrić Kralj 2020, 54).

Thus, when analysing the acquisition paths of literature for libraries such as that of Vanja Deutsch Maceljski, it is evident that the majority of the collection was obtained through Zagreb bookstores. This is confirmed by labels from bookstore Literatura and the bookstore of Stjepan and Marija Radić. An anonymous Zagreb bookseller noted: "In Zagreb, a layer of wealthy merchants has taken root, who are not Croats. They mostly buy German books from us. Or rather, their wives and daughters buy them. We cannot drive them out with a broom from our premises, so we provide them with what they request,

because we prefer that they order from us rather than from Germany or Austria" (Majhut and Lovrić Kralj 2020, 55).

In addition to bookstores, books could also be acquired through sales agents of foreign publishers operating in a legal grey zone. According to the law, these agents were supposed to offer their books only to publishers, but they often sold them more cheaply to private individuals, going door-to-door and avoiding taxes and duties (Majhut and Lovrić Kralj 2020, 56). Advertisements from foreign publishers offering discounts of up to 33% on retail book prices can be found in the 1925 edition of *Knjižarstvo* (Majhut and Lovrić Kralj 2020, 54).

Apart from domestic bookstores, sales agents, and direct orders, books could also be acquired while traveling. For example, the book *Bonzo and Us* (c. 1933) bears a label from a French bookstore in Egypt. It is plausible to assume that Vanja received this book as a gift from Albert and Tilda Deutsch Maceljski following their cruise along the coasts of Palestine and Egypt in 1933.

The books from the private library of Hilda Deutsch Maceljski reveal little about the circumstances of their acquisition, as they bear no dedications or other inscriptions. It can be assumed that part of her collection was acquired directly from publishers, as suggested by publisher leaflets inviting buyers to order books. We can find the so-called "Büchzettel" from the Malik-Verlag publishing house, and similar promotional materials by Renaissance Verlag. Verlag von Otto Hendel in Halle a. S. enclosed an extensive promotional list of books from its own editions, advertised as "books for travel and at home". Only a few books bear the labels of the bookstores where they were purchased, most of which were located in Zagreb. Thus, we know, for example, that Carl Sternheim's *Lutetia* entered Hilda's private library from Papirnica Auer (Ilica Street 16), *Die Geschichte der jungen Renate*

Fuchs by Jakob Wassermann from the Bookshop and Lending Library M. Strmecki (Duga Street 10), and Klabund's *Der Kreidekreis* from the Minerva Bookshop (Preradović Square 7). One label has also been preserved from the Viennese bookstore Altes Rathaus, on the cover of Felix Salten's *Neue Menschen auf alter Erde*.

The fact that Milan Marić, as well as members of his family more broadly, were world travelers is attested by the numerous travel guides found in his library, as well as in the libraries of other Jewish families. Between the two World Wars, travel guides in Zagreb could be obtained at the bookstores of Lavoslav Schwentner (Ilica 29) and Kugli & Deutsch (Ilica Street, which maintained a separate section for travel literature, maps, and postcards), as well as at the antiquarian bookstore of Josip Rotschild, located near the main square. More specialized literature, such as the Turkish dictionaries owned by Milan Marić, was purchased at the Auer Bookstore and Stationery in Zagreb (Gundulićeva Street 3), as indicated by preserved book labels.

Milan Marić's role as a member of the board of the Society of Friends of the Strossmayer Gallery required him to follow developments in the art market, which likely directed him toward the personal or mediated acquisition of auction catalogues found in his collection. Some of these auction catalogues were regularly announced with invitations to auctions in *The Burlington Magazine* during the 1930s. It is not recorded whether the magazine was available in bookstores in Zagreb or elsewhere in Croatia, but it is possible that auction catalogues were obtained or subscribed to during his travels, for example to London, as suggested by the subscription offers on the inside covers of the publication.

Within the books belonging to Milan Marić's library, a number of bookstore labels have been preserved. Examples include the Buchhandlung (bookstore) of Carl von Hölzl at Kärntner Ring 9, where

the Grand Hotel in Vienna was located, as well as Knjižarnica Polet in Belgrade. Among Croatian bookstores, a stamp from the Slavenska knjižara of Stjepan and Marija Radić, located at Jurišićeva 1 in Zagreb, has been found in some books. Slavenska knjižara operated from 31 December 1915 to 26 May 1948.

6. Conclusion

The examination of the private libraries of Jewish families in interwar Zagreb, particularly those of the Deutsch Maceljski and Marić families, reveals the intersection of intellectual curiosity, social status, and transnational cultural engagement. These collections, carefully curated and multilingual, reflect both the personal interests and professional pursuits of their owners, encompassing literature, history, art, technical manuals, and children's books. The libraries of Hilda and Vanja Deutsch Maceljski illustrate a conscious cultivation of literary quality and world literature (*Weltbibliothek*), as well as the upper-middle-class educational ideals of the period, while Milan Marić's library demonstrates a cosmopolitan and scholarly orientation, including specialized and technical materials.

The acquisition paths of these libraries – through local bookstores, foreign publishers, travel, and auction catalogues – highlight a deliberate strategy of collecting that combined both accessibility and selectivity, emphasizing intellectual and cultural capital. The fate of these collections, confiscated and stored during the Second World War, underscores the systematic persecution of Jewish families in the Independent State of Croatia and the broader cultural losses incurred. Today, the preserved libraries serve as invaluable testimony to the intellectual life, cosmopolitanism, and resilience of Zagreb's Jewish community, offering critical insights into their social networks,

cultural values, and the deliberate cultivation of knowledge in private spheres.

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Milan Marić

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2. *Illustrated Catalogue of the Furniture, Marbles, Bronzes, Clocks: The Wallage Collection*. London: Stationery Office, 1920.
3. *Catalogue of an extremely choice collection of chinese porcelain, superb jades, ivories and corals*. London: Sotheby & Co., 1936.
4. *Az Ernest Múzeum aukciói XXXVII: Dr. Mezey Ferenc Hagyatéka Kilény Hugó Gyűjteménye*. Budapest: Ernest Múzeum Kiadása, [s. a.]
5. *Verschiedener Berliner Kunstbesitz*. Berlin: Paul Graup, 1925.
6. *Mahmadou Fofana* / Raymond Escholier; bois originaux en couleurs de Claude Escholier. Paris: Le Livre Moderne Illustré, 1934.
7. *Régi ezüstkiállításának leíró lapstroma: 48 képpel* / szerkesztette Csányi Károly. Budapest: Az Országos magyar iparművészeti múzeum, 1927.

8. *Catalogue général officiel: exposition internationale des Arts Décoratifs et industriels modernes*. Paris: Imprimere de Vaugirard, 1925.
9. *Exhibition of French Art: 1200-1900*. London: Piccadilly House, 1932.
10. *A petroleum handbook* / compiled by Members of the Staff of the Royal Dutch-Shell Group. London: The Asiatic petroleum company limited, 1933.
11. *Die Schmiermittel-Anwendung; Mineralöl-Industriehandbuch* / herausgegeben von Markward Winter. 7. Auflage. Hannover: Curt R. Vincentz, 1928.
12. *Jubilarna knjiga Državnih željeznica Kraljevine Jugoslavije*. Beograd: [s. n.], 1929.
13. *Türkisches Lesebuch mit Glossar: Volksdichtung und moderne Literatur* / von J. Németh. Berlin; Lepzig: G. J. Göschen'sche Verlagshandlung, 1916.
14. *Türkisch-deutsches Gesprächsbuch* / von J. Németh. Berlin; Leipzig: G. J. Göschen'sche Verlagshandlung, 1917.
15. *Jugoslavien: Tagesfragen der Auslandwirtschaft* / E. Froyd Kaurimsky. Wien: Werlag von K. F. Koehler, 1920.
16. *Der Lago Maggiore: der Orta-See und die Ossola* / Renzo Boccardi. Wien [etc.]: Amalthea Verlag,[s. a.].
17. *Le livre du voyageur* / par H. Sauvard et P. Farcy. Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1928.
18. *Cambridge and its colleges* / by A. Hamilton Thompson; with 23 illustrations by Edmund H. New. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1926.
19. *Illustrierter Führer durch Dalmatien*. Wien; Leipzig: A. Hartleben's Verlag, 1915.

20. *Gothaisches Genealogisches Taschenbuch der Gräflichen Häuser: 104. Jahrgang.* Gothi: Justus Perthes, 1931.
21. *Semigothaisches Genealogisches Taschenbuch ari(st)okratisch-jüdischer Heiraten mit Enkel-Listen (Deszendenz-Verfolgen): Dritter Jahrgang.* München: Kyffhäuser Verlag, 1914.
22. *Kyros der Große* / Justin D. Prášek. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhaandlung, 1912.
23. *Vor 5000 Jahren: Ausgrabungen von ur (Chaldäa) Geschichte und Leben der Sumerer* / C. Leonardo Woolley. Stuttgart: Franckh'sche Verlaghandlung, [s. a.].
24. *Alt-Warasdin: sitz des Warasdiner Generalats.* Warasdin: J. B. Stifler, [c. 1900].
25. *Kultur Kuriosa: Zweiter Band* / Max Kemmerich. München: Albert Langen, 1926.
26. *Eheleute und Kirchenleute: Vergnügliche und ernste Kulturbilder aus alten Zeiten.* Berlin; Leipzig: Wilhelm Borngräber, 1910.
27. *Ataturkova Turska* / M. Svetovski. Beograd: Izdanje Balkanskog instituta, 1938.
28. *Gemälde des Wiener Kongresses 1814 -1815: Erinnerungen, Feste, Sittenschilderungen Anekdoten* / Aug. de la Garde; eingeleitet und erläutert von Gustav Gugitz. München: George Müller, 1914.
29. *Plan sentimental de Paris* / Henri Béraud. Paris: Editions Lapina, 1927.
30. *Tel Qu'en Lui-Même...: roman* / Georges Duhamel; illustrations de Clément Serveau. Paris: Le Livre Moderne Illustré, 1936.

31. *Riquet a la Houppe et ses compagnons* / Raymond Hesse; préface de Anatole France; illustrations de Gus Bofa. [Paris]: Mornay, 1923.

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2. *Wirinea* / Lydia Sejfullina. Berlin: Malik-Verlag, 1925.
3. *Der Sumpf* / Upton Sinclair. Berlin: Malik-Verlag, 1928.
4. *Babbitt* / Sinclair Lewis. München: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1924.
5. *Der Traum: Roman* / Herbert George Wells. Berlin; Wien; Leipzig: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1927.
6. *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf* / Alfred Döblin. Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1930.
7. *Im Anfang war die Liebe* / Malwida von Meysenbug. München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1926.
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9. *Dante – Novellen*. Wien; München: Rikola Verlag, 1924.
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11. *Mein Sumatrabuch* / Helge Kaarsberg. Berlin [etc.]: Franz Schneider Verlag, 1923.
12. *Lutetia: Berichte über europäische Politik, Kunst und Volksleben* / Carl Sternheim. Berlin; Wien; Leipzig: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1926.
13. *Menschen in China* / Dorothea Hosie. Stuttgart; Berlin; Leipzig: Deutsche Verlags – Anstalt, 1926.
14. *Das Leben Tolstois* / Romain Rolland. Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt, Rütten & Loening, 1922.

15. *Memoiren einer Idealistin: Zweiter Band* / Malwida von Meysenbug. Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1917.
16. *Neue Menschen auf alter Erde* / Felix Salten. Berlin; Wien; Leipzig: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1925.
17. *Buddha: Neue Geschichten und Studien Japan* / Lafcadio Hearn. Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt Rütten & Loening, 1920.
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19. *Memoiren einer Sozialistin: Kampffahre* / Lily Braun. München: Verlag Albert Langen, 1911.
20. *Dies Irae* / Anton Wildgans. Leipzig: L. Staackmann Verlag, 1918.
21. *Die Heilung durch den Geist* / Stefan Zweig. Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1931.
22. *Der Kreidekreis* / Klabund. Berlin: J. M. Spaeth Verlag, 1925.
23. *Golowin: Novelle* / Jakob Wassermann. Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, [1929?]
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10. *The Golden story book for girls.* London: Oxford University press, 1934.
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12. *Volksmärchen der Detuschen /* Johann Karl August Musäus. Stuttgart: K. Thienemanns, [1925 ?].
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Empirical Literary Memory Studies and the Memory of Complicity in Flemish Fiction about World War II

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Abstract: This article proposes an integration of cultural memory studies with the empirical humanities through a small-scale qualitative study of readers' responses to Jeroen Olyslaegers's *Will* (2016), a novel exploring moral complicity in Nazi-occupied Flanders. Building on recent calls to move beyond the study of literature's "mnemonic potential" towards the observation of its actual effects, the study investigates how ordinary readers engage with historical fiction dealing with complicity and responsibility. Drawing on interviews with four volunteers who read *Will* as part of a university-based experiment, the analysis traces how readers interpreted the novel's representation of collaboration, responded to its affective and ethical dimensions, and connected its themes to broader historical and contemporary injustices. The findings suggest that readers do recognise and respond to the novel's ethical argument about complicity, though often implicitly, and that conversational framing and vocabulary development can help elicit more explicit reflections. The study highlights the plurality of reading practices and shows how literature can foster critical and self-reflective engagement with the past. Ultimately, it argues that empirical approaches to literary reception are vital for understanding how collective memory is

negotiated through cultural production and how literature may act as a catalyst for ethical awareness in contemporary societies.

Keywords: cultural memory studies; memory theory; military occupations; Jeroen Olyslaegers; ethical reflections

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a small-scale empirical study in cultural memory studies conducted at Ghent University in the spring of 2025. Four volunteers, recruited through an elective university-wide course on Human Rights, were asked to read the novel *Will* by Jeroen Olyslaegers and to complete a series of simple tasks during their reading experience. These included marking passages that resonated with them emotionally and writing at least two reflections prompted by the novel—one halfway through and another upon completing it. Afterwards, the volunteers took part in individual interviews of about forty-five minutes each, conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire. Their responses were analysed qualitatively in order to gain a better understanding of how ordinary readers approach literary texts dealing with historical injustice, and of the extent to which the novel stimulated ethical reflections on the Second World War. The novel *Will* was chosen for its powerful portrayal of Flanders under Nazi occupation, and because—according to my own interpretation as a trained literary scholar—it compels readers to consider the various forms of complicity that affect the lives of ordinary people caught up in a military occupation. This small qualitative study of readers' reception sought to determine the extent to which readers would interpret the novel in this way and use the fictional world created by Olyslaegers to reflect on the ethical dilemmas raised by history.

This type of study combines methodologies and theoretical insights from the field of cultural memory studies with the practices of the empirical humanities. Research in this area—which could be tentatively defined as empirical literary memory studies—remains scarce and has so far been pursued mainly by a handful of pioneering scholars (Ortner 2025; Andersen, Ortner, and Borčak 2022 and 2025; Antonini, Brooker, and Škopljanc 2024). The present contribution is divided into two parts. First, it offers a brief overview of key theoretical concepts in cultural memory studies, arguing for the need for more empirical research on literature and memory. It then discusses the qualitative study on Olyslaegers's *Will*, presenting its main results and considering their implications for memory research.

Cultural Memory Studies and the Issue of Reader Reception

Cultural memory studies is a sub-branch of the wider interdisciplinary field of memory studies that focuses on the role of cultural production in sustaining, disseminating, maintaining, and at times challenging collective memory—that is, the collectively held beliefs about the past articulated in the social sphere through narratives and discourse. In the 1990s and early 2000s, cultural memory studies was still in its infancy, pursued as a specialised research interest by a relatively small group of scholars across the globe. Since then, however, the landscape has changed profoundly, and cultural memory studies has developed into a well-established field of academic inquiry.

One of the scholars who can be most credited for this transformation is Astrid Erll—whom we were fortunate to hear during her keynote speech at the EROL symposium. Professor Erll has offered a systematic account of how cultural products shape the dynamics of memory and forgetting (Erll 2011 and 2025; Erll and Nünning 2008), and she has been a driving force in turning cultural

memory research into one of the central—if not *the* central—areas within memory studies.

Thanks to the work of Erll and other influential cultural memory theorists, such as Ann Rigney (2004 and 2021) and Michael Rothberg (2009 and 2019), over the past fifteen years, cultural memory studies has entered a phase of maturity. The field now rests on solid theoretical foundations for understanding the cultural dynamics that give rise to collective memory. The latter is conceived as an emergent and dynamic process sustained by acts of representing the past (*mediation*) across diverse forms of cultural production. The repeated mediation of particular events and stories across different media (*remediation*) enables specific interpretations of the past to persist and circulate within society. This sustained cultural work establishes certain narratives as dominant and widely accepted, providing schemata and implicit assumptions through which other, subsequent historical events are filtered and interpreted (*pre-mediation*). At the same time, cultural production also functions as an archive of interpretations of the past, allowing subordinate or marginalised perspectives to endure and, potentially, to challenge dominant narratives in later periods (*counter-memory*).

This view implies that memory is simultaneously an individual and a social process—one that unfolds within a plurimedial constellation of discourses, involving both human actors and cultural forms. From this perspective, cultural production is not secondary to psychological or sociological approaches to memory. On the contrary, it is a central and indispensable process that continually shapes memory itself—which can only exist through the mediation and representation of the past in the cultural artefacts circulating throughout society.

Now that the scaffolding for the study of cultural memory has been established, I believe there are several important areas that still need

to be addressed if we want the field to develop further and to arrive at a more precise understanding of how visions of the past continue to persist and shape the present. One of these crucial areas concerns the role of the reader. This remains a strikingly understudied issue within cultural memory studies, despite its far-reaching implications for the very theoretical model on which the field rests. According to this model, the consumption of cultural products is one of the key moments when individuals can acquire narrative templates as well as implicit and explicit ideas about the past (Rigney 2021). The study of literature and the arts therefore offers cultural memory scholars not only the opportunity to observe how writers have represented historical events in a given period, but also the chance to reflect on the kinds of ideas and values that texts transmit to their readers.

Astrid Erll, drawing on Paul Ricoeur's conceptualisation of mimesis, has distinguished between the processes of *configuration* and *refiguration* to capture these two moments (Erll 2011, 152-157). A text dealing, for instance, with Nazi-occupied Poland or Japanese colonialism in China configures the past by offering a representation that readers can then use to refigure history within their own interiority, imagining what life might have been like in another time. Literature can thus transmit knowledge about the past, enabling readers to follow history from the experiential perspectives of rounded characters who live through events that seem to unfold before their eyes. Not only can this open more direct, emotionally resonant, and heartfelt avenues into the past, but it can also prompt readers to reflect more deeply on the ethical dilemmas and moral questions that are central the historical experience of humans.

From this it follows that literature can have transformative effects on readers' understanding of the past and on collective memory, and that literary texts can therefore be analysed, studied, and discussed in

terms of how they make the past intelligible and of the kinds of messages and values they attach to the representation of history. Yet the effects that literary texts can exert on readers remain *potential* effects, since they depend on how the texts are actually read and interpreted. For this reason, Erll argues that analysing how a literary work configures the past can only yield assumptions about its “mnemonic potential” (Erll 2011, 157), that is, the effects it could potentially have on readers’ understanding of the past. Moving beyond the idea of potential, and examining how literature is *actually used* by real-world readers as a tool for reflecting on the past, would require a decisive step towards the study of reader reception, a step that cultural memory studies has not yet fully taken.

The problem of reception—and of how the textual dynamics that literary scholars identify through their professional interpretations translate into actual acts of reading by ordinary, real-world readers—has haunted the theorisation of cultural memory studies from its very beginning. The issue was already fully foregrounded in an influential article published in 2002 by the late Wulf Kansteiner—whose sudden and premature passing has left a profound void in the field, as few scholars, if any, could match the combination of energy, wit, and acuity that Wulf brought to every academic exchange. In that article, Kansteiner urged the then-emerging field of cultural memory studies to engage more consistently with textual reception, identifying it as the crucial dimension through which many of the theoretical claims about the relationship between memory and culture could be tested and validated (Kansteiner 2002).

Over the past twenty years, many scholars have responded to Kansteiner’s call. As a result, cultural memory studies does not treat texts in isolation but has developed methods to assess their effects across society: for example, by examining critical reception in

specialised journals and online repositories (Perra 2010; Saxena 2021; Noji 2023); by analysing how certain works become canonised and the focus of sustained debate (Assmann 1999); and by studying how literary texts are re-actualised by other artists and writers through intertextual relations, adaptations, and transmedial or intermedial reworkings—in other words, through the processes that Erll and Rigney have classified as acts of *remediation* (Erll and Rigney 2009). All these approaches seek to capture different forms of textual reception within society by tracing the afterlives of specific cultural products and examining how they continue to exert an impact on diverse audiences over time. Yet one crucial dimension has remained strikingly underexplored, namely, the actual reading experience of ordinary readers.

The lack of research on how lay readers engage with literature and on how they use it as a tool to reflect on the past creates at least three major problems for the field of memory studies. The first issue is that the reflections developed by literary scholars on the effects of literary texts on memory culture must stop at the level of *mnemonic potential*. In other words, these reflections remain speculative: we currently lack the evidence and data needed to demonstrate how literature's potential is realised in concrete, situated acts of reading.

The second problem is perhaps even more significant—and it shows how transformative a serious engagement with readers could be for research on cultural memory. Because the perspective of everyday readers has not been sufficiently taken into account, the field of memory studies is still marked by what Rita Felski (2008, 12) calls the division between professional and ordinary reading practices. As a result, our current assessment of literature's mnemonic potential may be highly partial and incomplete, since it rests almost exclusively on the reading practices of a small

professional group trained in literary criticism. The true potential of literary texts may therefore be far broader, richer, and more diverse than our current models suggest, encompassing transformative experiences that remain powerful for ordinary readers, even if they have long been normalised, and thus overlooked, by literary scholars.

Finally, while we do not yet know whether, or how, literature's mnemonic potential is realised in the experience of ordinary readers—and how the very category of that potential might need to be rethought in light of such findings—the lack of research on readers prevents literary memory studies from asking whether something could be done to amplify literature's mnemonic potential across society. Scholarship has shown that literature can be instrumental in supporting unethical or self-serving narratives, but literary criticism has also compellingly demonstrated that literature can exert a profoundly positive influence on memory culture, offering a space for imagining the past in complex, non-reductive, and richly nuanced ways. The absence of research into how readers actually use literature to think about the past is therefore preventing the field from exploring methodologies that might help foster and sustain these positive societal effects.

Case Study: Reading *Will* by Jeroen Olyslaegers

The study I carried out at Ghent University in late spring and early summer 2025 was entitled *Everyday Reading of Complicity in Fiction about World War II Occupation in Flanders*. As mentioned earlier, its aim was to observe empirically the effects of a literary text that represents World War II occupation through the prism of complicity. Hence my choice to work with *Will*, a novel that offers a painful and unsettling account of collaboration during the Second World War.

Set in Flanders, the story is narrated by Will, an unreliable narrator living in contemporary Antwerp who recalls the years of the city's Nazi occupation when, in order to avoid military service, he joined the local police force. Moving back and forth in time between the twenty-first century—when Will struggles with the ailments and issues caused by old age—and the wartime past, the novel traces the ethical choices that the protagonist had to make while navigating between resistance fighters and Flemish fascists. Lacking clear political convictions, Will becomes increasingly entangled in the crimes of the occupiers, participating as a policeman in the round-up of Antwerp's Jewish population. Through this figure, the novel recounts the Second World War from the perspective of an in-between character—an "implicated subject," to use Michael Rothberg's terminology (2019)—who gradually becomes complicit in atrocities he did not himself initiate.

One of the core aims of the study was to examine, through qualitative analysis of readers' responses, whether the mnemonic potential that I, as a literary scholar, had attributed to the text was in fact activated through the act of reading. In particular, I wanted to determine whether readers were receptive to the novel's exploration of complicity, and thus to assess whether literature, as it is often argued, can serve as a viable tool for fostering reflection on complex positionalities vis-à-vis the crimes of history. To achieve this goal, the study employed a small degree of misguidance. In the communications with participants, the title was slightly altered to *Everyday Reading of Fiction about World War II Occupation*, thus omitting the reference to complicity that was central to both the novel and the research question.

Participants in the study were asked to respond to a semi-structured questionnaire that included the following fairly open-

ended questions: Did you have any prior knowledge of Flanders during World War II?; What are your overall thoughts on this novel? What do you think about Will, the main character? What was it like to experience history through Will's perspective? Do you think the novel absolves or justifies the main character's actions? What did you find particularly effective and convincing in the novel? Were there aspects of the novel that you found unconvincing? While reading, did you make any reflection about World War II military occupations? Did the novel make you think about other historical or contemporary contexts? What kind of broader reflections did the novel elicit for you? Did reading *Will* let you re-think some of your previous ideas about history and individual responsibility in the face of injustice? Were there parts of the story that stayed with you after you finished reading? Is there anything else about your reading experience that you would like to share? While the interviews followed this common framework, follow-up questions allowed each conversation to take its own specific direction, reflecting the distinct views and sensibilities of each participant. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and pseudo-anonymised.

In what follows, I will discuss the data that emerged from this small-scale empirical study with readers. Beyond its specific focus on the transmission of reflections on complicity, the discussion foregrounds what these interviews reveal about two of the three theoretical issues addressed in the previous section: namely, the actualisation of literature's potential as envisioned by literary scholars and some of the specific factors that need to be considered if we are to amplify readers' realisation of this potential.

With regard to the central research question concerning the transmission of reflections on complicity, Reader 2 immediately identified this as a key theme of the text, describing the novel as "a

journey [...] which captures a progression, from innocence to complicity; from guilt to regret". He further observed that the narrative as a whole compels readers "to reflect on their own choices under a tyranny, [showing that] there are no easy solutions". This interpretation closely aligns with that of Reader 3, although in her case the articulation of this view was less direct. In response to the open questions about the novel's meaning, she remarked that what struck her most was that it did not adopt "the victim perspective", but almost "the opposite point of view". Following the events of the Second World War from Will's standpoint, she explained, "made [her] feel very uneasy", and she admitted that Will "definitely brought a new perspective" from which she could think about the past. When prompted through follow-up questions to expand on these remarks, she produced a reflection that engages directly with the issue of complicity:

"Yeah, I mean, as I... we already said, it's kind of an explanation of why people did what they did [...] and it might help me to understand why locals who didn't have anything to do with the idea of the Holocaust, um, then ended up being involved [...] Like, why? I think this book can give some kind of explanation, maybe".

After receiving this answer, I decided to introduce the concept of *complicity* myself, noting that the participant's interpretation was already pointing in that direction. I therefore asked directly whether, during her reading experience, she had reflected on the issue of complicity and on the nuanced degrees of participation in injustice that characterise Will's behaviour. This comment resonated with Reader 3, who appeared to find words that more clearly expressed the kinds of meditations she herself had been making:

"I haven't made the reflection, actually, that there are these kinds of nuances. Yeah. But I think you're right that they play an important part in the story. I mean, Will doesn't really choose sides, he walks along with whoever is there. Yeah, uh, and there is complicity, for sure. I think this is the thing that worries me: if I was ever in such a situation, would I end up being complicit?"

The exchange shows that, through the reading of the novel, Reader 3 had perceived the moral questions that Will's vicissitudes brought to the fore, but these remained somewhat clouded by a lack of specific terms that could be used to unpack his behaviour.

In the case of Reader 1, things were even more complicated. On the one hand, her answers revealed a deep understanding of the dynamics portrayed in the novel. She argues that Will shows "the interplay between free will and one's existence as a social being" as well as "the entanglement between free will and what is right or wrong." Here Reader 1 is clearly foregrounding the ethical dimension of the story, hinting at how the novel enables us to contemplate both Will's individual agency and his participation in structural dynamics over which he has no real control. Moreover, she several times defines the novel as "heavy", because, she explains, "I was following his logic, I was following his dilemma all the time." On the other hand, while being unsolicited, Reader 1 does not make any reference to the concept of complicity. Yet, after thirty minutes of interview, when explicitly asked whether in her view the novel also engaged with the issue of complicity and responsibility, and whether she had been thinking about these issues, she replied: "Yeah, complicity! Definitely a lot about complicity, and partially about responsibility".

The case of Reader 4 is also interesting, especially because it was the only interview that took place with a significant delay from the moment of reading. In fact, while the other volunteers were interviewed between one and two weeks after they finished the novel,

Reader 4 was interviewed more than two months after completing the book. In her answers about the general assessment of the novel and about the main character, this reader shows a clear understanding of the issues raised by *Will*, arguing that “the author tries to show you how difficult it is to be in that situation, because everyone is always saying: if I was around during the Holocaust, I would have done this and this and this. And I think the author is trying to show that, no, you’re just a regular person. You don’t know what you would have done”. Yet, while replying to the initial questions about the overall interpretation of the novel, Reader 4 focuses above all on the contemporary parts of the story, discussing the struggle of an old, lonely man who is grappling with guilt and regret for the past, and who has remained alone after the tragic loss of his wife, friend, and granddaughter — in a subplot that is still connected to the traumas of the legacy of World War II.

If our conversation returned to the issue of complicity under Nazi occupation, it was above all because Reader 4 decided to consult and read aloud some of the notes she had taken while reading the text. In her notes, she wrote about the feelings she experienced while reading the story, which she described as “nauseous-making, disturbing, unsettling”. She also observed that “Will’s memories of occupied Antwerp so far reflect questions and struggles of guilt, responsibility and powerlessness”, and that the complexities of the modern society in which he lives “make it hard to point at agency and responsibility”. When asked why these issues that had seemed central to her during the reading sessions were not foregrounded in her answers during the interview, she explained that such reflections were above all linked to specific parts of the novel rather than to the text as a whole. This showcases the plurality of reading experiences and how the mnemonic potential of a novel may be the result of

selective attention to specific features and parts of a more complex narrative object. Moreover, it also suggests the need for more longitudinal studies that could observe the effects of reception over an extended period of time and how textual interpretations evolve — in line with what Harald Weirich (2003) has called “the post-history of reading”.

The plurality of reading experiences was also clearly embodied in the diverse responses that readers had towards the novel’s depiction of violence. On the one hand, the moments of violence were identified as highly memorable and among the scenes that remained most vividly in the readers’ minds. For instance, Reader 3 openly stated that she “definitely remember[s] the brutal images very well”. Reader 2 referred to the torturing and killing of an anti-fascist professor as “the most important scene that is still stuck in my mind”. For Reader 4, the most memorable sections of the novel were the round-up of Jews in Antwerp’s ghetto and the long scene in which Will, his fiancée, and his aunt are in a bar frequented by collaborators and occupiers, when the protagonist “gets really, really, really drunk and then he beats someone up really, really bad”.

On the other hand, readers reacted with different susceptibilities to these moments of violence, which elicited diverse emotions, contrasting interpretations, and even original reading practices. For instance, Reader 4 considered Will’s decision to kill a collaborator in the aftermath of World War II as “the lowest point” of his moral trajectory as an individual, whereas for Reader 2 that same act of killing constituted an appropriate act of retribution and, therefore, almost a satisfactory moment to read: “I think it’s karma and [the collaborator] deserved that because he was a bastard, and he was a vicious person... diabolical, immoral, and he deserved what was coming for him. He really deserved that”. By contrast, Reader 1 found

the graphic depictions of violence too burdensome and therefore decided to skip them, skimming through all those parts which she found unsettling and difficult to bear.

While responses to violence were multifaceted, the answers to another question proved far more consistent among the participants. When asked whether reading *Will* made them think about other historical and present-day contexts, all readers showed that, for them, reading about World War II in Flanders was a catalyst for reflections on both the present and other aspects of the past. For Reader 1 and Reader 3, this meant above all thinking about the plight of the Palestinian people and the victims of Israeli war crimes in Gaza. Reader 2, instead, established a connection with the rise of far-right populism across Western Europe. Reader 4, in his answer, preferred to focus on other historical contexts and discussed both the British occupation of Ireland and the long share of blood it caused during the twentieth century, as well as the crimes of the Ottoman Empire. Yet, while giving this answer, the participant also alluded to the destruction of Gaza by Israeli forces, which had already been a subject of discussion between the two of us, since the volunteer had family from that region. During the interview, he chose not to return to this painful present-day catastrophe, and I respected his silence and did not ask him about it again. All these examples show that reading about historical injustices elicited reflections that were in no way limited to the specific historical context addressed by the literary text, but rather allowed participants to establish connections with other historical crimes, both past and present, according to a dynamic of solidarity and relationality that Michael Rothberg has famously defined as “multidirectional memory” (2009).

A final set of interesting reflections concerns the reading practices and uses of literature (Felski 2008) that the text generated. For

instance, after reading *Will*, Reader 1, who was not much used to historical fiction about wartime, felt the need to read something lighter and more edifying, and she turned for comfort to some of her favourite poems by Pessoa. Nonetheless, the reading experience was far from useless for her, since it gave her deeper insight into the history of the country where she is now living and elicited several reflections on her condition as a migrant in Belgium. For Reader 4, reading about Antwerp in World War II — and the relationship that the protagonist has with his city and with the memory of what it once was — led her to ask similar questions about her hometown, Ghent, prompting forms of historically inspired flânerie.

Yet the most transformative effects and active use of the reading experience were reported by Reader 2. Not only did he decide to watch *Will's* cinematic adaptation several times in order to compare the two media and observe how the novel was transmediated for the screen, but he was also inspired by the reading experience to intensify his writing habits. By following *Will's* ruminations in occupied Antwerp, Reader 2 gained the awareness that the lines of thought that occupy our minds are the first step towards future actions that can have wide ethical magnitude. Aware of this, he decided to explore his own inner world more deeply through journaling:

Honestly, the novel made me reflect on myself. What we have in our thoughts is controlling our actions. As I mentioned at the beginning, I started to write my daily notes, what I am doing and what I want to see. Because your thoughts become an action: that's something I learned from this novel. I was already writing once or twice a month, but now I'm kind of doing it every day.

This practice of self-development, inspired by literature, constitutes an example of an impactful, everyday use of a literary text — one that

would be difficult to predict through a purely literary analysis of a novel and without empirically exploring the situated acts of interpretation of ordinary readers.

Conclusion

This small empirical study has offered a modest yet illuminating contribution to the emerging dialogue between cultural memory studies and the empirical humanities. By exploring how ordinary readers engage with *Will* and by tracing the interpretive, emotional, and practical afterlives of their reading experiences, the research has sought to move beyond theoretical notions of literature's *mnemonic potential* towards an examination of how this potential is actually realised in practice.

Based on the interviews I carried out, it can be argued that *Will* does succeed in fostering ethical reflections on complicity and on the indirect participation of ordinary citizens in historical injustices, and that readers do, in fact, recognise and respond to the novel's central theme of complicity. Yet in some cases, such recognition remains implicit: to articulate more explicit reflections, some readers require conversational prompting and the development of a vocabulary that enables them to express their ideas and reading impressions. This insight indicates the need for further and broader empirical studies that can reveal which activities best support and amplify literature's potential as a means of encouraging critical reflection on the past.

By attending to the plurality of reading practices and by situating acts of interpretation within real contexts, we can begin to appreciate how literature functions as a dynamic agent in the ongoing negotiation of memory, identity, and responsibility. Even within its limited scope, this study shows that readers can use literature dealing with historical crimes to reflect on both the past and the present,

using the emotionally charged exploration of an imagined past to test ethical dilemmas surrounding present-day injustices, political issues, and personal concerns. More generally, the study demonstrates that listening to readers—and learning from their interpretations—remains an essential step for cultural memory studies' attempt to understand how collective memory is made, sustained, and transformed through culture.

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Part II Affective and emotional aspects

“I don’t know why this most horrible part comes up to me now...”. A Framework for Linking Textual Dimensions of Child Sexual Abuse Fiction to Reader Responses

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Abstract: In this paper we propose four intratextual dimensions of fiction depicting child sexual abuse (CSA) which influence how readers respond to such works: the centrality, explicitness, victim/survivor-centredness and accuracy of the CSA depiction. To test this framework empirically, we analysed a subset of the ReLEL dataset of Croatian readers’ memorable reading experiences in which they spontaneously discussed CSA fiction. We examined how the dimensions influenced 1) whether and how readers mentioned CSA in their recollections, 2) whether and which emotions and 3) reflections were elicited, and 4) whether and how readers connected to the victim/survivor, bystander, and perpetrator characters. The following findings are key: firstly, the manner in which readers of fiction refer to CSA depends on the centrality and explicitness of the issue within the fiction; secondly, the complexity of the victim/survivor character has a notable impact on the emotions evoked; thirdly, the fiction can prompt readers to reflect on CSA in the real-world and this is influenced by the centrality of CSA in the narrative as well as its frequency and narrative position; fourthly, the focaliser(s) of the

narrative are key to understanding readers' connections to victim/survivor, bystander, and perpetrator characters, and readers connect more often with complex victim/survivor characters. These findings could be of particular significance to authors creating CSA fiction who aim to elicit or avoid certain effects on readers. Furthermore, the framework and results could be useful for researchers studying the impact of fictional depictions of other marginalised or underrepresented groups.

Keywords: representation of child sexual abuse, empirical literary studies, novels about child sexual abuse, audience response studies, social attitudes to child sexual abuse, narrative perspective, victim/survivor characterization, emotional engagement, reflective engagement

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA)¹ is a significant social problem, with current estimates suggesting that one-in-eight children worldwide are affected (Sanjeevi et al. 2018), and one-in-five children in the EU ('Proposal for a regulation' 2022).² However, the issue remains insufficiently addressed both in the media and everyday conversations, with a "culture of silence" still existing ('A Vision To Zero' 2025: 4-5). When CSA is discussed, misconceptions about its prevalence, harm and long-term effects, about victim/survivor

¹ There is no universally accepted definition of CSA. We use the definition in Hand (2025: 19): "unwanted sexual experiences in childhood'- whether this included physical contact or was a non-contact sexual abuse (which could include exposure to a person's body, imagery, pornography or on-line content)".

² It is notable, however, that CSA is underreported universally, and this underreporting may be more pronounced in regions with weaker legal frameworks, due to specific cultural factors, or lack of adequate data collection systems.

characteristics, and the type and reasons of perpetrators are prominent (Cromer and Goldsmith 2010; Glina et al. 2022). In addition, public understanding of the trauma-responses and coping mechanisms of people with lived experience of CSA (hereafter: CSA victim/survivors) is lacking (Bulfin et al. forthcoming). Both social avoidance and entrenched misconceptions harm the wellbeing of victim/survivors and hinder prevention efforts (Hailes et al. 2019).

In this context we asked: could representations of CSA encountered in (fictional) books counter the social avoidance and even help contest some of the 'CSA myths'? Some existing research suggests a positive answer: Self-selected reading, and to a greater extent *fiction* reading, has been hypothesised and shown to ease engagement with 'difficult topics' (Koopman et al. 2012 for depictions of rape; Menninghaus et al. 2017 for the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception). The present study therefore explores the potential of CSA representations encountered in fictional literature – 'CSA fiction' – to counteract public reluctance to engage with the issue of CSA, to foster an (emotional) connection to victim/survivor characters, and to possibly even challenge some of the misconceptions. We also considered whether certain types of representation in CSA fiction – for example, stereotypes about victim/survivors or perpetrators – could potentially reinforce misconceptions.

To answer these questions, we used the dataset 'Remembering Literature in Everyday Life' (ReLEL), which provides us with recollections of memorable reading experiences of 1005 non-professional Croatian readers. Readers self-selected 3–5 works they had read fully at least once in any period of their life; about 70% of readers' choices were fictional works – for example, literary classics

and recent bestsellers, and about 30% were non-fiction (Škopljanać et al 2025). We focused on the responses in which readers chose to discuss contemporary CSA fiction. As respondents were not asked to discuss or avoid any topic during their interview, this data allows us to examine whether fiction depicting CSA is vividly remembered, whether or not the representation of CSA was an important aspect for the readers, and to see how readers naturally talk about CSA. In an exploratory fashion, we can thus study unbiased and unprompted responses to these works – in terms of emotions, reflections, or connections to victim/survivor characters evoked by the reading.

We hypothesized that readers' responses are not entirely idiosyncratic, but instead are connected to the way CSA is presented in the fictional works. More precisely, we expected responses to vary based on four 'dimensions of representation': the centrality of CSA in the narrative; the explicitness of the depiction of CSA; the victim/survivor-centredness of the depiction; and the accuracy of the depiction, including its engagement with CSA myths (see section 4). Therefore, following thematic analysis of the readers' responses to the CSA fiction, we attempted to connect the types of reader response to the different types of literary representation along the four dimensions. This is the first time such an approach has been taken to the analysis of fiction depicting CSA.

2. Method of analysis

To arrive at the sub-corpus of fiction depicting CSA from the ReLEL dataset, the CSAREps and ReLEL teams³ worked to identify relevant

³ We would like to thank Caroline Dunne and Giulia Scapin from the CSAREps team for reading some of the fiction, and Lovro Škopljanać, Velna Rončević, and Luka Ostojić from the ReLEL team for their support, including translating interviews and discussing results. CSAREps refers to the

texts in English and Croatian, adhering to inclusion criteria for both the texts (see section 3.2) and readers' responses (3.3). The CSAREps team read all the texts to check that they met the textual inclusion criteria, and analysed the way CSA is portrayed (see section 4). The ReLEL team translated (excerpts of) the relevant reader responses and added responses in which a keyword search using the Croatian terms for 'child sexual abuse', 'rape', and 'molestation' showed results.⁴ The CSAREps team checked they met the reader inclusion criteria, coded all responses qualitatively, and analysed them using a mixed-methods approach.

We combined a theory-driven and data-driven approach to coding and analysis (Kuckartz 2019). Our theory-driven codes were informed by our familiarity with the scholarship on CSA, the expertise of the CSAREps project's experts-by-experience advisory board,⁵ and our previous research examining audience responses to CSA fiction in terms of its personal impact on viewers and their engagement with CSA myths (Bulfin et al. forthcoming; Pöhls et al. 2025). Further data-driven codes were developed by the authors following an initial read-through of the responses. We then performed a qualitative content analysis with the software MAXQDA 24. Three rounds of codebook refinement were undertaken alongside three tests of intercoder agreement (as measured by MAXQDA's integrated comparison feature of coded segments at a minimum overlap of 65%), which

European Research Council-funded 'Investigating Fictional Representations of Child Sexual Abuse' project, www.csa-in-fiction.com.

⁴ Despite this thorough approach, the sub-corpus might not be exhaustive and CSA may be represented in other texts within the wider corpus.

⁵ We would like to thank members of our advisory board for their valuable feedback.

reached a satisfactory level of 75% after coding 25% of the dataset jointly.⁶

3. Corpus: methods of inclusion and exclusion

3.1. The ReLEL dataset

In semi-structured interviews (28 minutes on average, with the ReLEL team), readers selected 3-5 main texts that they had read in full, remembered well, were impressed by or thought were important for themselves or others. They were then asked to summarize each text and describe their engagement with it in relation to their emotions, motivations to read, deep impressions and memorable parts; some questions about their general reading experience followed (For the interview questions see: <https://zenodo.org/records/10785192>).

3.2. The CSA fiction texts

To be included as ‘CSA fiction’ in our analysis, texts needed to fulfil at least one of three criteria: CSA is present within the narrative; or it is based on a real-life occurrence of CSA (e.g., *Room*) (Bethune 2007); or transmedial versions of the narrative (film, TV series) explicitly or implicitly depict CSA (e.g., *The Handmaid’s Tale*) – as recollections of these (story)worlds might overlap in respondents’ memories. All non-English language texts had an English translation which we used for analysis, except for *Sjeme Tame* which was analysed in Croatian by co-author Aleksandra Milenović. The final CSA fiction sub-corpus consisted of 27 Texts (see Table 1). 11 texts were mentioned by multiple readers, while the remaining 59% were mentioned only once. It is worth noting that 69.7% of texts in the full ReLEL dataset were mentioned only once, while CSA fiction like *The Kite Runner* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* are two of 66 books that were

⁶ The codebook can be accessed here: <https://osf.io/d6h9k/overview>

mentioned 10 or more times, showing that some CSA fiction was frequently mentioned. Furthermore, *Crime and Punishment*, which fits the textual inclusion criteria, was the most frequently discussed text in the dataset; however, in line with our contemporary remit, our analysis focused on responses to 20th and 21st-century texts.

Table 1
Number of readers, titles, authors and years of publication of selected CSA fiction texts from ReLEL dataset

No. of readers discussing work	Title of CSA fiction (in English translation if existent)	Author	Year of publication
19	<i>The Kite Runner</i>	Khaled Hosseini	2003
14	<i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i>	Stieg Larsson	2005
8	<i>Dark Mother Earth</i>	Kristian Novak	2013
8	<i>Lolita</i>	Vladimir Nabokov	1955
7	<i>Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F.</i>	Christiane Vera Felscherinow	1978
5	<i>Game of Thrones</i>	George R. R. Martin	1996
5	<i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i>	Arthur Golden	1997
5	<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	Margaret Atwood	1985
4	<i>2666</i>	Roberto Bolaño	2004
2	<i>The Institute</i>	Stephen King	2019
2	<i>Hopeless</i>	Colleen Hoover	2012

1	<i>Sjeme Tame</i>	Iva Kolega	2018
1	<i>A Little Life</i>	Hanya Yanagihara	2015
1	<i>Gerald's Game</i>	Stephen King	1992
1	<i>Interview with the Vampire</i>	Anne Rice	1976
1	<i>It</i>	Stephen King	1986
1	<i>My Dark Vanessa: A Novel</i>	Kate Elizabeth Russell	2020
1	<i>Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia</i>	Jean Sasson	1992
1	<i>Room</i>	Emma Donoghue	2010
1	<i>The Consequences of Love</i>	Sulaiman S.M.Y. Addonia	2008
1	<i>The God of Small Things</i>	Arundhati Roy	1997
1	<i>The Lovely Bones</i>	Alice Sebold	2002
1	<i>Shelter</i>	Harlan Coben	2011
1	<i>Home</i>	Harlan Coben	2016
1	<i>Bared to you</i>	Sylvia Day	2012
1	<i>The Beast</i>	Anders Roslund & Borge Hellstrom	2004
1	<i>The Owl Always Hunts at Night</i>	Samuel Bjørk	2016

The CSAREps team assigned the texts to one or more genres: literary fiction and issues fiction were most frequent (37.04% each), followed

by crime (29.63%), horror (22.22%), other genres, romance/erotica and young adult (11.11% each) and we included (fictional) memoirs (7.41%). 66.67% of the texts were published in the 21st century and many of the earlier texts are long-running serials (*Game of Thrones*), or have been adapted into new mediums (*Gerald's Game*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *Lolita*), thus potentially remaining contemporary to readers (Antonini et al. 2024).

We also recorded the types of abuse presented in the CSA fiction corpus, with many works including multiple types. Child sexual exploitation (CSE) was the most frequently featured type of abuse (in 51.85% of the texts); followed by intrafamilial abuse (40.74%); child abduction (25.93%); and abuse perpetrated by someone in the child's close circle; stranger abuse; or the child being held in captivity (22.22% each). Less frequently depicted were institutional abuse (11.11%) and clerical and non-recent abuse (3.7%). While types of abuse can differ between nations and timepoints (Ferragut et al., 2021) multiple sources concur that between 70-92% of children know their abuser (Council of Europe, n.d.; Australian Bureau 2016; Finkelhor & Shattuck, 2012). Thus stranger abuse, and probably also CSE and bunker/captivity narratives are overrepresented in these texts, and even when intrafamilial or close-circle abuse are shown, it is often in conjunction with these rarer forms of abuse. The frequency of these rarer forms in fiction could amplify misconceptions about how most children experience CSA. The corpus, despite being contemporary, also contains very few depictions of online CSA/CSE which is rising drastically. To keep our later findings on readers' responses in perspective, it is also important to note that many of these texts also depicted other difficult life experiences, such as drug abuse or forced migration.

Examining the representation of victim/survivors' gender reveals an overrepresentation of male victim/survivors in the CSA fiction compared to real-world prevalence data. Male victim/survivors are depicted in 57.7% of the fictional texts, while female victim/survivors are represented in 84.6% (Figure 1), suggesting a 1.47-fold increased likelihood of girls being victimised. In reality, studies consistently suggest that girls are 1.9 to 2.2 times more likely to experience CSA (Barth et al. 2013). While the overrepresentation of boys as victim/survivors in fiction could contribute to enhanced awareness, stigma reduction, and better efforts to support male victim/survivors, it could also distort readers' understanding of who is most at risk.

The representation of perpetrators' gender in the CSA fiction was largely accurate vis-à-vis real-world prevalence for female perpetrators: 11.11% female in the fiction versus 10% in reality (Ferragut et al. 2021). Male perpetrators were slightly overrepresented as they were present in every text. The concomitant absence of female perpetrators operating alone could reinforce the prevailing myth that CSA is invariably perpetrated (also) by males.

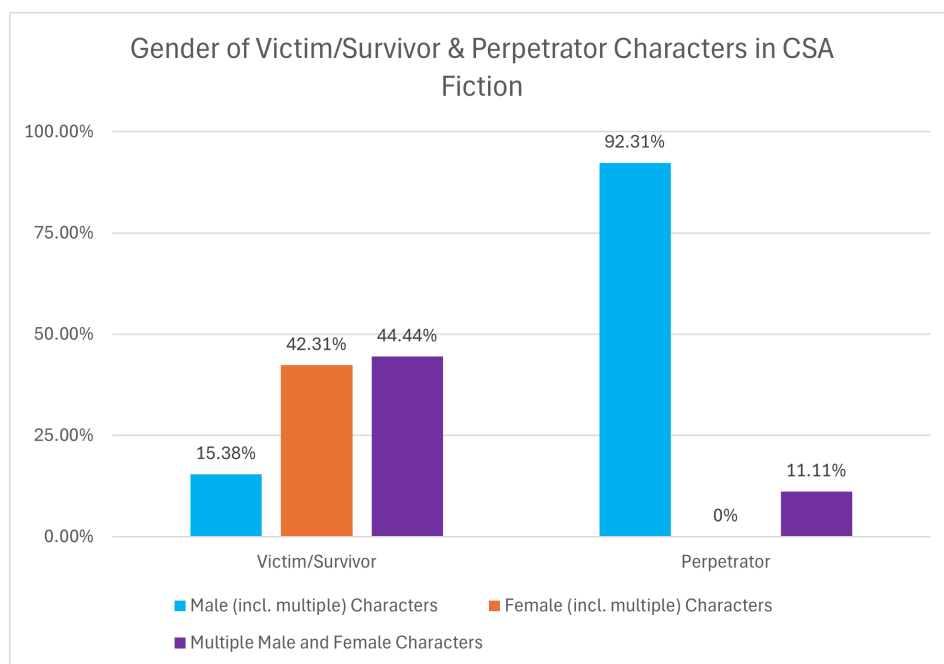


Figure 1: Gender distribution of victim/survivor and perpetrator characters across the CSA fiction texts

3.3. The readers

Responses were included when readers selected a CSA fiction text as one of their 3-5 memorable texts, even when they did not explicitly discuss the representation of CSA in their interview. Responses were also included if readers mentioned a CSA fiction text in passing - with reference to CSA, general violence, or their own reaction to the text (e.g., feeling bad while reading) - even if the text was not one of their 3-5 most memorable texts.

Our sample comprised 89 readers total (8.8% of the full ReLEL dataset) and as 6 readers referred to two CSA texts in their interview, we worked with a total of 95 responses. Of those, 6 responses mentioned the CSA text in passing while discussing other texts, while

89 responses discussed the CSA text in some detail. The subsample of readers who discussed CSA texts was similar to the overall ReLEL dataset in terms of age (mean = 44.17 years, range = 20–76); education level (3.16% PhD, 61.05% graduate school, 34.74% secondary school, 1.05% elementary school); and frequent self-reported reading, around 30 books on average per year.

One major difference from the complete dataset was the even larger proportion of women among CSA fiction readers (88.42%) compared to the full ReLEL dataset (69.6%). This suggests that CSA fiction is part of the larger trend where fiction is read more often by female readers (Jabbar and Warraich 2022), and particularly that which features sexual violence (Vicary and Fraley, 2010). While 29.4% of recollected fiction in the ReLEL dataset was read by minors, the proportion of CSA-related fiction read by this age group was notably lower at 19.32%. Comparable levels of reading were observed during young adulthood (ages 18–25), with 25.07% of all recollected fiction and 26.14% of CSA fiction consumed within this age range. This is in line with our findings that CSA content is often seen as unsuitable for children – regardless of the way it is depicted and/or the genre of the text (Bulfin et al. forthcoming) – and therefore not often included in stories for children (Mills 2018), though it recurs in young adult fiction (Bulfin 2021; Oelmann 1991). That more than 45% of the CSA fiction was remembered from readings below 25 years-of-age, suggests the potentially strong impact that fictional representations of CSA can have, as young readers – having less real-world experience – are more likely to have their views and beliefs informed by fiction (Adams 2020).

4. Textual dimensions shaping reader responses

Fictional representations can significantly impact beliefs about societal issues and attitudes towards others, particularly for people with limited awareness of an issue or contact with affected individuals (Fontes and Pino-Juste, 2021; Jones et al., 2023). As people without personal knowledge or experience of CSA tend to avoid the issue, we hypothesised that CSA fiction can potentially be highly informative and meaningful, but also misleading and harmful to general views on CSA and victim/survivors.

However, the aspects of fictional representations responsible for these potential effects on general audiences have not yet been studied. We therefore propose four theoretical dimensions that we expected to be key in shaping reader responses to fictional depictions of child sexual abuse: 1) *Centrality of the CSA depiction* in relation to the whole work; 2) *Explicitness of CSA* in terms of both naming and depiction; 3) *Victim/survivor-centredness of the depiction*; and 4) *Accuracy of the depiction of CSA*, especially with regard to misconceptions and 'CSA myths'.

In this section, we put forward specific propositions regarding the effect of each dimension on reader responses and then test these in the following sections using our sample of 95 responses to CSA fiction. The categorization of each CSA fiction text in our corpus under these four dimensions can be found on Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/d6h9k/>

4.1. Centrality

When an issue is prominently depicted within a text it is likely to make more of an impact on readers. To determine and operationalize the centrality of CSA within the texts in our corpus, we used 1) an **overall**

rating of centrality where texts could lie on a spectrum from CSA being: a) the *central or main topic* (as is often the case for issues fiction), b) *pivotal to plot or character development*, c) *world-building* in that CSA (only or mainly) adds to the bleakness or violence of the storyworld, or d) *non-central*.

In addition, we recorded 2) **CSA occurrence over the course of the work**, and differentiated between it being a theme: a) *throughout – revealed early* (roughly in the first third of the narrative), b) *throughout – revealed later*, c) *intermittently* (e.g., isolated abuse scenes that occur at multiple points in the narrative), d) *seldom – at a key moment* (e.g., as a reveal explaining criminal or other behaviour), or e) *seldom – incidental*.

Lastly, we recorded 3) **CSA co-occurrence with other types of violence**, or whether CSA was an isolated incidence of violent crime in an otherwise nonviolent environment, making a distinction between CSA as: a) the *only violent crime* depicted, b) *CSA co-occurring with other violence directed at the victim-survivor* (adverse childhood experiences and/or violence later in life), c) *CSA co-occurring with violence against other characters*, or d) *CSA co-occurring with other difficult issues/potentially traumatic events*.

We expected that greater centrality, sustainedness, and singularity of CSA in a representation will link directly to its prominence in readers' responses. This, we hypothesized, will manifest in increased references to CSA as a recurrent theme, or as a particularly memorable aspect, or as a subject which prompts emotion or reflection in readers.

4.2. Explicitness

The use of appropriate terms is one of ten established criteria for good quality journalistic reporting on CSA (see Döring and Walter 2020, NQC 3), which aim at supporting a solution-focused discussion on this important topic. Research on the impact of media reports also stresses that using appropriate terms in relation to victim/survivors, perpetrators, and the crime enhances reader-perceived adequacy of news reports and facilitates understanding of the issue (Döring and Walter 2025, 910-917); that terms and descriptions used reflect the underlying understanding of the issue (as historical surveys show, Bingham 2019); and that distancing text features (such as passive voice) obscure perpetrator responsibility and foster victim blaming (Bohner 2001). While there is, to our knowledge, no comparable research linking the way CSA is depicted in *fiction* to the impact on readers' perceptions of the issue, we hypothesize that similar mechanisms are at play.

When operationalizing 'explicitness' in fiction, we focused on 1) the **naming of the issue of child sexual abuse** itself, distinguishing between it being: a) *explicitly named*, b) referred to *implicitly by depiction of the abuse*, or c) *normalised* by the terms and descriptions used (e.g., calling it a form of love, or using a term like 'prostitution', which implies that the abuse is a form of sex work and hence a legal or tolerated profession); and 2) the **graphic depiction of CSA scenes**, distinguishing between it being: a) *explicitly depicted multiple times*, b) *explicitly depicted once*, c) *reported* (but not 'shown'), or d) *implicit or hinted at*, but not made explicit.

Considering the diverse ways readers process metaphorical language and implicit reference (cf. Scapin 2023), we hypothesize that readers

will more readily comprehend and recall that a work depicts CSA if CSA is explicitly named and represented. In contrast to a depiction in which CSA is normalised, this type of representation is more likely to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of CSA as a grave crime with potentially severe consequences for the victim/survivor. The explicit articulation of the issue and demonstration of CSA, either through direct expression or through reporting, is likely to result in a reduction of victim blaming and the engendering of more empathic responses. Conversely, responses that normalise CSA are anticipated to result in the downplaying of consequences and a diminished comprehension of victim/survivors' trauma responses and coping mechanisms.

4.3. Victim/survivor-centred perspective

In an approach that seeks to actively listen to people with lived experience of child sexual abuse we discussed with our experts-by-experience advisory board what would make a representation victim/survivor-centred in their opinion. The discussion revealed that elements beyond the textual representation – such as authors' purpose, their objective of preventing re-traumatisation and dispelling CSA myths, and their intention to present a non-sensationalist account – are crucial factors in determining the degree to which a representation is perceived as survivor-centred. The role of paratextual information, which is routinely sought out by (some) readers to make sense of their reading experience, should therefore be a focus of further research.⁷ Here, we focus on operationalizing the intra-textual dimensions that might engender a holistic connection

⁷ In the interviews, the ReLEL team asked about respondents' background knowledge regarding the author. In our subset only a few readers had related knowledge, e.g. if the authors were politically or socially engaged.

with the victim/survivor perspective in readers, as this was prioritised by our board.

We identified three related textual aspects that may impact readers' responses: 1) the **focaliser and perspective** from which the narrative is told: a) *victim/survivor - child perspective*, b) *victim/survivor - adult perspective*, c) *bystander*, d) *far-away bystander* not belonging to the victim/survivors' close circle, or e) *perpetrator*.

In addition, we identified 2) the **complexity of the victim/survivor character** and differentiated between: a) *round* characters that are complex in their cognitive and/or emotional portrayal, undergo development, and show multiple facets of their character, and b) *flat* characters about whom not much more than their experience of CSA is known.

We also surveyed the fiction for 3) the **depicted impact of CSA**, including bodily sensations, emotions, victim/survivors' resilience, their coping strategies, their trauma (responses), including self-harm, the (difficulty of) disclosure, the continued impact on their life, death by suicide or death by murder, as well as noting if no impacts were described. We operationalised these as: a) *not showing any impact*, b) *showing some kinds of impact* (1-3 of the above mentioned), or c) *showing many kinds of impact* (more than three kinds).

We hypothesise that focalisation will impact on how readers connect with characters. Experiencing events from the perspective of the victim/survivor focaliser is most likely to evoke other-oriented emotions (sympathy, compassion, etc.) towards victim/survivors and other-oriented cognition (problem awareness, problem-solving

thoughts) regarding them. As other-oriented cognition in this case often involves evaluating bystander behaviour and previous research has found a tendency to blend with bystander characters even in a case where the main character was a victim/survivor (Pöhls et al. 2025), we expect that both depictions with a victim/survivor focaliser and those with a bystander focaliser will also evoke connections to bystander characters. Perpetrator focalisation may prompt perspectival alignment with the perpetrator, creating a connection between the reader and the character (or even the people they represent) which might lead to normalizing responses regarding child sexual abuse.

We expect that the complexity of victim/survivor characters will amplify these responses: round victim/survivor characters could elicit more emotional reactions, including deeper other-oriented reactions (e.g. not only pity), while flat characterisation may inhibit emotional reactions and connections to the victim/survivor character.

Narratives showing different kinds of CSA impact could help foster understanding of CSA as an event with prolonged consequences in general and the impact(s) depicted in particular. Such narratives could potentially encourage readers to reflect on trauma responses, thereby facilitating a shift in perspective in which some socially undesirable behaviour is understood as a consequence of trauma that could result in a less critical evaluation of the victim/survivor.

4.4. Accuracy of CSA depiction

It is widely accepted that literary fiction can promote understanding and reduce stigma towards those who are 'different', improve social attitudes through perspective-taking, and educate the general public

about support behaviours (Chung & Slater 2013; Chapple et al. 2021; Pöhls et al. 2025). This has been demonstrated for certain marginalised groups such as autistic people (Jones et al. 2023). The extent to which these prosocial effects occur is likely contingent upon the representation's accuracy.

Accurate fiction can trigger reflections on (Pöhls et al. 2025) or form a starting point for conversation on (Bulfin et al. forthcoming) 'difficult' social topics. Alternatively, inaccurate representations can perpetuate negative stereotypes (Kearney et al. 2019), and reinforce erroneous beliefs about societal issues (Bulfin et al. forthcoming). Due to unconscious availability heuristics, whereby individuals form assumptions based on prior, salient (vicarious) experiences (Tversky and Kahnemann 1973), dramatic or memorable fictional cases could affect beliefs about prevalence - for example, leading people to overestimate the number of CSA cases involving captivity.

We therefore analysed whether the CSA fiction in our corpus, 1) *accepts or endorses erroneous beliefs regarding CSA*; 2) *challenges misconceptions about CSA*; or 3) *refers to unusual or statistically infrequent CSA, or to circumstances/events that are often connected to CSA myths or misconceptions, but without endorsing them*.

We expect that reading CSA fiction that endorses erroneous beliefs will be correlated with readers accepting some of these, while reading CSA fiction referring to myths or misconceptions without endorsing them may lead to similar but smaller effects. Conversely, if CSA myths are challenged by the depiction, we expect that they might be recognised as false after reading. Testing the results of these

hypotheses on myth acceptance/refutation is beyond the scope of this study, however, and will be undertaken in future work.

5. RQ1: How and how frequently is CSA mentioned?

5.1. Overview of CSA mentions in response to the fiction for the dataset

The prevailing societal reluctance to discuss child sexual abuse was reflected to a certain extent in the ReLEL dataset. Given that this was a relatively brief interview conducted in public spaces, it was perhaps not surprising that respondents did not disclose personal experiences of sexual violence in childhood (Croatian prevalence statistics show that 8.5-13.7% of people experience CSA (Popović 2018)). However, the interviewers reported that participants were willing to discuss other challenging subjects, including death, grief, war, mental health and sexuality, in relation to their own or acquaintances' experiences, suggesting that CSA remains a particularly taboo topic (McRobert, 2022).

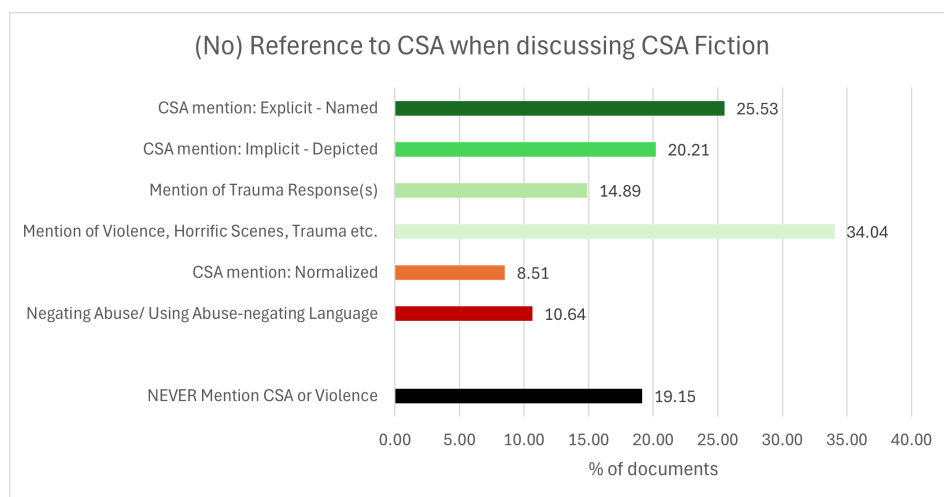


Figure 2: List of types of references readers make to CSA in their responses and percentages of responses including each reference type. Except for those not mentioning CSA or violence, these are nonexclusive.

The question of whether respondents mentioned CSA in relation to the books they chose cannot be answered in a simple dichotomous manner (Figure 2 & Table 2). In most recollections (34.04%), respondents referred to violence, horrific scenes, or trauma in a general way that could include the CSA depiction, but could also – as many works depicted CSA along with other traumatic events – refer solely to those other events. While 25.53% of responses mentioned CSA explicitly, it was also often mentioned implicitly or hinted at (20.21%), or characters’ trauma responses were referred to (14.89%), showing that these respondents engaged with the (impact of) the abuse depictions of their own accord and unprompted by the interviewers. However, not everyone mentioning CSA directly did so in a trauma-informed or victim/survivor-centred way: some responses normalised the abuse (8.51%), and others denied that CSA took place

(despite evidence to the contrary) or used language that indicated they misunderstood or minimised its harmful impact (10.64%).

Table 2:

Examples of the ways in which readers mention CSA

Subcodes: CSA Mention	Example reader responses from CSA fiction subsample
CSA mention: Explicit - Named	Well, perhaps that situation of rape , unfortunately. That abuse of minors . (R416: <i>Dark Mother Earth</i>)
CSA mention: Implicit - Depicted	Not because of these elements for which we know Lolita and what is in general... What is the whole center of the book . (R629: <i>Lolita</i>)
Mention of Trauma Response(s)	[...] their relationship and that, I mean, what they went through, how she managed, I mean, because he had nightmares and all that , how she managed to actually cure him of all that, in quotes, for him get rid of it in the end. (R862: <i>Crossfire</i>)
Mention of Violence, Horrific Scenes, Trauma, etc.	I mean, I remember the really shocking parts, descriptions, events , but now I remember the characters very poorly. (R559: 2666)
CSA mention:	It's about the same thing, actually

Normalized	several stories, but it follows a boy who is also from Afghanistan, abused, there are a few disturbing scenes described, but again normal for that area. (R940: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)
Negating Abuse/ Using Abuse-negating Language	So, there's a part about when she is bending or when she's actually kind of seducing him with her body in some way. And then for me it was so, well, she's not that innocent, like. So, like, you cannot have it black and white, that situation. Of course, I'm not excusing him because he like fell in love with her, but so on the other hand, it's a fact that everyone has their own side, every story has two sides. That is, a medal has two sides. (R121: <i>Lolita</i>)

Respondents frequently referred to CSA in multiple ways during their interviews (therefore the above-mentioned response types were non-exclusive) and patterns of linguistic politeness, likely due to the perceived sensitivity of the topic, were observed (see also Table 2). Some respondents transitioned from less to more explicit language across the interview. For example, R416 initially described the relationship between an abusive football coach and the boy victim/survivor as “let's say [...] interesting”, but towards the conclusion of the interview, explicitly referred to “that situation of rape [...] that abuse of minors” as something that had remained in her memory, showing that *Dark Mother Earth* had caused her to reflect on the issue. Additionally, respondents offered excuses for broaching

CSA in the interviews or exhibited hesitations when speaking about it. This suggests they experience considerable reluctance and difficulties in discussing CSA.

Furthermore, in nearly a fifth of responses (19.15%), CSA (or even possible references to it) did not come up at all and in more than a quarter of recollections (27.08%) it was not mentioned in the initial summary of the narrative. This suggests that CSA was not perceived as a main theme by these respondents or that they were unwilling to discuss it.

5.2. How are the mentions of CSA connected to the fictional dimensions of the work?

As hypothesised (see section 4.1), we found a clear link between our **overall rating of centrality** and the frequency with which CSA was (explicitly) named by respondents (Figure 3).

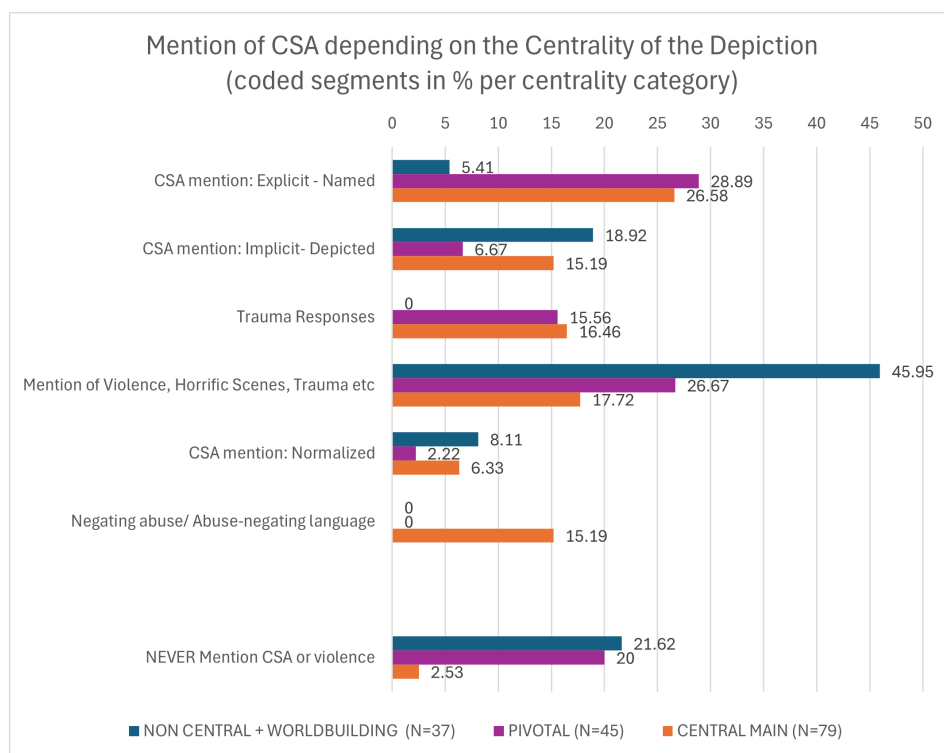


Figure 3: References readers made to CSA in their responses in relation to the 'overall centrality' rating of the text. (% of all responses which refer to CSA in the respective way per centrality category)

In response to CSA fiction in which CSA was merely a non-central topic or world-building element (world-building set), respondents referred to CSA explicitly in only 5.41% of mentions. This figure is significantly lower than in the responses to fiction where CSA was pivotal (pivotal set; 28.89%) or central (central set; 26.58%). Instead, in the world-building set, CSA was not distinguished within mentions of other horrific events (45.95%), or mentioned in an implicit way (18.92%). Such non-direct referrals were less prevalent in responses to the central or pivotal sets. If CSA was central in a work, it was rarely

omitted entirely (only 2.53%), while fiction in the pivotal and world-building sets had many respondents focusing on other themes.

Notably, trauma responses or the impact on the victim/survivor or bystander characters were only discussed when CSA was central or pivotal to the narrative. This suggests that if CSA is employed solely as a world-building tool to highlight the negative aspects of a storyworld, such as violence or injustice, it fails to direct attention towards the impact of CSA on the lives of victims/survivors and bystanders.

The normalising and negating responses require further analysis to ascertain their relationship to characteristics of the representation: We hypothesised that respondents' references to CSA would mirror the **naming of the issue of CSA** in the text (see section 4.2) - and for texts that normalize CSA, we expected to see more abuse-normalizing and abuse-negating language.

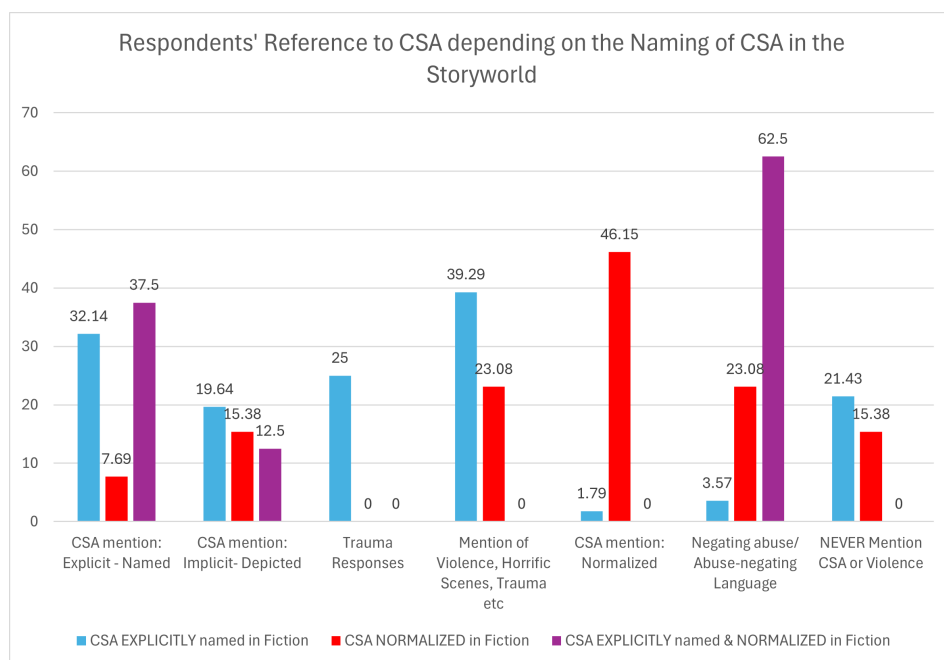


Figure 4: References readers made to CSA in their responses in relation to the naming of CSA in the text, in percentages of responses including this reference. Except for those not mentioning CSA or violence, these are nonexclusive.

A clear link was found between fiction that referred to CSA in a normalising manner and normalising mentions by respondents (Figure 4). While explicit textual mentions of CSA largely elicited either encompassing referrals to violence (39.29%) or explicit referrals to CSA (32.14%) and rarely evoked normalizing responses (1.79%) nor abuse-negating language (3.57%), normalising textual depictions were most likely to evoke normalising language in respondents' references to CSA (46.15%).

A striking similarity between the respondents' language and textual descriptions is revealed upon closer examination. Almost all

normalising responses were in reaction to CSA fiction which normalises CSA, albeit in different ways according to their respective storyworlds. In *Interview with the Vampire*, CSA is normalised as a component of vampirism as focalised by the perpetrator, and the abusive adult vampire-child victim relationships which mirror real-world CSA are romanticized and eroticized. One respondent mentions the scenes of “feeding” as particularly memorable, but does not go beyond the term used in the storyworld or reflect on its significance, indicating that she did not link it to real-world abuse. *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *Zoo Station* depict CSA as a conventional real-world social practice. Although it is focalised by the victim/survivor, *Memoirs* normalises CSA by conveying it as a non-recent cultural tradition, allowing readers to view it as a “geisha lifestyle” (R765, R978) rather than recognising it as child sexual exploitation. Although described as exploitative, in *Zoo Station* CSA is portrayed as a common experience for marginalised youth in West-Berlin during the 1970s, which leads to its normalisation in the eyes of readers, who fail to single it out for condemnation.

While depictions that normalise CSA regularly provoked abuse-negating responses as we had hypothesised (23.08%), negations are even more frequent in response to works that both normalize *and* explicitly name CSA (62.5%), such as *Lolita*. Five out of eight responses to *Lolita* negated CSA: it is called “love between an older man and a minor girl” (R806) and twelve-year-old Dolores is described as “entering into some sexual relations” (R401) with the perpetrator - the unreliable focalising character Humbert - as if it was her choice. What can be understood here is that respondents are well aware of the literary facts: She is a child, he is not, they engage in sexual acts. But the abusive nature of this is not recognised or acknowledged; instead,

harmful CSA myths are corroborated and victim blaming takes place (see also Table 2). These respondents seem to have been influenced by Nabokov's literary depiction of perpetrator strategies, such as the use of elaborate rationalisations of CSA, as James Phelan surmises (Phelan 2007: 232). Negating abuse could be respondents' way to continue to share the perspective of the "interesting" (R370, R717) focaliser, the perpetrator Humbert, with whom they have been invited to connect; in these instances, respondents do not seem to have realised that the text also ultimately invites them to distance themselves from his views.

Unreliable narration may also have contributed to the abuse-negating responses to fictional works with a victim/survivor character as focaliser, such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *My Dark Vanessa*, where the protagonist uses protective denial to cope with her abuse and only over time gains clarity and language to recognize and name the abusive nature of her experience.

It can be concluded that the centrality of CSA in fictional representations is positively correlated with its presence in readers' responses, whereas representations where CSA is solely employed for world-building elicit less explicit references and, within the scope of our dataset, no reflections on the impact of CSA on victim/survivors and bystanders. The language employed to refer to CSA is crucial, with explicit textual language most successfully evoking explicit language in the responses and normalising textual language evoking normalising responses (and to a lesser extent abuse-negating responses), and a combination of normalising and explicit language in the fiction evoking abuse-negating responses (and to a much lesser extent explicit naming of CSA).

6. RQ2: What kinds of emotions are evoked by CSA fiction?

6.1. Overview of emotional responses in the dataset

Our CSA fiction corpus depicts many forms of child sexual abuse (and other difficult life events), and – as we hypothesised – strong emotions are evident in readers’ responses. Emotions were mentioned in 84.21% of responses and in response to 88.89% of the texts. We coded the emotions inductively and included aesthetic emotions (AEs) such as liking (Schindler et al. 2017). The positive AE we designated Interested/Engaged was mentioned in the most readers’ responses, followed by Sadness, Liking, Impression/Affected (a mixed AE indicating a deep effect), Shocked/Shook up and Disgust/Nauseous (Figure 5).

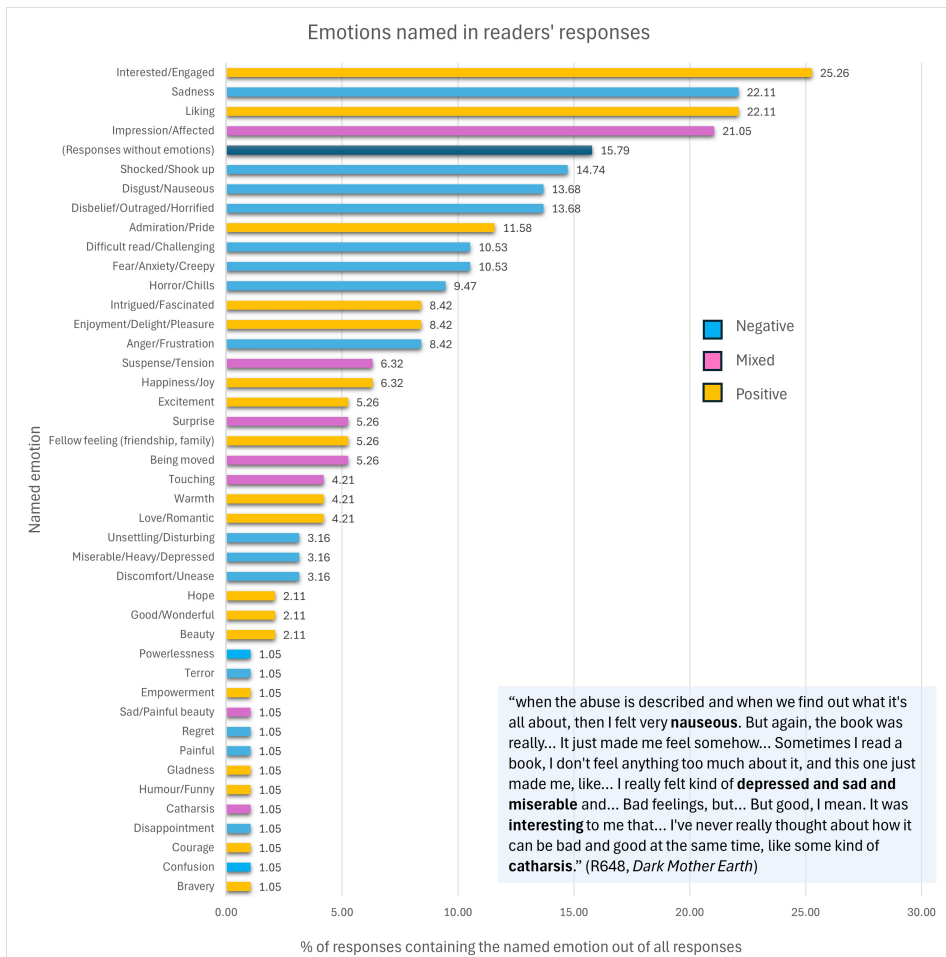


Figure 5: Emotions named in readers' responses (% of responses containing the named emotion out of all responses)

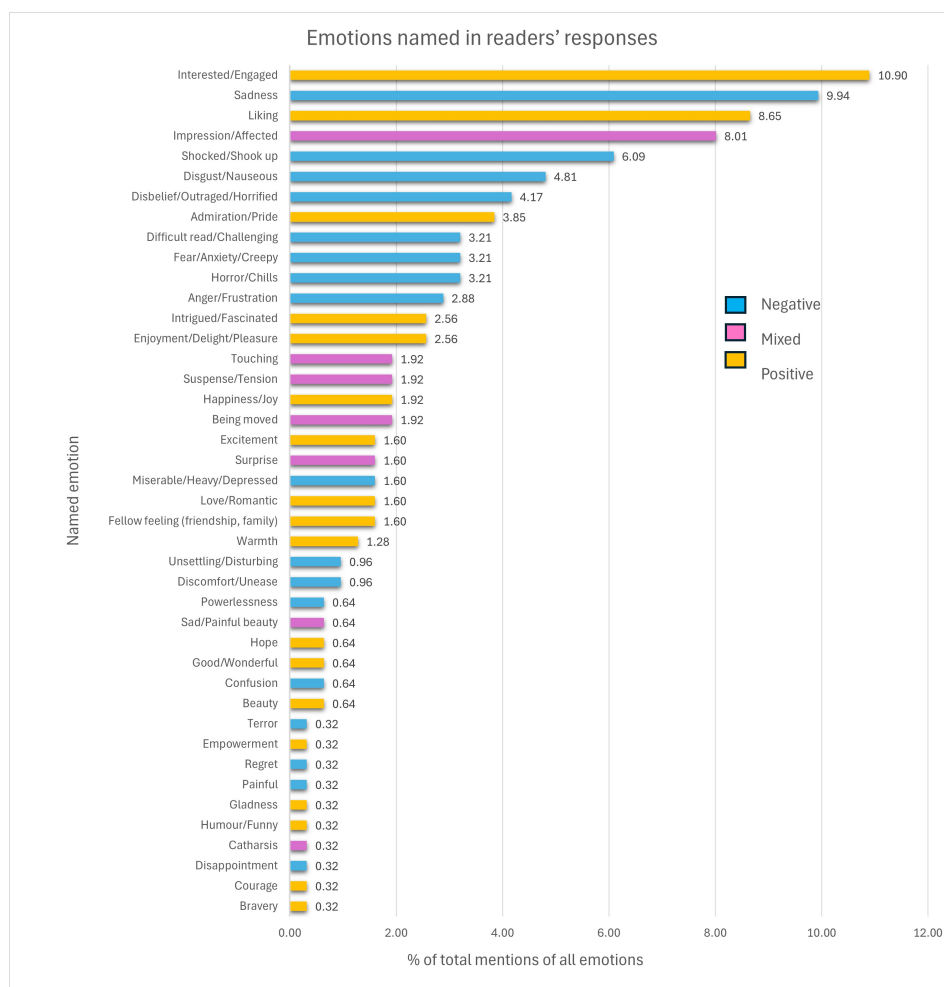


Figure 6: Emotions named in readers' responses (% of total mentions of all emotions)

Overall, 43.59% of all mentions of emotion referenced negatively valenced emotions, 40.06% referenced positive and 16.35% referenced mixed (Figure 6 shows the emotions mentioned most frequently overall). The relatively high number of negative emotional reactions likely derives from the difficult material encountered in the CSA fiction. The co-occurrence of these negative emotions with

positive and mixed AEs points to the ameliorating effect of AEs on the potential distress experienced when strong negative emotions like shock and disgust are evoked during reading. This is in line with Menninghaus et al.'s (2017) distancing-embracing explanatory model for the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception, which stresses the role of interplays of positive and negative emotions and concomitant mixed emotions in making the (reading) experience bearable and even pleasurable. The excerpt shown in Figure 5 from R648's response to a striking abuse scene in *Dark Mother Earth* evinces several key negative emotions evoked by abuse depictions and suggests they were ameliorated by the mixed AE Catharsis.

Within the overall ReLEL dataset, emotions were mentioned in 95% of responses and were negative in 50% of these, meaning that our sub-corpus of CSA fiction evoked emotions in fewer responses (84.21%) – possibly due to the relative lack of cues for positive emotions in these difficult texts. For example, our rate of negative emotions differs from Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo's (2019) findings on a corpus of popular texts in which they observed many more positive reactions than negative. In addition, within the CSA-fiction responses which mentioned an emotion, more include a negative emotion (60.00%) than in the ReLEL dataset (50%), which again may relate to the difficult material. Furthermore, comparing negative emotion distribution in the CSA fiction and ReLEL dataset (using a preliminary ReLEL study on negative emotions, Škopljanač 2022) shows that the CSA fiction provoked stronger negative emotional reactions of shock, disgust and outrage, including visceral bodily reactions; but this was tempered by the presence of positive AEs. While Schindler et al. (2017) hold that readers tend to eschew fiction which evokes intense negative emotions, our findings confirm Škopljanač's (2022) that what

he refers to as ‘bibliotraumatic’ emotions in reading are both memorable and can be embraced by readers.

As well as coding each mention of an emotion, we also coded what the emotion was evoked by – from general comments to specific accounts of the emotion’s stimulus (Figure 7).

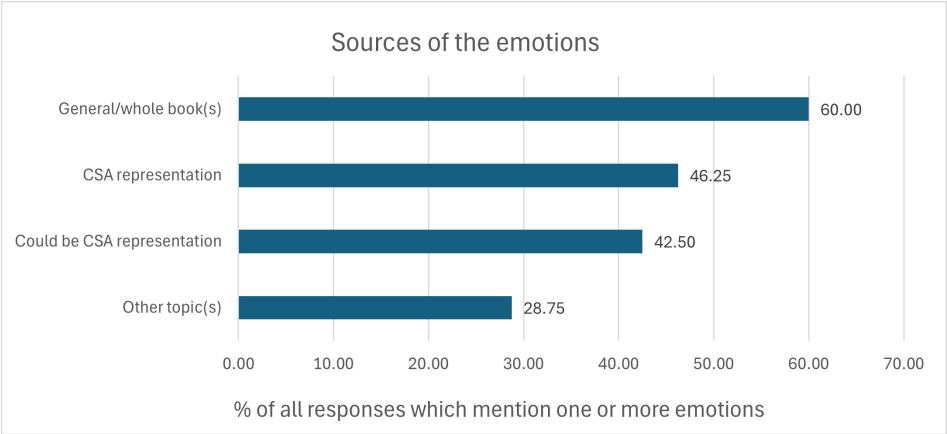


Figure 7: Sources of the emotions (% of all responses which mention one or more emotions)

The latter were divided into cases where the emotion was explicitly evoked by the CSA representation, where it could relate to the CSA representation, and where the stimulus was other topics (e.g., war or drug abuse) (see Table 3). We found that at least one emotion was evoked by the CSA depiction in 46.25% of all responses where an emotion was named. Representative responses show readers’ shock and sadness at the actions of abusive parents, but also fascination with a perpetrator’s perspective (Table 3). As Figure 7 demonstrates, many of the emotional reactions in the CSA-fiction responses do or

could stem from the CSA representations; and this could also be a factor in a respondent's emotional response to the whole book.

Table 3

Example reader responses for sources of the emotions and for the 'Deep Impact' and 'Memorable Parts' questions

Stimulus of the emotion	Example reader responses from CSA fiction subsample
General/Whole Book(s)	[I]t's interestingly written, I mean once you pick it up you can't put it down. (R722: <i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i>) It doesn't end well. It's very sad. (R039: <i>The God of Small Things</i>)
CSA Representation	The book shook me because... Because I can't believe that such things exist in the 21st century, that parents sexually abuse their children. (R239: <i>Sjeme Tame</i>) Well, also some kind of excitement. Sadness, when they sell her, disappointment. And in the end she's happy, so joy. (R726: <i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i>) I found that concept interesting, that of a pedophile, that is, from the perspective of a pedophile. (R370: <i>Lolita</i>)
Could be CSA Representation	Because it was about a child, so that particularly shook me... (R940: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)
Other Topics	[E]ven somehow a, a kind of disgust, so to speak. I don't know how to express it more softly. So it's just very uncomfortable for me to read about all these things concerning addiction. (R246: <i>Zoo Station</i>)

'Deep Impact' Question	Jesus Christ, now we are stranded at this terrible part. The first thing that comes to my mind is one of the descriptions of those victims, those girls who perished ... I don't know why that most horrible part comes up to me now, of the whole book, but well, there you go. (R065: 2666)
'Memorable Parts' Question	[I]t's a striking scene for me ... how this young man is raped by his peers... (R709: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)

The distribution of emotions evoked specifically by the CSA depictions also differed from that of the full set of CSA-fiction responses (and even more so from the wider ReLEL dataset (where comparison is possible)). As Table 4 shows, the strong, visceral negative emotions of disgust and horror play a larger role in the responses evoked by the CSA depictions, while interest and liking are less prominent, speaking to a strong repugnance for this brutal crime against children.

Table 4

Distribution of most frequent emotions directly evoked by the CSA representations versus distribution of emotions in the full CSA fiction subsample

Named emotion	Distribution of most frequent emotions directly evoked by the CSA depictions	Distribution of emotions in the full CSA fiction subsample (% of total mentions of emotion)
Disgust/Nauseous	13.04%	4.81%

Impression/Affected	9.78%	8.01%
Interested/Engaged	8.70%	10.90%
Horror/Chills	7.61%	3.21%
Sadness	6.52%	9.94%
Shocked/Shook up	6.52%	6.09%
Disbelief/Outraged/ Horrificed	5.43%	4.17%
Liking	4.35%	8.65%

Furthermore, respondents frequently mentioned the CSA depictions when specifically asked if any part of the text made a deep impression on them and/or was particularly memorable. The CSA depiction was a factor or possible factor in 60.04% of responses to the deep impression question and in 54.05% of responses to the particularly memorable question, with the experience of reading an explicit abuse depiction often remaining vividly in the respondent's mind (see Table 3).

6.2. How are readers' emotions connected to the fictional dimensions?

We hypothesised that there would be differences in emotional reactions to the CSA fiction according to the **overall centrality of CSA** in the narrative (see section 4.1). We found, as might be expected, that more emotional reactions are evoked by the CSA depictions in narratives where CSA is the central theme (51.11%) or pivotal to

events/characters (45.83%) compared to when it is a world-building element (8.00%; Figure 8).

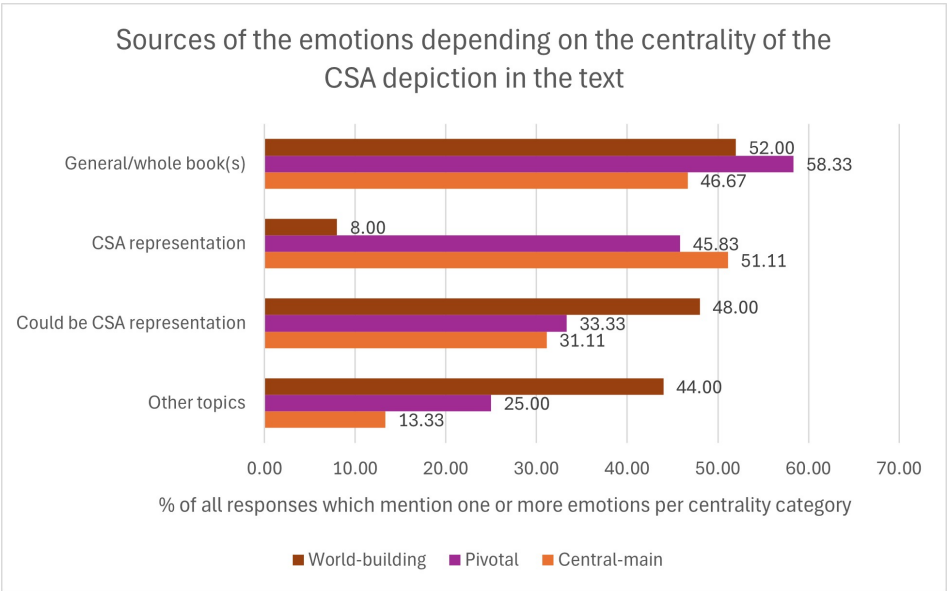


Figure 8: Sources of the emotions depending on the centrality of the CSA depiction in the text (% of all responses which mention one or more emotions per centrality category)

This suggests that shallow, passing depictions of CSA used to intensify storyworld bleakness (e.g., *The Institute*) allow readers to bypass the typically strong emotions it evokes. Frequently encountering such CSA depictions – for example, within the crime or horror genres – could potentially lead to desensitised or fatalistic responses to the issue. Unexpectedly, we did not find patterns of difference in emotional valence or distribution for the different types of CSA narrative centrality – likely because the world-building texts depicted other difficult topics, such as femicide (2666) or addiction (*Zoo Station*).

We also hypothesised that there would be differences in emotional reactions to the CSA fiction according to the **complexity of the victim/survivor character** (see section 4.3). We found that emotion is evoked by the CSA depiction more often for round characters (42.30%) than for flat (23.53%), indicating that facile or stereotyped depictions of victim/survivors can impede readers' connections (Figure 9). Round characters also produced slightly more negative (10.76%) and slightly fewer positive (9.62%) emotions, possibly implying the emotional burden of engaging with a more plausible or relatable character who is experiencing abuse (Figure 10).

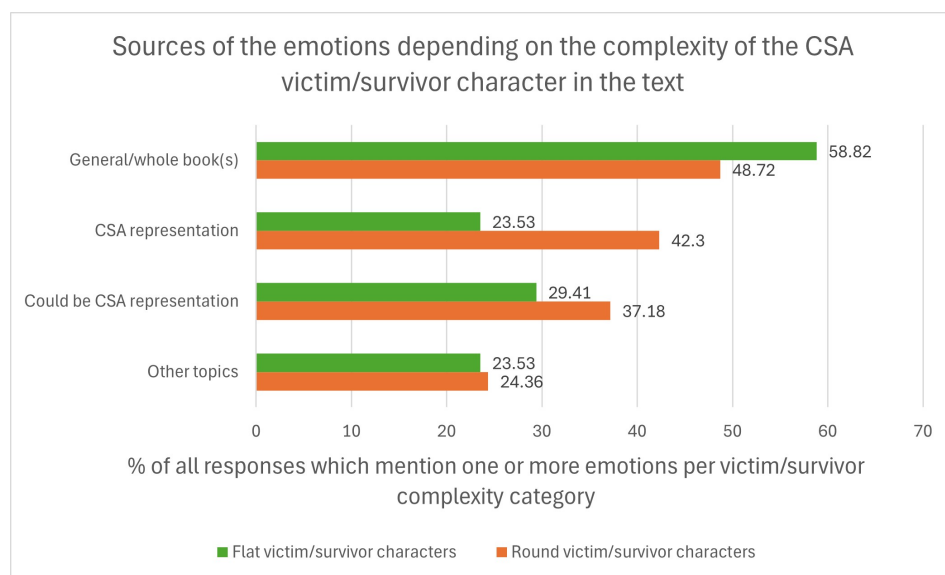


Figure 9: Sources of the emotions depending on the complexity of the CSA victim/survivor character in the text (% of all responses which mention one or more emotions per victim/survivor complexity category)

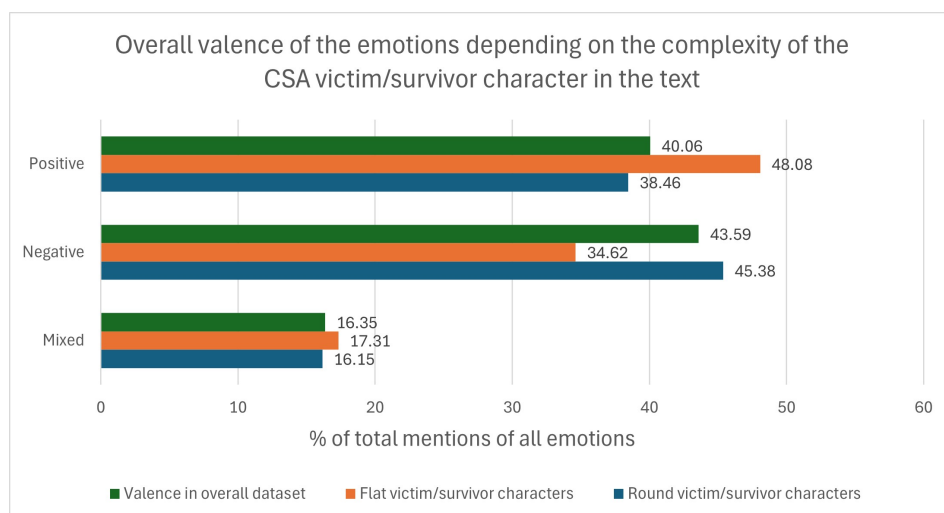


Figure 10: Overall valence of the emotions depending on the complexity of the CSA victim/survivor character in the text (% of total mentions of all emotions)

Finally, texts with flat characters seem to evoke more suspense and enjoyment emotions (Figure 11) – possibly because this set of texts includes several crime novels and thrillers – while texts with round characters engender more sadness, disgust and horror. Overall, the difference in the distribution of the emotions confirms that the complexity of the victim/survivor character affects readers' emotional responses to the text.

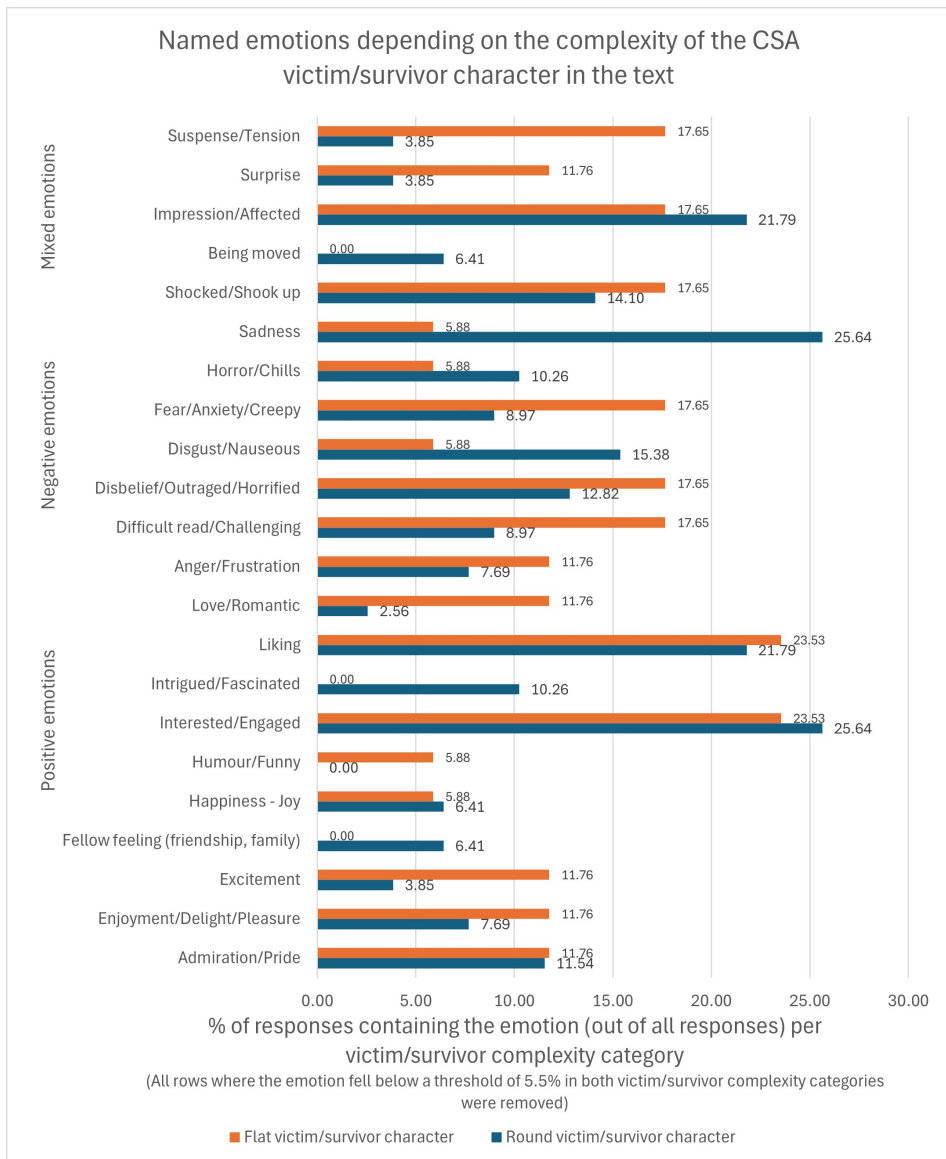


Figure 11: Named emotions depending on the complexity of the CSA victim/survivor character in the text (% of responses containing the emotion (out of all responses) per victim/survivor complexity category)

7. RQ3: Which kinds of reflections are elicited by the CSA fiction?

7.1. Overview of reflections elicited for the dataset

In discussing the fiction, respondents frequently (in 60% of cases) shared reflections that went beyond the confines of the storyworld, pertaining to insights or realizations regarding the real world gained through their engagement with the narratives. Their reflections concern human psychology, one's own or other societies, oneself, and morals and values (Figure 12).

In 25.26% of responses, these reflections, realizations, or learnings were directly connected to child sexual abuse. Compared to non-CSA-related reflections, they were more concerned with human psychology (especially trauma, resilience and development, human wickedness and the banality of evil) as well as oneself, personal life situations, and choices (Figure 12). At the same time, CSA-related reflections were less connected to the societal level, suggesting that the depictions did not frequently evoke thinking about CSA as a problem to be addressed by society as a whole. For some readers reflecting on society, depictions set in a remote time or place (e.g., *The Kite Runner*; *Memoirs of a Geisha*) elicited distancing responses – such as CSA being “normal for the area” (R940) – that might imply the misconception that CSA is intrinsic to certain regions while uncommon in one's own sphere. Depictions set geographically close to Croatian readers (*Dark Mother Earth*; *Sjeme Tame*), on the other hand, elicited reflections on CSA prevalence in one's own society.

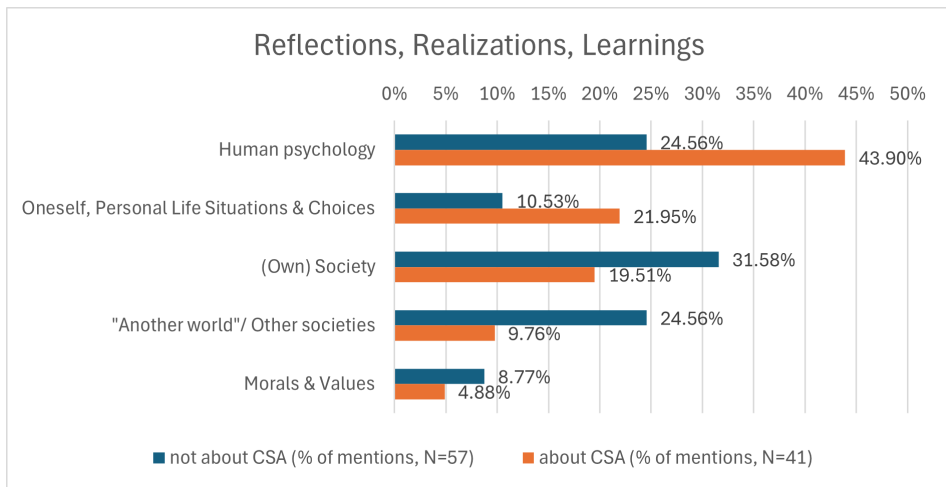


Figure 12: Subjects that were reflected on by readers. Percentage of mentions depending on whether reflections, realizations, or learnings were in relation to CSA (57 mentions) or not (41 mentions).

Overall, we found prosocial reflections that pointed to a raised awareness regarding the prevalence of CSA and its potentially traumatic impact on victim/survivors, realizations of bystander difficulties and importance, as well as refutations of common misconceptions about CSA, victim/survivors and perpetrators. For example, one respondent realised after reading *The Consequences of Love* that perpetrators do not fit a specific national, racial, or religious profile (R900). However, some responses did demonstrate CSA myth acceptance, as illustrated by the suggestion that there might be acceptable reasons for becoming a perpetrator (R629, R806) or that the victim/survivor could have 'asked for it' (see section 5.2).

7.2. Which fictional dimensions influenced the number and types of reflections?

We found that the **overall centrality of CSA** (see section 4.1) in the narrative did significantly impact the quantity of realizations and learnings related to CSA (Figure 13). When CSA was central to the narrative, it elicited one or more reflections in 35.56% of respondents, in 25% of respondents when it was pivotal to plot or character, and in only 7.41% of respondents in the non-central/world-building set. While this may not be particularly surprising, it provides robust support for the claim that readers' cognitive engagement with the subject of CSA can be facilitated through fiction in which it is a key focus.

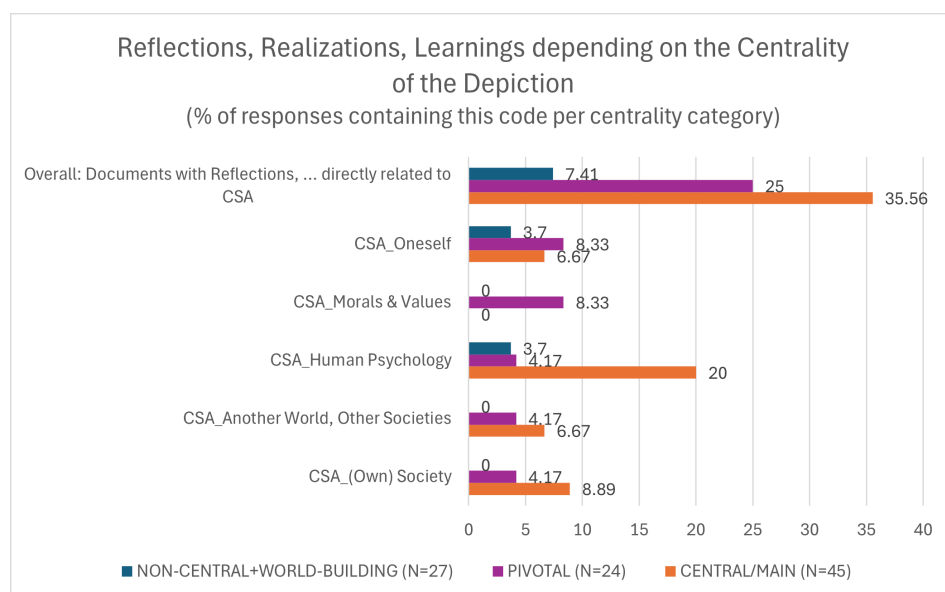


Figure 13: Subject of reflections made by readers in relation to CSA and their percentage coverage based on overall centrality of CSA in the texts they are discussing.

Subsequently, we explored whether the type of **CSA occurrence in the novel** – its frequency and the point in the narrative when it is first

mentioned – also influenced responses. Of all reflections related to CSA, most (52.8%) occurred in response to narratives where CSA was thematised early on and then throughout the narrative. 34.6% of reflections were evoked for narratives where CSA occurred seldomly, but at key points of the story, and only 13.3% of reflections were mentioned in response to stories where CSA was thematised later, but then throughout the rest of the narrative (for examples of reflections, see Figure 14). When CSA was seldom and incidental, or appeared intermittently, it evoked no reflections related to CSA at all. This suggests that it is not only the overall centrality or frequency of a topic that increases its saliency for readers, but also its narrative position, with early or key mentions of CSA prompting more reflections.

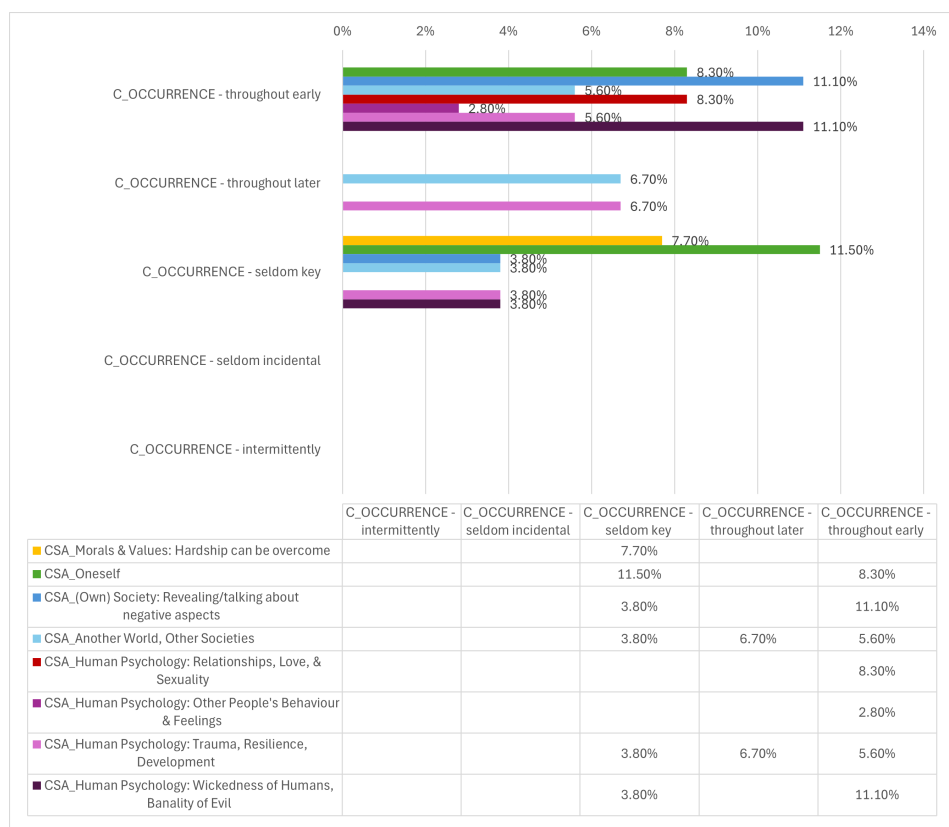


Figure 14: Subject of reflections made by readers in relation to CSA and their percentage coverage based on the CSA occurrence over the course of the texts.

8. RQ4: Do readers show connections to victim/survivor (and other) characters?

8.1. Overview of the connections to characters for the dataset

In light of victim/survivors' testimonies of feeling rejected or shamed when disclosing child sexual abuse (Cunnington & Clark 2022), we explored the extent to which readers can establish a spontaneous connection to victim/survivor characters depicted in the CSA fiction. Reiterating the guidance from the project's advisory board of experts-

by-experience, the preferable type of readers' connection to victim/survivors would be a holistic engagement with these characters and 'walking with them', while also recognizing that their experience of CSA might continue to impact their life without being the defining aspect. This type of full empathic connection contrasts to partial connections which recognise either the victim/survivor's strength or the harm inflicted on them. While partial connections to the victim/survivor are preferable to no connections in terms of countering social avoidance, they can be reductive.

In the analysis, we adopted an inclusive approach in which 'connection' could entail sympathetic, admiring, attentive, empathetic, and perspective-taking responses (Webber et al. 2022) and registered if respondents demonstrated a broad connection to the whole character; a partial connection recognising the strength; or a partial connection recognising the suffering of the victim/survivor character (see Table 5). Combining these codes allows us to also see how many respondents showed both types of partial connections, and thus had a more complex recognition of the victim/survivor experience, and how many of those who formed a broad connection to the whole character also recognized their CSA experience. We see this latter type of connection as coming closest to a holistic engagement with victim/survivor characters, and use the term 'holistic' to refer to it in following sections.

Table 5

Examples of the three non-exclusive types of connection with victim/survivor characters.

Subcodes: Connection to	Code Definition	Example Reader Responses from CSA	% of Read
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Victim/Survivor Character		Fiction Subsample	ers
Broad Connection to Victim/Survivor Character	Seeing the 'wholeness' of the character; referring to the character in general	It was even more interesting for me to actually read about what happened in the life of a young fifteen-year-old girl (R246: <i>Zoo Station</i>)	3%
Partial Connection to Victim/Survivor Character: Recognizing Harm	Specifically connecting with the character through recognizing the harm inflicted and adverse effects of CSA	And there's a very moving scene where this boy is raped and broken by a young man and he completely changes in the sense that he withdraws into himself (R160: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)	20%
Partial Connection to Victim/Survivor Character: Recognizing Strength	Specifically connecting with the character through admiration for their character, actions, growth, and/or resilience.	Well, that boy Hassan was somehow specific in himself, because of his sincerity and devotion to him and he never looked at anything calculated or with any bad intentions (R937: <i>The Kite Runner</i>)	19%

While previous research on audience responses to a film depicting CSA (Bulfin et al. forthcoming) found that very few general audience viewers (partially) connected with the victim/survivor character, here we saw a different response pattern with the different types of connection emerging in 37.09% of readers' responses. This higher number of connections might arise from the retrospective nature of the interviews: Self-selecting texts one has read some time ago might favour those where the respondent could (partially) connect with the fictional character.

Readers' partial connections through the recognition of harm or the recognition of strength were almost equivalent in frequency (20% and

19% respectively), diverging from previous research showing a focus on harm in responses to a text featuring a child victim/survivor focaliser and a deceased adult victim/survivor focaliser (Pöhls et al. 2025). This underscores that the type of connection likely to be formed may depend on dimensions of the fictional work such as the focaliser (see below). More complex or holistic connections were quite rare in our dataset: 7.29% of respondents connected to both aspects of harm and strength, and all of the 3% that showed a broad connection to the whole character also acknowledged at least one aspect of victimhood or survivorship.

In addition, 7.2% of respondents also connected to bystander characters. Most of these - four who read *The Kite Runner*, one who read *Sjeme Tame* - observed the bystander character's failure to intervene in the CSA, took their perspective, but condemned their inaction, and commented on its long-term effects on the bystander character: "There was a very difficult situation, also where violence was involved and where basically, he should have helped, which any person would reflexively react to help [...] And that's probably where [because of] fear [he] failed and simply-, but it haunted him through life somehow afterwards" (R993, *The Kite Runner*). These reflections on two texts depicting non-supportive bystander characters could potentially foster better bystander behaviour in the real world by setting a negative example that people strive to avoid. In contrast, fiction with a positive bystander exemplar has been demonstrated to elicit connections from a greater number of participants (Pöhls et al. 2025), but further research is needed to determine whether negative versus positive bystander characters have comparable or differing impact on readers' attitudes, intentions, or behaviour.

Few respondents (5%) connected to the perpetrator character - all in response to *Lolita*. 75% of these comments showed that these readers shared the Humbert character's perspective - one even found him "close to me" (R717). Some acknowledged that "there should be disgust", but they did not feel it and that the perpetrator character "tried [...] as much as possible [...] to resist those urges" (R370), pointing to a significant degree of emotional and cognitive alignment with him, despite their qualifications that they were not justifying him (R370, R121, R717). These responses endorse De Jonge et al.'s (2022) theory that - owing to their fictionality - perpetrator characters permit readers' moral disengagement, allowing readers to connect with Humbert as a character even as they explicitly recognised the abuse. As described in section 5.2, sharing the perpetrators' perspective can have further consequences: most readers who connected with this character engaged in negating language about CSA.

8.2. How are the connections to characters related to the fictional dimensions of the work?

The dimensions we hypothesised would relate with readers' connections to the victim/survivor character are: **1) complexity of the victim/survivor, 2) impacts of CSA depicted, and 3) focalisation** (section 4.3). We found that **the complexity of the victim/survivor character** was most important for facilitating connections to that character. In our dataset, connection with the victim/survivor character only occurred in response to complex, round characters; flat victim/survivor characters (e.g. in 2666) elicited no connections. This suggests that complexity of victim/survivor representation is a prerequisite for readers' connections with these characters, one which sensationalised representations may not afford.

The type of connection – holistic, partial recognizing strength, or partial recognizing harm – strongly depended on the **kinds and multitude of impacts** depicted in the specific text. If many impacts were depicted, most responses showed partial connections recognizing strength (25.8%), or harm (21.2%), and 4.5% showed holistic connections. In contrast, if fewer impacts were depicted, partial connections recognizing harm were more prevalent (41.7%), those recognizing strength much less so (8.3%), and holistic connections were non-existent. If no abuse impacts were depicted, connections with victim/survivors rarely occurred, and equally recognised harm or strength (both 5.9%). Thus, while depictions showing some or many kinds of impact elicited nearly an equal percentage of connections overall (41.7% and 39.4%, respectively), recognizing holistic victim/survivors or their strength seems to be a response that depends on the representation of a multitude of impacts.

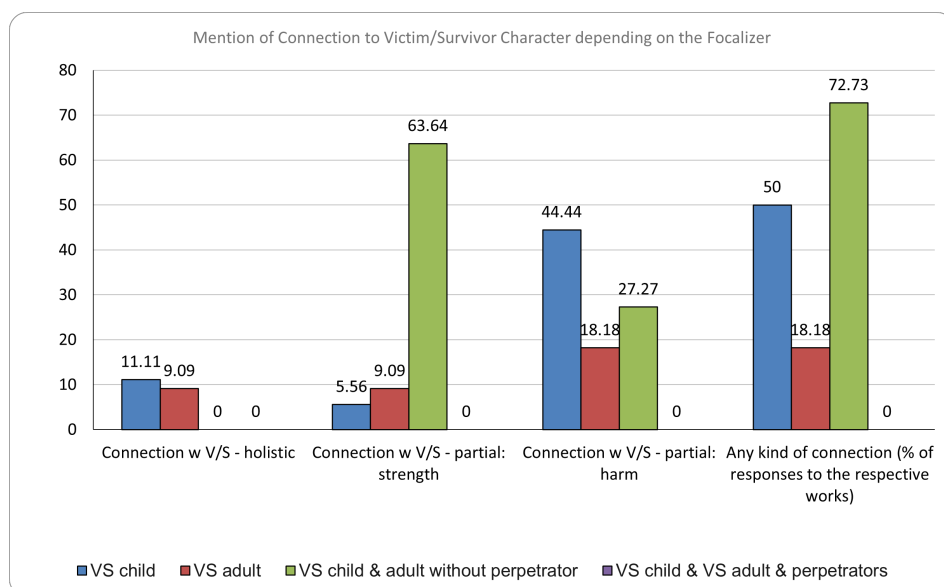


Figure 15: Distribution of connections to victim/survivor characters based on the focalizer of the texts.

Different patterns of connections emerged depending on which **character(s) focalised the text**. The fictional depictions were grouped according to the following types of focalisation: a) child victim/survivor (only, or in conjunction with a bystander), b) adult victim/survivor, c) a mixture of adult and child victim/survivors (only, or in conjunction with bystanders), or d) a mixture of adult and child victim/survivors and also a perpetrator (see Figure 15).

Fictional representations that contained both an adult and child victim/survivor focaliser elicited most connections overall to the victim/survivor characters (72.73%), followed by those with a child focaliser (50%). In our dataset, holistic connections with victim/survivors only appeared when the focaliser was a child or adult victim/survivor. In these cases, the time that readers spent ‘in the

shoes' of these characters might have helped them to form more holistic connections. Multi-focalised depictions containing a perpetrator focaliser did not elicit any connections to the victim/survivor characters.

Partial connections based on the harm done to victim/survivors were most likely to be elicited in response to stories with child victim/survivor focalisers (44.44%), but also frequently for adult victim/survivor focalisers (18.18%) and multifocalised depictions (27.27%). A connection based on the harm might be more readily formed when readers encounter a vulnerable focaliser to whom CSA happens in the present and not in retrospect. Partial connections based on the victim/survivors' strength were most likely to appear when the story was focalised by an adult and a child victim/survivor character. Possibly, this contrast might have highlighted the strength it took the victim/survivor to live with the experience of CSA.

Some texts focalised by victim/survivors also produced connections with bystander characters (adult: 9.1%, child: 16.7%), while some bystander focalised texts also produced partial connections to the victim/survivors. This accords with Pöhls et al.'s (2025) findings wherein readers' connections fluctuated between the victim/survivor and bystander characters. We found no connection to any character in narratives focalised solely by a distant bystander, suggesting that a level of narrative involvement is necessary for connection.

The only text that elicited a connection with the perpetrator was *Lolita*, which is focalised solely by the perpetrator. Other multifocalised narratives included perpetrator character focalisers, but did not elicit connections to them. However, the inclusion of a

perpetrator focaliser may have blocked connections with victim/survivor characters (see above). On the other hand, not all readers of *Lolita* connected to the perpetrator – 20% partially connected with the victim/survivor Dolores by recognizing the harm she experienced.

9. Discussion

In this paper we proposed that four intratextual dimensions of fiction depicting child sexual abuse would influence how readers responded to these works. Using the ReLEL dataset of Croatian readers, we empirically tested these hypotheses and raised the following key insights.

In a context where CSA is a difficult subject to discuss, there were clear variations in how readers referred to the issue. The largest proportion of readers referred to general acts of violence, followed by those mentioning CSA explicitly, then implicitly, and then in the context of traumatic responses. A notable proportion did not mention CSA at all, or negated its harm or normalised it. Readers were more likely to mention CSA when it was central to the text or pivotal to its characters, compared to when it was used as a world-building device. Normalizing and negating responses were more likely when texts did not name CSA explicitly and used normalizing or negating language to describe CSA.

Overall, the valence of readers' emotional responses to CSA fiction was both positive and negative; as the difficult topic caused negative, visceral emotions but was ameliorated by an enjoyable reading experience. Almost half of all readers' emotional responses were caused specifically by the CSA depiction, and this proportion

increased when the depiction of CSA was central or pivotal within the narrative. Readers' emotional responses also varied depending on complexity of the victim/survivor character, with round victim/survivor characters evoking greater and more nuanced emotional reactions, compared to flat characters. As emotions are a key element in our understanding of and relation to others, it suggests that texts with simplistic victim/survivor characters can inhibit real-world understanding of victim/survivors, while complex portrayals of victim/survivors can promote a nuanced understanding of them.

A quarter of all readers made reflections related to CSA, which shows that reading fiction about CSA can stimulate real-world contemplation of the issue. We found prosocial reflections suggesting raised awareness of CSA's prevalence and traumatic consequences, and refutations of common misconceptions about CSA. The reflections pertained more to individual psychology than wider society, suggesting that CSA may be perceived more as an individual issue rather than requiring collective, societal-level solutions. CSA's centrality within, its frequency throughout a narrative, and a mention of it at an early position or a key moment within the narrative elevated the frequency of reflections associated with it.

Finally, we found preliminary evidence for victim/survivor-centred readings as just over a third of readers made connections to victim survivor/characters, focusing on their strength or the harm inflicted on them, but with few making holistic connections. These multifaceted connections to victim/survivors outnumbered those with bystander or perpetrator characters – these latter mostly evincing disapproval of the (inactive) bystanders and fascination with

the perpetrator character. The manner of depicting the victim/survivor character was found to be significant for the formation of connections: complexity (as opposed to 'flatness') of victim/survivor characters was a prerequisite for establishing a connection to them, and the utilisation of victim/survivor focalisation, as well as the depiction of a high number of CSA impacts was found to increase the likelihood of reader connections.

This research raises several questions and avenues for future work. The categorization of CSA fiction according to the four dimensions requires further development into a full framework, through adding more CSA fiction, more raters, and more reader responses. The ReLEL dataset is a treasure trove of possible research avenues, but our future research will also entail consolidating our theoretical dimensions with reader responses from different cultures as well as undertaking studies where readers are asked directly about their responses to CSA depictions rather than recollecting CSA fiction spontaneously. Studies asking victim/survivors about their responses to CSA fiction are also a priority.

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R. L. Victoria Pöhls (corresponding author): conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, review & editing

Aleksandra Milenović: data curation, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, review & editing

Ailise Bulfin: investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, review & editing, funding acquisition

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The materiality of reading and its affective implications in people's everyday lives: Insights from the reading conversations

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Abstract: Numerous studies focus on media in everyday life, but although reading is also a media practice, it is rarely considered as part of this agenda, and despite the fact it mostly happens at home, domestication theories largely bypass it, too. Reading as a media practice is usually acknowledged only sporadically, e.g. when it refers to reading magazines or following news on cell phone. Even digitalisation, enabling us to read whenever and wherever, did not secure reading a more central topic in media studies. On the other hand, in reading studies, digitalization spurred new interest for the material specificities of reading behaviour, and this provides a framework also for my research interest. In this contribution I will focus on the ways in which books play a role in people's everyday pursuits and undertakings, not only through reading as such, but also through their material presence. My research is based on individual semi-structured interviews or so-called reading conversations with people who have voluntarily agreed to talk about their reading behaviour. I was interested in reading habits and practices, with an aim to analyse reading as embedded in time and space and performed through different kinds of rituals. In this paper I focus on

the findings referring to affective materialities. Considerable attention is given to the methodology and the analysis of the research process, and some reflection dedicated to the importance of complementing media and reading studies.

Keywords: reading conversations, affective materiality of books, media vs. reading studies, self-reflective research process

1. Introduction or Epistemological reflection on the topic of everyday reading

I have always been intrigued by the contextual aspects of the reading (especially pleasure reading) experience, by which I refer to the tangible, material, environmental, as well as physical, that is bodily dimensions of the reading act, that all exceed the textual dimension. This was partly because of my own self-reflective observations of my readings and partly because of my interest in the history of reading which is among others also a history of changing postures, places, rituals as well as different textual objects and reading props. This 'infrastructure' is also what, among others, constitutes, defines and in fact eventually makes possible the everydayness of reading, and I believe it was exactly the practical integration of reading in the quotidian context that importantly contributed to its establishment as a leisure and pleasure practice back in the eighteenth century (e.g. Vogrinčič 2008, Brewer 1997).

However, the notion of everyday seems to be much more at home in media and communication studies, which offer a lot of useful conceptualisations and research methods (e.g. Ytre-Arne 2023, Markham 2017, Baym 2015, Bakardjieva 2005, Bird 2003, Moores 2000, Drotner 1994, Bausinger 1984), but do not seem to so readily accommodate reading and books as one of their central domains:

there are definitely not that many prominent examples which address reading in terms of media practice, even though there are of course some notable exceptions, as is the case with the work by Janice Radway (1991) and Joke Hermes (1995).

In media and communication studies, interest in everyday life has been particularly central to theories of domestication (e.g. Hartmann 2023, Berger et al. 2004, Hirsch and Silverstone 1992), founded on the process of gradually integrating media technologies in the home (Ytre-Arne 2023, 3). But even though the majority of people predominantly read at home, there is – again with a couple of recent exceptions (e.g. Salmi-Niklander and Dalbello 2022; Vogrinčič Čepič and Kotrla-Topić 2021; Mackey 2016a and 2016b) – surprisingly little research on contemporary home reading practices that would explore domestic reading habits as a phenomenon in itself and not in terms of ‘home literacy environment’ (see e.g. Johnson, 2014), assessing its importance for developing life-long reading skills. This may be because of the firmly rooted and still predominant understanding of media as primarily *mass* media, historically conceptualized in 1930s as the ones with the power of influence and control (Scannell 2007) on the one hand, and because of the common equation of reading with reading books on the other. Books as such are not only falling out of the category of classical (periodical, general interest) mass media, but also have a more marginal role in structuring and scheduling the everyday life, simply because reading books on an everyday basis is much less common, wide-spread and frequent than checking-up the news on one of the possible devices, and also less central to public connection (for the concept of public connection, see Couldry et al. 2010). As such reading has – except for the daily news consumption – habitually remained on the brinks of mainstream media studies concern.

Debates about media and everyday life usually give precedence to one medium: while being originally concerned with the television (e.g. Scannell 1996, Silverstone 1994, Morley 1992), the attention has in the last two decades switched to all-inclusive smartphones (see Regehr 2025, Ytre-Arne 2023, Drusian et al. 2022). Ironically, with digitalisation and smartphones becoming our key media, we are not only reading more and definitely more often than ever, but our reading is also more embedded in our everyday chores and less anchored at home. Even so, the fact that we now live in the era of digital orality (Pettitt 2012, Logan 2010, Sauerberg 2009), communicating by reading and writing more than ever before, and that our written communication often resembles conversation, which means that we are now reading what we would otherwise verbalise, has not been acknowledged enough by media studies in a way that would make more room for rethinking the changed nature of reading.

On the other hand, with the digital turn, studies of reading have begun to more systematically consider the material specificities of reading behaviour and the different affordances of various reading devices, thus making media studies with its everyday epistemology again a very useful frame of reference (see e.g. Engberg, Have, Stougaard Pedersen 2023). The fact that the changing materiality of reading has sparked a new curiosity about the book as an object and about everything this implies not only increased the awareness of what used to be taken for granted for so long, but notably facilitated approaching people (in the interviews and focus groups) with questions tackling reading from the extra-textual perspective, emphasizing the material, as well as bodily and emotional dimension of reading, simply because readers had by now acquired the comparative print-versus-digital experience, which made it easier to address the above issues via differentiation.

As someone being primarily educated in comparative literature, I quickly realized that I will have to look elsewhere in order to grasp the phenomenon of reading in its situated, embodied and embedded existence. I found a lot of useful insights on the crossroads of sociology, cultural and media studies, anthropology, and in ethnographic research. Aiming to learn about ordinary people's reading behaviour, but also to observe how they verbalize it, I used one of the most straightforward and seemingly simplest research methods – semi-structured interviews about reading or so-called reading conversations

2. Reading conversations – development of a method

I began conducting reading interviews in 2018 simply because I wanted to talk to ordinary, not necessarily avid readers, about how they read and what role reading plays in their lives, and I was curious to see how they articulate their reading experience and wanted to gather some live, real-life, first person material. After all those years that I have been undertaking these interviews, I came to believe, that not only this was a very useful and efficient way to grasp the quotidian quality of reading, but has many beneficial consequences to which I will refer to during this talk.

These conversations with whoever was willing to participate were organized at the small cultural centre in Ljubljana, called *Vodnikova Homestead: House of Reading, Writing and Storytelling*, where I conducted 43 individual reading interviews between the spring 2018 and the spring 2023. The invitation was first weekly and then at least monthly published in the cultural centre's newsletter and on its Facebook page and sent to the list of subscribers. It was written in an open and friendly manner and explicitly addressed all kinds of

readers, even those who might have stopped reading long time ago or those who perhaps only read comics or online news, because I wanted to hear their views on reading, too. (However, especially at the beginning, my interviewees turned out to be mostly elderly women, who read a lot.) I held reading interviews roughly once or twice a month, they took place on the premises of the cultural centre and lasted between one and two hours.

My research method was basically a semi-structured individual interview (Denscombe 2010), however, in practice, these interviews often turned into more loose and dialogical conversations, which is why I use the terms 'reading interview' and 'reading conversation' or 'conversation about reading' interchangeably, especially since the conversational atmosphere was deliberately encouraged. It was only gradually that I discovered how to best conduct the interview, learned what worked and what did not, and slowly developed a specific approach of talking about reading that allowed me to understand and also take advantage of the opportunities and challenges it offered. I will first present my main conversational guidelines, then focus on the findings, emphasizing the ones that refer to the affective materiality of reading, and conclude with the uses of such reading-related discussions.

I detected and defined three core pillars of my approach. First, in the reading interview, the focus has to be on reading and not on the text. Second, reading should be considered in its various aspects: cognitive, physical-material and emotional. And third: this kind of conversation requires a personal approach.

I believe that by focusing on the reading behaviour, habits and experiences, rather than on a specific text or texts, we make the discussion much more open and accessible, because everyone can

say something about his or her reading in general, simply because everyone in the developed world has at least some reading experience, even though he or she might not be an avid reader or might not consider herself/himself to be a reader at all. I find this important, because I think this makes it possible even for the reluctant readers to participate in the debate, to feel invited and included.

This standpoint provides a common ground, inviting different readers – seasonal and dormant, digital- or genre-only-, used-to-be-readers etc. – to join in the debate. Text-centred discussions on the other hand risk excluding or even losing those who do not feel up for it, who do not want to analyse and interpret the thematic and formal aspects of the narrative and may be driven away exactly because of the pressure of the tacit expectations of such debates, which often imply that one should read the book in advance, form and share an opinion, and possibly even have some knowledge about the author. This quickly privileges the ones who might know more about the writer or are more articulated and skilful in critical discourse. However, by avoiding the pressure of the text, conversation about reading quickly becomes much more inclusive and connecting, presupposing that we are all some kind of readers, not necessarily passionate, but readers nevertheless.

Putting reading in the centre of the debate does not mean that the text finds no place in it. It is impossible to converse about our reading without referring to the reading material and concrete textual examples – titles, authors etc. – however, prioritizing the practice of reading over the reading matter makes a difference as the respondents feel more at ease, realizing their contribution is valuable regardless of what or how much they read.

What can this conversation then be about if it avoids tackling the text? This is where my second pillar comes in: reading conversation addresses reading, the act of reading in all its heterogeneous complexity. Reading inevitably takes place in a certain place at a certain time, in a concrete reading position and in a specific mood. It is affected by the materiality of the reading object (be it a paper text, an e-reader, or an audio device), and by the characteristic of the reading situation, and it evokes feelings. Rather than treating reading merely as a cognitive, rational, mental act of deciphering meaning, we should consider it also as a physical act, a bodily practice and as an emotional experience. Once we open reading to all these aspects, we substantially enhance its potential for discussion and reading quickly becomes a topic that can be talked about at length, it becomes much more discussable. This multidimensional perspective boosts its capacity for debate, even when putting the text aside.

I strongly believe, all this can be more easily achieved by using a personal approach, which is the third pillar of my reading conversation method. According to my experience, conversations function best if the interviewer allows him or herself to act as a fellow reader with his own reading life, sharing his or her reading experiences and attitudes, thus establishing an equal dialogue in which the interviewee is prioritized without exempting the interviewer from the conversation. I welcomed the questions from my interlocutors, and my experience was that bringing my perspective, and attaching my readings to my different roles as a mother, daughter, wife, professor etc. enabled an open and relaxed interaction and stimulated the conversation.

These three core pillars importantly defined the structure of the interviews and the way they were conducted. My main task was to

assist my respondents to reflect on their personal reading experiences and put them into words.

The easiest way to strike up a conversation was by first letting my participants speak freely about their reading, which is why I first asked them what they thought when they thought about reading, and to describe what kind of readers they considered themselves to be. One can say a lot already from what they focused on as well as from what they did not mention. Also, it was obvious that there were some questions they anticipated and prepared for and felt eager to share (such as, what do you like to read and how much do you read), so using those for an introductory warm-up was also something that worked well. It was only afterward that I began to steer participants toward the topics that addressed the contextual particularities of their readings and to inquire after seemingly mundane details, always allowing them to talk freely about their reading experiences.

Below is a list of open queries and topics:

- everyday reading: 'day in the life segments' (morning to evening)
- typical and ideal reading session
- time and place of reading
- different reading practices: reading aloud, reading on the go, listening to audio books
- public vs. private reading
- reading memories, remembering reading, rereading
- biographical changes in reading practices
- the book as an object, storing books
- leisure vs. obligatory reading

- reading choices and quantity of reading
- different reading devices
- reading and emotions
- reading postures, reading and the body

At the end I have always also asked the interviewees about how they felt during the interview, what they thought of the questions and what they made of this experience.

For the sake of illustration, here are some examples of questions in arbitrary order:

How has your reading changed over time, throughout different ages of life?

What are your ideal reading circumstances (e.g. your preferred reading spot etc.)?

What is your first / your favourite reading memory?

How is your reading affected by the weather or the time of year?

Do you visualise the story and its characters, do you see and hear them?

What does the intensity of your reading depend on?

Do you have reading rituals?

What is your usual reading posture, and does it depend on what you are reading?

Do you prefer to read when you are alone, or you like the presence of other people?

Do you talk about what you read with anyone?

What motivates you to read? Do you reread books?

Have any books been of particular importance to you?

How exactly I addressed these topics and in what order was not strictly determined and I quickly realized that I must invent a new path of conversation with every collocutor, depending on what he or she is telling me and how he/she responds to my query. I listened to recordings and tried to understand what makes the interview better, experimented with different versions and learned on the way. It was essential that I, myself, answered the questions first, because this made me more sensitive and more alert for the nuances of the responses I received in the interviews. As rightly observed by Pink, “knowledge about the embodied and sensory realms can only be gained through reflecting on the researcher’s own sensory engagements and memories” (Pink 2009 in Koskinen-Koivisto et al. 2024, 4). Autoethnography and reflexivity (Olmos-Vega et al. 2023, Koopman et al. 2020, see also Nolan Stinson 2008) therefore became an additional tool of my approach.

The key thing was that my interviewees realized that they cannot provide wrong answers, and as soon as that happened, they quickly became comfortable. It was paramount that I treated them as experts from their own experience (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl 2019), which is exactly what they were since they obviously knew the most about their readings. And the fact that I am interested in what only they can say something about gave them confidence and stimulated them to engage in conversation. It aroused a kind of self-inquiring curiosity in them, that helped me investigate their reading behaviours together. In what follows I will quickly summarize the main findings and then turn to those referring to affective materialities.

3. The findings

3.1. General findings

I deliberately dedicated some attention to the performance of the conversation itself, because what surprised me most were not only some insights I gained, but rather the many positive effects of our conversations about reading, which is something my interviewees acknowledged as well.

To think about one's own reading allows people to see themselves from a different perspective. It reveals yet another layer of our identity, the reading identity. Many admitted that they had not thought before about a lot of issues I brought up and felt intrigued by their new self-discoveries.

Talking about one's reading, especially reading for pleasure, is in fact one of the ways to talk about ourselves, and this is why it often turns into autobiographical narration as the interviewees are inclined to evaluate their reading behaviour through their life story, which came to the surface especially when talking to the elderly.

Reading conversations also seemed to have a significant motivational potential. For example, interviewees often said, that from now on they would pay more attention to their reading habits and observe themselves more closely, but they also felt encouraged to try something new. Our exchange thus often motivated them to explore reading in its various forms and to look for new reading pleasures. It stimulated them for reading.

I will now turn to the observations made by the interviewees that I labelled as affective materialities, because they demonstrate the attachment to the physical object of the book and reveal the uses and pleasures of books beyond reading.

3. 2. Findings on affective materiality

Even though my questions presumed the importance of material aspects of reading, the role of the environment etc., I was nevertheless surprised by the various forms of material attachments that were expressed and especially by the significance of the mere presence of books that was often emphasised in our conversations. Observations from the interviewees listed below demonstrate these various manifestations of physical, tangible relationships with books. Some are more common and predictable, such as the ones expressing the importance of owning the books and of exhibiting them at home. Bookshelf arrangements present a special topic, especially the relationship between a display for the visitors and the more intimate, less exposed collection, often arranged next to bed (see also Kajander 2022). The importance of taking the books along on a bus and on some errands which usually require waiting is also very common, simply because books add another layer to the surroundings or the situation, and they often bring comfort. As observed by Collinson: "By creating such reading places readers actually construct their everyday cultural worlds [...] The everyday value of reading in this instance is not to be found in the text, or in the aesthetic, but in the way reading allows readers in a given location to transform it, albeit temporarily, in to a 'place' partly of their own making" (2009, 55).

Some other responses, however, were more intriguing. As claimed by Paul Willis, ethnographic method has the capability to surprise researchers, allowing them to reach knowledge not prefigured in their starting paradigm (1990, 90). For example, some of the interviewees said they carried a certain book around as a talisman. Some tucked a book under the pillow at night for inspiration, to

gather wisdom, and for memorisation. Some carried the book they were currently reading around the apartment (e.g. to the bathroom and to the kitchen) to remain close to the characters, treating books as accompaniments. Some personalised the object of the book by wrapping it up, adding notes, using ex libris, specially chosen bookmarks (etc.), and some referred to books as friends, treated them as 'beings' (and sometimes even talked to them). Quite often the observations of my interviewees revealed that books also function as mediators of memory, as materialized memories (Salmi-Niklander and Dalbello 2022, 1). In this sense, books can be characterized as biographical objects, which function as tools for autobiographic elaboration, a way of knowing oneself through things (Hoskins, 1998).

Here are some quotes that demonstrate what I have been referring to:

I never use bookmarks and therefore leave books lying open face up. I like how in this way, books are somehow present in the space, as if they'd integrate, became part of what's going on 'in the real world.' (W17)

I always wrap my books in gift paper and put them carefully away before turning in, because you cannot leave books lying around among files of socks or pots. (W2)

I even bring along my book in the bathroom, when I'm taking a bath, but then I always worry it'll get wet, so I never actually read it, but it's there, lying next to the bathtub... (W10)

I think the book is also grateful if you treat it with love and care, I have the feeling that it also has a soul of its own. I treat a book as a living being and sometimes I even thank it and say: My darling, you have given me so much pleasure. (W6)

This all signifies that the corporeal existence of the books itself already has an affective power and is emotionally charged, which is what the concept of affective materiality broadly refers to (see Koskinen-Koivisto et al. 2024, 2).

In order to facilitate talking about the non-textual part of reading behaviour, which is something my interviewees were not most used to, I asked them to bring to the interview a selection of five books or five reading items (of their own choosing), not only for me to see, but primarily to help them evoke feelings and remember the details about the circumstances and the process of reading them. Particularly books that contain dedications and underlined passages or even some drawings, and those that show signs of use, have coffee stains or smell like sun cream, are sometimes very revealing. It is often difficult to verbalize material and sensory aspects and bringing the actual book(s) often helps.

In analysing what they said, I found it useful to draw on the studies on embodied cognition, which argues that we do not only think with our brains, but always also with our bodies. In that sense reading – as any other cognitive act – is also always *embodied, embedded, enacted* and *extended* (Schilhab and Groth, 2024).

It is embodied, because it is an engagement of the body with the reading material: the very act of holding the text or scrolling it, the body posture, the control of the gaze, all that is reading embodied. It is enacted, because we are always performing gestures of reading, which become inscribed in the knowledge of the body through habits and rituals and conventions. Reading is also always situated in a particular situation and organized in accordance with its constraints and availabilities. We read differently in the nature than in the

classroom or on the bus. And reading is often also extended as it draws on the materiality of the reading situation, in order to understand the text better or to memorize it more easily, for example by underlining, making marginal notes, using post-its and page tabs, similar as when counting, we help ourselves with our fingers.

The embodied perspective which has been popularised as the four Es, provides a nice tool for thinking about emotional attachment to the materiality of the book and reading, and brings this dimension to the forefront. It also helps us understand that a big part of the pleasure of reading is in fact gained from the non-textual, ritualistic and performative dimension, what is also obvious from readers' responses.

The physical aspects of the reading ritual are very important to me: holding the book in my hands, opening it, flipping through its pages, feeling its pages between my fingers, its weight, its smell. (W5)

There's a sequence of small things I always do and prepare before I begin to read ... something to nibble, cushions, the lights, I have to undress, I need some props ... (M14)

I have to read before going to sleep no matter what. The mere fact of holding a book and following the lines brings me comfort, even if I'm too tired to grasp a word. (W31)

A mere presence of books on the one hand and a sheer set-up for reading (an installation of reading) on the other already has an effect, often a substantial one. What is being read is frequently of secondary importance, which is why, rather than talking about the 'use of

literature' (Felski 2008), which emphasizes what is being read, I talk about the use, or rather, the function of books as mere objects, i.e. as only a promise of reading. As implied in the quotes, the 'setting' for reading, the 'reading installation' itself already has its effects. Or, as observed by Thumala Olave, "the material presence of books during the day is in itself a support" (2022a, 40). Thumala Olave introduces the concept of books as icons, which corresponds to the sentiments, articulated in the reading interviews. "Books afford aesthetic, lived experiences; they are quotidian, mundane icons [...] The fusion of the material, surface properties of books, the valued cultural goods that books represent, and of the act of reading is essential to books' iconic power and appeal" (2022b, 143, 145).

It is significant that my interviewees expressed affective materiality exclusively with regards to paper books. This could be attributed to the fact that many of them self-defined as 'older, traditional readers' (almost half were over 60 years old), implying their lack of experience with (as well as aversion to) digital reading. However, affective materiality of reading is not limited to print, but can just as well relate to e-books (see Thumala Olave 2022b).

4. Discussion, conclusion and further remarks

What these reading conversations have taught me is that talking around, rather than about the text, addressing precisely these material aspects, has at least three beneficial effects. First, it is a way into talking about the everydayness of reading as it allows us to grasp the quotidian nature of engaging with books. Second, it facilitates the inclusion of reluctant readers in conversation. And third, it increases curiosity about reading and the books. The latter became especially obvious when I applied reading conversation to a focus group of not-

only-avid-readers (Vogrinčič Čepič 2023). The method evidently works well also in a group interview and, I think, could be used much more often, especially in educational context. Despite its many benefits, talking about reading is in my view an underrated and underexploited tool for reading encouragement. According to my experience, even reluctant teenage readers feel intrigued by the questions and show some interest in books and reading (Vogrinčič Čepič 2023). Significantly, one of the topics that they relate to most easily is the book as a personal item, a possession of special meaning and appreciation. It seems that the iconicity of books extends even to people who do not make books so central to their lives (see Thumala Olave 2022b), which is exactly what makes it an effective common denominator for an inclusive reading conversation.

Observations from other research that I was involved in the last few years, confirm that the tangible presence of reading material stimulates reading conversation. As part of an Erasmus+ project on reading for pleasure pedagogy (see Setting up a Reading Motivator project webpage), we have in 2024 carried out a series of reading-related workshops in primary schools and realized that one of the things that children liked the most was when reading motivators brought piles of books and literary put them in front of their noses for children to look at and browse through, creating a visible and tangible book environment. Again, the fact that books were there to hold and examine made a crucial difference.

Being part of a broad research on youth media habits in Slovenia (n = 3489, Oblak Črnič 2025) and analysing a series of transcripts of focus groups with primary school teenagers (n = 27, 12 – 15 years old), I was intrigued to learn that reluctant readers, those who do not buy or borrow books to read voluntarily, when asked whether and what they

read, reported how they sometimes browse through print magazines, newspapers, and most often, free of charge bulletins or even commercial flyers that they come across at home, either finding them in the mailbox or laying around on furniture surfaces in the living or dining room area, and thus implying that they actually have to be directly confronted with the reading material to start engaging with it (Vogrinič Čepič 2025). With newspapers 'disappearing' into various devices, there is less opportunity for such chance encounters with physical reading matter, which apparently does make a difference. Aiming at analysing the media repertoires of the young (Hasebrink and Popp 2006), this research addressed various cross-media practices, including reading, and offered a nice way of linking media and reading studies, which – as argued in the beginning of the article – could both benefit from a more intensive interaction, especially in the context of contemporary reading behaviour.

In this paper I tried to show that the above presented approach of reading conversation with the focus on affective materialities enables us to effectively grasp the everydayness of our media practices.

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**Reading the trauma of eating disorders: Marya
Hornbacher's *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*
(1997) and Elena and Claire Dunkle's *Elena Vanishing* (2015)**

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Abstract: This paper will look into two memoirs dealing with victims of anorexia nervosa and bulimia: Marya Hornbacher's *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* (1997) and Elena and Claire Dunkle's *Elena Vanishing* (2015) in order to discuss the possibilities of reading narratives on serious mental health issues such as eating disorders. The main question it will ask has to do with how we read narratives on eating disorders and how many possibilities of reading exist in such a case. Some of the possible readings of such trauma narratives include: the symptomatic reading which embodies a reading effect that will in its turn emerge as symptom (Rooney, 2017: 127); the empathetic reading as a response founded in empathy which involves "intellectual interest, active imagination, emotional investment" and – crucially – "ethical engagement" (Assmann 2018: 216) or the implicated reading where the reader is a participant in a system that generates dispersed and unequal experiences of trauma and well-being simultaneously (Rothberg 2019: 12) In line with Rita Felski's insistence to redefine what we mean by reading with a "critical thinking" this paper will discuss how important it is to think critically when reading mental illness narratives. We will see that such

traumatic narratives require multifarious capacities of the reader, with the symptomatic reading always remaining at the core of the reader's experience.

Keywords: eating-disorder memoir, symptomatic, empathetic and implicated reader

Eating disorder memoirs

Although eating disorder memoirs were mostly published in the 1990s (Jenefer Shute *Life-Size*, 1992; Stephanie Grant *The Passion of Alice*, 1995; the Spice Girls Geri Halliwell *If Only*, 1999) we have seen a resurgence in interest, as the publishing market proves, in this type of memoir in the last ten years (Stephanie Elliot *Sad Perfect* 2017; J. J. Johnson *Believeraxic*, 2017; Stephanie Covington Armstrong *Not All Black Girls Know How to Eat*, 2017; Walt Gleeson *Quiet in the Corner*, 2020). Marya Hornbacher's *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* belongs to the first category as it was published in 1997 and Elena and Claire Dunkle's *Elena Vanishing* was published in 2015. The logical explanation to the trend would be the increase that we see in eating disorders in young women all over the world. In Johns Hopkins Medicine Journal, Ellen McVay warns that, from 2018 and 2022 in the United States, health visits for eating disorders more than doubled for children under the age of 17¹. Though the important trigger for the increase in cases of eating disorders was the COVID pandemic, the fact that memoirs on eating disorders started being published before the pandemic, shows that discussions on this mental illness had entered the public arena even before COVID.

¹ <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/articles/2024/12/eating-disorders-among-kids-are-on-the-rise>

In the past five years, the Croatian media have also been talking about the increase of patients between the ages of 12 to 30, with 40,000 people registered in the healthcare system, while the number of people with eating disorders is most likely twice as high. Anorexia nervosa is also recognized as the deadliest of all mental health illnesses with 10 % of people dying within 10 years of getting the disorder and up to 20 % dying within 20 years. Yet, if memoirs on eating disorders are increasingly being read, we should ask whether anything changed in their representation of this mental illness and whether one should expect the same type of the reader in the 1990s and 2020s.

Of course, narratives of starvation are nothing new for the well-read audience: one would probably immediately think of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747-8) who starved herself in response to the controlling behavior of her family and her suitor; or Franz Kafka's short-story *A Hunger Artist* (1922), about an artist who professionalized his starvation in public. He was first admired and approached by the passers-by with awe until they lost all interest in his 'performance' and let him die, only to replace him afterwards with a panther. Also, in connection to bulimia, one might think of *Confessions of an English Glutton* (1823) written to mock Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) or Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862) where Laura slowly wastes away after gorging on fruit offered by the goblins with clear implications that women should not take pleasure in food.

Most readers are also aware of anorexia mirabilis, or *inedia prodigiosa*, a form of daily fasting that was practiced in the Middle Ages by Catholic nuns to imitate the sufferings of Jesus. So, one could argue that eating disorders have a long documented history, but also

that they occurred in particular historical circumstances promoting self-control and self-punishment. Interestingly, as noticed by Greta Olson, the majority of literary writings on eating disorders concern anorexia, whereas bulimia, twice as common as anorexia, is not so well documented. Olson believes that “the literary interest in anorexia reflects Western culture’s infatuation with self-control and the historical fascination with thin ‘spiritualized’ women.” (7-8) However, both chosen memoirs deal with young American girls confessing their mental health issues which concern bulimia *and* anorexia. Thus Marya Hornbacher’s *Wasted* charts the course of anorexia and bulimia that drove her to the brink of death over the course of fourteen years, while Elena and Clare B. Dunkle’s *Elena Vanishing* was written to document Elena’s sinking into eating disorders that lasted for 7 years. *Elena Vanishing* was written jointly by Clare Dunkle, Elena’s mother and an award-winning author, and Elena herself. In line with the confessional narratives of previous decades and centuries, both Hornbacher and Dunkle feel the need to tell the reader why they wrote their memoirs. For example, Hornbacher says:

I wrote it because people often dismiss eating disorders as manifestations of vanity, immaturity, madness. It is, in some ways, all of these things. But it is also an addiction. It is a response, albeit a rather twisted one, to a culture, a family, a self. I wrote this because I want to dispel two common and contradictory myths about eating disorders: that they are an insignificant problem, solved by a little therapy and a little pill and a pat on the head, a ‘stage’ that ‘girls’ go through (...) and conversely, that they must belie true insanity, that they only happen to ‘those people’ whose brains are incurably flawed, that ‘those people’ are hopelessly ‘sick’.

(5-6)

In the excerpt above, Hornbacher immediately places her chronic eating disorder in the realm of societal misunderstanding of what it is and how serious the consequences are. She also calls her eating disorder 'an addiction' which later she explains as "(...) the longer you do it, the more you need to achieve that original high" (105) with adrenaline kicking in when you are starving. Also, she detects the holy trinity of culprits for the onset of eating disorders: a culture – Western culture as obsessed with thin bodies; a family – a particular family dynamic which is chaotic and with no clear boundaries and a self – the personality of an eating –disordered person plays a huge role – "we are often extreme people, highly competitive, incredibly self-critical, driven, perfectionistic, trending toward excess." (6)

Elena Dunkle, on the other hand, feels obligated to post 'A Note to the Reader' saying that "This is a true story. But it is also a work of fiction. (...) Our goal has been to create an accurate portrait of anorexia nervosa in all its separate stages, just as Elena herself lived through them." (0) The fictional part has to do with her mother filling the gaps in her often non-chronological memoir and turning them into a story. In the 'Afterword', however, she warns the reader not to use this memoir as a guide for how others should live or as "a suggestion for how to handle your own journey to recovery". (286) Although, in both cases the authors are very careful to warn the reader about their writing, it is also significant that Dunkle's memoir makes it clear that her experience is unique to her and might not be similar to anyone else's story. This particular 'address to the reader' reminds one of the early-nineteenth-century addiction autobiographies where the addicts want to preserve 'the dignity of autobiography' (Harding, 452) by not falling into the trap of advertising drugs or alcohol to the public, which, paradoxically, is exactly what they end up doing – for example, Thomas de Quincey's pleasures of opium outweigh the

dangers of drug addiction; Charles Lamb's *Confessions of a Drunkard* advocate for drunkenness in the utilitarian, rational world of the First industrial revolution.

Although, both eating disorder memoirs paint an authentic experience of going through hell and back in recovering from mental illness, they require a reader with excellent close reading skills and an empathetic response that goes beyond the words on the page. The symptomatic reading is therefore required as a default reading since the reader must be cautious of the possibility that what the text seems to be saying is in stark contrast to what it actually says. The following subchapters therefore speculate on the difficulty of interpreting eating disorder memoirs and the necessity of a symptomatic reader who will not make the mistake of recommending such memoirs to an inexperienced reader.

Interpreting eating disorder memoirs

The question of how to interpret eating disorder narratives was already posed by Susie Orbach in the late 1990s. In her essay 'Interpreting Starvation' (1998), Orbach posits that post-Second World War period psychoanalysis lost its sensual understanding and became "curiously dislocated from the body." (134). She adds:

Such interpretations lost much of their validity because they bypassed listening to the patient in favour of relying upon a construct: the woman is fat, therefore she wants the father's child. The woman is thin, she refuses a female rounded body, therefore she is pre-oedipally arrested. Absurd and crude as such interpretations sound, they encapsulate the kind of understandings that were previously available. (134)

As a psychotherapist, Orbach refuses to see eating disorders as metaphors, in which case the patient's body is read as a text – the female body thus becomes linked to a 'performance' and the action of eating or not eating is seen as entirely symbolic. Famously, Judith Butler contended that "the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities" where "acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts" (521). Hornbacher's memoir could be seen in the light of such body performativity, where the desire to be thin is linked to the cultural imperative of happiness and success at all costs:

Starving is the feminine thing to do these days, the way swooning was in Victorian times. (...) My generation and the last one feigns disinterest in food. We are 'too busy' to eat, 'too stressed' to eat. Not eating in some ways signifies that you have a life so full, that your busy-ness is so important, that food would be an imposition on your precious time. (118)

Numerous times in her memoir Hornbacher blames her eating disorder on the environment she grew up in. In the 1990s America, she claims, her "generation was weaned on subliminal advertising, stupid television, slasher movies, insipid grocery-store literature, MTV, VCRs, fast food, infomercials, glossy ads, diet aids, plastic surgery, a pop culture wherein the hyper-cool, blank-eyed supermodel was a hero." (135) Her eating disorder thus becomes a metaphor for the wider social and cultural problem of the capitalist society in which women are seen as commodities, bodies to be conquered and enjoyed, only if they conformed to the criteria of thinness.

From her early childhood Hornbacher had a sense of what it means to fit in: primarily it was connected to having a particular type of body.

For example, at the age of 5, when she lives in California with her parents, she remembers standing in the kitchen with her friend and talking about dieting. Soon after that, she would stop eating dinners that her father, who loved cooking and eating, prepared for the family. Also, she observed her mother's strange eating habits, where normally, she would skip a meal or push the plate away, leaving the dinner half-eaten. It is clear that from Hornbacher's early age, food was a problem in her family and her parents "used food – one to excess, one to absence – as a means of communication, or comfort, or quest." (22) The fact that both her parents worked in a local theater explains why she was fascinated with transformations and believed that nothing was as it appeared in reality: her father, being a theatre director acutely aware that he would never become a name; her mother, angry with the fact that she got pregnant at an early age and herself, masking her obsession with vomiting by being a playful little girl.

Hornbacher understood early on that her femininity was a 'performance' which had to be constructed in relation to absence of food and that consuming food stood for the loss of control and the expression of profound emotional distress. Therefore, in her memoir, a woman's body is seen as a site of cultural dynamic in which fasting is perceived not only as normal, but also as necessary. For example, when visiting her grandmother on her mother's side, the old lady continuously makes comments about how her little cousin Joanna looked:

Oh, no, honey, you mustn't eat that! You eat too much, you're going to get fat! She pinches Johanna's arm and says 'Honey, look at this! You're getting fat!'

Time stops. No one moves, Johanna, who is 12 and quite thin already, starts to cry. I stand up and walk out of the room. I go to my bedroom and sob, my mother comes in after me and tells me my grandmother doesn't know any better, and I say I don't give a damn if she knows better, this whole family is totally *fucked up* about food. (241)

It is clear that the consumption of food was an intergenerational traumatic experience for this family, with women obsessing over dieting for their entire lives. At the age of 9, Hornbacher became bulimic, mimicking her father's binge-eating and at fifteen she became anorexic, emulating her mother's dietary habits and daily standing in front of the mirror to check on her body size. She turned to anorexia after realizing that bulimia was "crass and gauche, so unlike the person (she) wanted to become" (90) whereas anorexia was all about being "dark and mysterious" (90), the embodiment of self-control. Hornbacher also connects eating disorders with different parenting styles and says: "If you are bulimic, it is assumed that you come from a chaotic family. If you are an anorectic, it is assumed you come from a rigid and controlling family. As it happens, mine was both." (22)

Also, the mirror becomes a powerful metaphor not only for the lack of proper size, but also for gradual sinking into madness. Hornbacher uses this historically potent metaphor to describe her weakening sense of the self, which is worthy and recognizable only if the mirror says so. In the case of eating disorders, body dysmorphia sets in the early stages of illness, making the patient believe her obese, distorted reflection in the mirror is the true size of their body. She compares herself to *Alice in Wonderland* by saying that she "went through the looking glass, stepped into the nether world, where up is down and food is greed, where convex mirrors cover the walls, where death is honor and flesh is weak." (10) Thus, Hornbacher uses the most potent

metaphor of the mirror as prison, telling the truth about the woman's worth and power.

As she has always been encouraged to write short stories and poetry by her English teachers, Hornbacher's traumatic narrative is full of references to literary works she found were closely tied to her life experiences. By using excerpts from Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich and Emily Dickinson² among others, she clearly takes a lot of pride in being a successor to women writers who struggled with different mental health issues or emotional and existential turmoil. For example, she calls her last chapter 'Dying is an Art, Like Everything Else' thus directly referencing Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' and linking her suicidal tendencies to Plath's own suicide. Yet, the reader in tune with confessional poetry of Sexton and Plath cannot help but wonder how much of Hornbacher's self is actually a carefully crafted suffering persona - a woman who went through hell and back and could then, at 23 years of age, congratulate herself on leading a pretty much normal life. In that sense, the memoir displays a high level of literariness (Olson, 230) as Hornbacher makes conscious choices about how to tell her story. It includes poetry excerpts, essays, her medical records and scientific data about eating disorders. Also, the narrative shifts from the real to the surreal in its gothic atmosphere when she describes her disoriented drives and a car accident, sexual adventures with strangers, her pregnancy at 14 and self-induced miscarriage by falling down the stairs, endless trips to the toilet and numerous stays in eating disorder centers. Though some of these descriptions are really dark, the reader feels that sometimes she romanticizes her illness and congratulates herself on becoming a

² Anne Sexton had a bipolar disorder and made multiple suicide attempts; Sylvia Plath suffered from severe depression and many signs point to disordered eating behaviours.

successful journalist in Washington D.C. Though at first she notices that there was something wrong with the city and comments on “the palpable greed, and the thrum of excessive power” (234), on the other hand, she has never been as productive and her eating disorder has never been so much out of control when she moved to the city:

I go back to Washington for a two-week journalism seminar at American, pounding the pavement to the rustle of the East Coast rat race. I am on Capitol Hill. In a workshop about representation of women in the media, I get into a virulent argument with a cocky little bastard about advertising, my face flushed, both of us standing up and leaning our hands on our desks, hollering excessively articulate epithets at each other. He spits out, *Feminist*. (...) I get down and stand on the scale. 87. (238)

Her successful journalist career is in stark contrast with her emaciated body while her feminist defense of women in the media is highly ironic in the context of her eating disorder. Namely, the very nature of illness undermines all feminist imperatives of women empowerment. In line with research on eating disorders in the 1990s turning to culture and family as causes for mental health issues, Hornbacher blames the American life-style and her own family for causing her downfall. As a typical white, middle-class girl, she becomes the center of the child-centered family, thus revealing the middle-class psychopathology. In other words, her illness “can be seen as a striking dysfunction in the bourgeois family system” (Brumberg, 134) further aggravated by the social pressure to “succeed” in life through her carefully chosen career, and a marriage partner. Yet, in the excerpt above, the reader feels that she falls into the trap of such success-driven culture, being proud that she is a successful journalist and that

she 'made it' in the man's world. Of course, if the man's world is still the standard, she has no way to bypass this standard and her illness becomes the very embodiment of her inability to resist the patriarchal discourse even if she is a feminist.

Unlike the self-conscious narrator of Hornbacher's *Wasted*, the narrator in Elena and Clare Dunkle's *Elena Vanishing* has a limited perception of the world which corresponds to the way people suffering from eating disorders see their reality. The simplicity of its narrative procedure makes it suitable for young adult readers, but just like *Wasted*, the memoir should be recommended with necessary trigger warnings. The narrative pace is slower and its focus is not the action but Dunkle's state of mind instead. Dunkle's psychological decline has to do with what she calls the 'voice of conscience' which is telling her what to do and how to feel in certain situations. The reader senses that this voice is an impostor, a common occurrence in people diagnosed with eating disorders, which belittles and shuts off the sane voice in her head. For example, in a powerful scene where Dunkle stops at Burger King to fill her starved stomach, the evil impostor voice becomes relentless:

My hands are trembling on the steering wheel. My breath is hot and quick. Like magic, a big white bag appears in my lap. The shake is cool and soothing in my hand. I pull over into the nearby parking spot and tear into the food like an animal. *What the hell?* Screams the voice in my head. *What the hell?* But I keep right on shoving the hot, greasy food into my mouth. Stop it! *Stop it! STOP IT! Stupid bitch! Stupid fat BITCH! (...) You will fix the problem, says the voice in my head. You will fix it NOW.* (159)

Vomit splatters my face. My hands are smelly and slimy. The plastic bag on my lap is a warm, gooshy mess. But I don't stop. I can't stop.

(...) Then spots of bright blood come up. (...) Tears are trickling down my face and burning my eyes. (160)

This particular event is witnessed by a young man working in Walmart. After having realized that he watched the whole thing, a feeling of shame overwhelms her, "shame so deep I wish I could die" (160). Furthermore, by delving into the mind of a mentally ill person, the narrator discloses the major symptoms of eating disorders, valuable for readers who want to know more about this fatal illness. First, their world shrinks to the point where it becomes difficult to perceive reality around them and all they think about is food – hiding food, stashing food, buying food and then throwing it away, eating it and purging or avoid eating it altogether. As the chemical balance in the brain changes, the person loses focus, sinks into states of dissociation and has either insomnia or nightmares. While being transported from Germany to the US in a helicopter with her father, she has a feeling that "this can't be happening. It isn't happening, is it? It's like I'm watching a movie that's all around me." (16) Also, obsessive-compulsive disorder sets in which makes her plan her days minutely:

No junk food. Exercise every day. Study hard. Work hard. BE hard. No tears. No meat. No eating after 9 pm. Get up at 6 every day. Bed before 1 am. 800 calories max on weekdays. Weight day is Friday. I will not be a failure! (124)

Such 'to do' lists are typical of anorexic patients who are perfectionists and want to have everything under control. On the other hand, following routine gives them a sense of security. As the brain starves, normal dreams turn into nightmares:

Nightmares come swimming out of the corners of my mind: chopped-up corpses. Bloody limbs. Dead baby! Dead baby! DEAD BABY! Shut up! I whisper, pounding my fists on my thighs. The room whirls. In a frenzy, I snatch up my razor from the bathtub and peel a deep slice through the flesh of my arm. Instant calm. The panic stills. The voice dies back to a whisper. (223)

After each and every nightmare, Dunkle cuts herself in order to release the tension of unexpressed emotions. The 'dead baby' in her dream is Lilly Arabella, the child she miscarried due to her emaciated body and hormonal imbalance. Years later, during group therapy in a hospital, she will admit to carrying the trauma of miscarriage and having given a name to an unborn baby.

Thus, Dunkle's memoir helps us understand the complex psychopathology behind eating disorders and the reader is both, intellectually and emotionally engaged – she learns something new about this illness and feels empathy for the patient. Although, just like Marya Hornbacher, Elena Dunkle comes from a white, middle-class family, the focus is on her personal struggle rather than the family dynamic or cultural influence. Her family situation is far from ideal (her mother got diagnosed with cancer and her older sister left the family unannounced) but she thinks of her family as a place of refuge and safety from the outer world. Clare Dunkle, Elena's mother, holds a special place in Elena's heart and her position changes throughout the narrative. At first the 'voice of conscience' blames her for sending Elena to a boarding school in Germany, far away from home, and for triggering anorexia. However, as the narrative progresses, we see to what extent Elena's mother sacrificed herself for Elena: she moved to a different city just to be close to her hospital, she firmly believed in Elena's recovery and encouraged her to persist every single day despite Elena's aggressive outbursts. However, if we take into account

the fact that Elena's memoir was co-written with her mother, it might point to a certain blind spot of this memoir, i.e. Elena's inability to fully examine her mother's position in her life. For a long time, Elena's parents could not figure out why their daughter got sick. It was a specific event that triggered anorexia which Elena kept secret from them. She was raped by an older boy when she was only 13 and kept it secret for 6 years. During therapy in a US hospital, she was finally able to talk about it. As anorexia is the inability to express strong, overwhelming emotions, Dunkle draws our attention to eating disorders as symptoms of traumatic events out of our control that turn disgust, shame or fear inward, thus triggering this illness.

She is also clear about the dangers of certain beliefs about eating disorders. First, she cancels the myth about people suffering from eating disorders having to be extremely thin: they can affect people at any weight. Second, she warns about the dangers of sudden death, as eating disorders can cause cardiac arrest, seizures, or kidney failure. Third, she says that nobody can share their life quietly with anorexia, the illness will take it all. Fourth, she highlights the importance of the support network based on family, friends and specialists without whom the recovery would be impossible. And last but not least, she claims recovery from anorexia is a life-long battle, much like alcoholism and drug addiction. Thus, in line with recent research on eating disorders, Dunkle offers a layered understanding of this complex illness, shifting the focus from external to internal factors, from 'what happened' to trigger the illness to 'what emotions did I bury inside when it happened'.

Beyond symptomatic reading

More than fifty years have passed since the publication of Georges Poulet's seminal essay "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority" (1972) suggesting that the act of reading involves the coming together of two consciousnesses – the writer's and the reader's when the reader can hardly explain "the facility with which I not only understand but even feel what I read." (60) In the last decade, with the rise of affect theory, the role of the reader has been re-established and Poulet's ideas reused. Thus Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth claim that "affect accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness" (2) where the affected reader acquires in turn the capacity to affect.

Yet, how are we to read narratives on mental illness, in this case, the trauma of eating disorders memoirs? Leigh Gilmore warned us about the difficult position of the reader of trauma narratives as autobiography and trauma stand on opposite ends. She claimed that "trauma narratives often draw skepticism more readily than sympathy because they expose the conflict between identification and representativeness." (22) In the case of eating disorders where patients suffer from dissociative states and memory blanks, this conflict is further aggravated: the mentally ill person who cannot remember is not to be trusted. And yet, the very vulnerability of confession renders such traumatic narratives authentic and trustworthy. Also, Gilmore adds, "autobiography about trauma forces the reader to assume the position of masochism or voyeurism." (22) The chosen memoirs are certainly difficult to read owing to vivid descriptions of vomiting, self-harm, suicide attempts, endless suffering and sometimes the reader might feel bodily sensations of disgust. Also, the reader might feel relatedness in the sense of common humanity between the narrative subject and herself as well

as interruptions in relatedness where it is extremely difficult to identify with the narrative subject. As for the accumulated affect, the reader might assume the position of an implicated reader in the case of Hornbacher's memoir.

For example, the reader of *Wasted* might find herself involved in the same cultural dynamic where she herself perpetuates what Hornbacher sees as problematic: obsessing over one's appearance, the judgment of others, pursuing of a respectable career, having a picture-perfect family life etc. I call such reader 'an implicated reader' borrowing the term from Michael Rothberg who defines the 'implicated subject' in the following terms:

Implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. (1)

The reader might thus be a participant in the system that generates "unequal experiences of trauma and well-being simultaneously" (Rothberg, 12), an eating disorder being a traumatic experience, usually well-hidden from the public view (esp. bulimia) which can get significantly worse for the patient if their environment promotes value based on appearance in a success-driven culture. As implicated readers, we are never direct agents of harm but, through our own actions, we perpetuate patriarchal values that are detrimental for women's mental health.

In the case of Clare and Elena Dunkle's *Elena Vanishing*, the implicated reading opens up to what Aleida Assmann calls the empathetic reading as a response founded in empathy which involves

“intellectual interest, active imagination, emotional investment” and – crucially – “ethical engagement” (216). The reader learns so much about the psyche of a person suffering from an eating disorder and gradually becomes both intellectually, imaginatively and emotionally invested as she learns about Elena’s devastating process of recovery. However, we might also argue that empathy generated in the purely hypothetical context of fiction differs from empathy activated in personal interaction – the eating disorder memoir complicates that sort of interaction as we are almost obliged to approach it through ‘the hermeneutics of trust’ (Ricoeur as qtd. in Felski, 9) or what Eve Sedgwick calls ‘reparative reading’ in which:

Interpretation becomes a coproduction between actors that brings new things to light rather than an endless rumination on a text’s hidden meanings or representational failures (Sedgwick as qtd. in Felski, 174)

In such reparative reading the reader’s role seems to be as decisive as that of the text since the affected reader acquires the capacity to affect their surroundings. Dunkle’s memoir engages the reader more, breaks down harmful stereotypes and significantly contributes to destigmatization of eating disorders. This is the book I would recommend to parents, teachers and specialists dealing with eating disorders. Dunkle’s memoir shows that literature does not stand on one side and life on the other. Therefore, as Marielle Macé claims, “reading is not a separate activity, functioning in competition with life, but one of the daily means by which we give our existence form, flavor and even style” (213) By mirroring the recent developments in research on eating disorders which focus on the patient’s psychopathology, Dunkle’s memoir shows how fragile our mental

health is and how important it is to remove stigma from mental health disorders. It invites the reader to reparative reading and empathic identification which in turn could affect the way we live our lives.

Yet, in reading both memoirs, it was impossible for me to escape the symptomatic reading, while paying close attention to the text and its form – the importance of the history of memoir as a genre, the narratological features and language used in describing the experience of eating disorders. Though, as we have seen, such symptomatic reading is not enough, I still think it is necessary. It helps the reader interpret nuances of tone and atmosphere only to conclude that Hornbacher's memoir might be read as a handbook for how to become eating-disordered. (cf. Olson, 230-1)

Without taking into account the reader trained in close reading, *Wasted* could have been easily recommended as a more complex and, in general, better written memoir. The fact that it was republished in 1999, 2006 and 2014, with the 2024 kindle edition proves the point. However, I see the danger of recommending it to the wrong type of audience – easily influenced young adults.

Elena Vanishing, on the other hand, should be recommended to teachers, specialists, and parents because it treats eating disorders with clever subtlety and words of caution that come as the final warning: "please do not take it or any of the other actions in this book as a model for how to handle an eating disorder." (286) Unfortunately, *Elena Vanishing* has not been republished yet.

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Identifying reading emotions: computer-assisted analysis of a corpus of letters from French contemporary readers

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Abstract: The present study aims to provide an empirically grounded definition of "reading emotions", understood not as the spontaneous reactions that arise during reading, but as the result of the process by which readers grasp these reactions retrospectively and turn them into language. To this aim, the study designs a tailored analytical framework and applies it to a corpus of several hundred letters written by contemporary French readers applying to be part of the jury of a well-known literary prize. The framework relies on two assumptions stemming respectively from reading studies and emotion research: the first one is that reading constitutes a dynamic interaction between text and reader, relying on universal neural mechanisms and shaped by historical, psychological, social, and individual factors; the second one is that emotions play a vital role in human cognition and evaluative processes. To validate these assumptions empirically, a computer-assisted analysis of the corpus is implemented, combining close reading, manual annotation and text-mining.

Keywords: Reading studies, emotion studies, empirical approach, digital humanities, ordinary readers

1. Introduction

Over fifty years of existence of a multidisciplinary field devoted to studying reading leave no doubt on the fact that written texts, and especially literary texts, trigger a complex web of cognitive, affective and sensory responses. As Robert Darnton has pointed out (Darnton 1986, 7), these responses are difficult to study, as they cannot be observed directly. Indeed, the reader's inner experience of reading remains inaccessible; we can only infer it from the traces it leaves - impressions, memories, and interpretations - in an oral or in a written form.

To contribute to the understanding of this experience, between 2020 and 2024, as part of the research project Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool (READ-IT), a team from Le Mans University explored several hundred letters written in 2010 and 2011 by a group of ordinary readers, reflecting on the role of reading in their everyday lives. These letters were submitted to the *Prix du Livre Inter*, a French literary award. This paper presents some of the results of the analysis, focusing specifically on the expression of reading-related emotions in the letters.

Both reading and emotions are widely explored across a range of scholarly disciplines, including literary studies, history, sociology, (computational) linguistics and cognitive studies. Yet, despite the centrality of emotions in the reading experience, reading studies and emotion studies have, for the most part, evolved independently of one another (Ouvry-Vial and Richard 2022, 127). This can be partly attributed to the fact that, as some literary scholars have noted, literary studies — which originally laid the foundations for the study of reading — have traditionally been reluctant to engage with methods and concepts drawn from research on emotions (Gefen 2016). In order to contribute to the understanding of “reading

emotions”, this paper suggests to bring these two fields into dialogue, developing an analytical framework specifically designed at their intersection and testing it against a corpus of testimonies from actual readers.

2. A tailored analytical framework for reading emotions

The analytical framework employed in this study draws on and combines several major findings stemming from reading studies and emotion research. A brief overview of the development of these two fields will allow to point them out.

In the 1970s, reading-response criticism established reading as a dynamic interaction between a text, which doesn't have a fixed meaning, and a reader, who brings it to life by interpreting and appropriating it (Iser 1978, Jauss 1982). By designing analytical models based on abstract figures of readers - such as Wolfgang Iser's implied reader (1974) and Umberto Eco's model reader (1979) - reading-response criticism first opened up the possibility of rethinking the study of texts through the lens of reading. The historical, anthropological and sociological approaches to reading that have emerged from the 1980s in Europe and beyond have brought to attention the fact that reading is a situated activity, that strongly varies according to historical (Cavallo and Chartier 1997), socio-economic (Bourdieu 1979) and even individual factors (Lahire 2004). Around the same time, some literary critics began urging their fellow scholars to move beyond abstract readers in favour of the *real* reader, one who reads with their body, their mind and their emotions (Picard 1986). However, the real reader emerging from this body of work is not an *actual* reader grasped in the specificity of their reading experience (Parmentier 2017, 125), but a *possible* reader imagined by the critic.

Over the past three decades, crucial insights into the physical and cognitive activity of *actual* readers were provided by cognitive sciences (Dehaene 2007). Building on these discoveries, a new empirical approach has progressively taken shape within literary studies (Kuiken and Jacobs 2021). Its aim is to observe and measure how the reader's brain and body are activated during the act of reading, resorting to technologies such as eye-tracking, EEG, and MRI, as well as qualitative methods such as questionnaires about reading experiences. The work emerging from this empirical approach to reading has the great merit of having revived a proposition already put forward by several sociologists and historians: that of studying reading through the *traces* it leaves behind. The range of traces left by actual reading practices is both broad and varied: it includes data accessible through brain imaging, quantitative data gathered via surveys and questionnaires, and, above all, qualitative data drawn from reading testimonies (correspondences, reviews and comments posted online, interviews, etc.).

Readers' testimonies have been at the heart of several research initiatives which—like the Remembering Literature in Everyday Life (EROL) project—are often marked by a distinctive collaborative and interdisciplinary approach. Among these, one may cite the pioneering Reading Experience Database (UK RED), as well as the Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool (READ-IT), which supported the present work. This project, led by Brigitte Ouvry-Vial at Le Mans University, aimed to provide researchers with a dedicated tool for analysing and exploring European readers' testimonies, in order to better understand how reading has been experienced from the eighteenth century to the present day (Benatti et al. 2023).

Over time, all these various strands of research have made it possible to better apprehend the full complexity of reading, both as a creative process that contributes to the construction of textual meaning, and also as a socially, historically, and individually situated practice. While cognitive sciences show that reading engages universal neural mechanisms, we are also aware that its impact on readers' lives and their interpretation of texts can only be fully understood through the lens of individual, lived reading experiences.

Let us now turn to the other phenomenon at the heart of the analysis carried on in this paper: emotions. While we can all intuitively define emotions based on our personal experiences—joy, sadness, confusion, and so on—there is, in fact, no consensus among experts on what emotions are, nor on how to distinguish them from other mental states such as passions, perceptions, or cognitive processes. Emotions lie at the heart of a rich and evolving multidisciplinary field, which began to take shape over a century ago with William James' pioneering experimental research into the physiological manifestations of emotions, such as tears or shivers (James 1884).

Early works in cognitive psychology (see Sander and Scherer 2014), followed by contributions from anthropology and linguistics (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990), paved the way for a broader investigation that now spans contemporary philosophy (Tappolet 2022) and history (Rosenwein and Cristiani 2018), marking emotions as a growing concern in the humanities and social sciences.

Rejecting the dichotomy between emotion and reason, that dominated Western thought until at least Romanticism, current research on emotions is almost unanimous on one essential point: emotions are not only physiological, but also cognitive, playing a complementary role to reason in decision-making processes and contributing to knowledge acquisition (Lemaire 2021). While a

comprehensive review of this vast field is beyond this paper's scope, the present section will briefly introduce a theoretical position that appears to be particularly relevant for thinking about emotions experienced during reading—that is the evaluative nature of emotions. Introduced by Canadian psychologist Magda B. Arnold (1960), this view posits that emotions are not directly triggered by an object (for example, a large and aggressive dog), but rather by the value that an individual attach to this object (in this case, the assessment that the dog may pose a physical threat).

Building on this proposition, a range of theories has emerged in philosophy and psychology to explain the evaluative processes underlying emotional responses (Candiotto 2023). Among these, cognitive theories hold that emotions are rooted in cognitive appraisals—what Martha Nussbaum (2001) describes as “upheaval of thoughts”. In contrast, perceptual theories (Prinz 2004, Tappolet 2016), while also emphasizing the evaluative dimension of emotions, argue that this evaluation is non-cognitive in nature: emotions are not seen as judgments, but as a distinct class of perceptions whose origin is rooted in the body.

Despite their differences, both positions converge on two fundamental ideas that form a robust analytical framework—a framework already employed in philosophical analyses of the emotions elicited by various art forms, including literature (Nussbaum 1992, Robinson 2005): first, that emotions involve a form of evaluation; and second, that they are intimately connected to cognition. When applied to reading, especially literary fiction, these insights prompt to explore whether the emotions readers experience and articulate are shaped by the value they assign to various textual elements—such as style, rhythm, character actions, or narrative events—and whether readers can retrospectively trace this evaluative

process. Furthermore, we may ask whether, and to what extent, these emotions contribute to the interpretation, understanding, and overall impact of the text.

To sum up, the analytical framework underpinning the present study draws on two key insights from reading studies and emotion research, respectively. The first one is that reading is a dynamic interaction between text and reader, grounded in shared neural mechanisms yet shaped by historical, psychological, social, and individual factors. Readers' testimonies provide privileged access to the affective, cognitive, and bodily dimensions of the reading experience, as well as to its variations across time, space, communities, and individuals. The second insight is that emotions play a central role in human cognition and serve an evaluative function.

This interdisciplinary framework enables the articulation of the three research questions guiding the investigation into the expression of reading-related emotions within the *Prix du Livre Inter* corpus, to which the next section of this paper is devoted:

1. How do readers recount their reading experiences, and what role do they assign to emotions within these experiences?
2. To which aspects of the reading experience do they associate their emotional responses?
3. What effects—whether consciously or unconsciously—do they attribute to these emotions?

3. An exceptional archival material for exploring reading emotions

The *Prix du Livre Inter* corpus constitutes a rare material, largely unexploited, for investigating reading experiences. Launched in 1975

on the airwaves of the renowned cultural radio channel France Inter (part of the national public radio broadcaster Radio France), the *Prix du Livre Inter* is a literary prize awarded each year to a recently published French novel by a jury of readers. What sets this prize apart is its commitment to giving ordinary readers the opportunity not only to take part in the public process of literary consecration, but also to speak out about what reading means to them. In fact, as required by the organizers, individuals who wish to join the jury must submit a letter of application to Radio France, in which they are invited to speak about themselves and their relationship to reading. The jurors are then selected from among the applicants by a committee composed of France Inter journalists, who evaluates the letters based on their sincerity and originality. The candidates are also asked to indicate their gender, their profession, their age and their place of residence. This unique literary prize relies on a popular jury of twenty-four readers, whose composition must meet a number of specific criteria. First and foremost, gender parity is required. Additionally, the jury must be geographically balanced, with members representing the various regions of France and, if applicable, the overseas territories and abroad. Each year, several thousand letters of application are received and evaluated by the editorial team of Radio France. Once the jury is formed, it is placed under the presidency of a well-known writer, who guides and oversees the deliberations. Each jury member commits to reading ten novels published over the course of the previous year, all of which are pre-selected by the prize's organisers. The final deliberations take place in June, in Paris, at Radio France headquarters, following discussions among the jury members and a secret ballot vote.

In 2020, members of the READ-IT project were granted permission to digitise and use for research purposes linked to the project's development a portion of these letters, originally handwritten and typed, deposited in paper format at the National Archives in Paris. The authorisation covers both accepted and rejected applications from the years 2010 and 2011, amounting to a dataset of approximately 3,000 letters. From the outset, it immediately appeared evident that these testimonies from ordinary readers could serve as a very peculiar and promising lens through which to examine the inner experience of reading in contemporary France.

Indeed, the candidates offer well-crafted yet intimate narratives of their personal relationship with reading. These accounts are presented with apparent spontaneity, yet with the awareness that the letters will be read and evaluated by a jury of experts and intellectuals. Ultimately, they are self-portraits in which personal identities are inextricably linked to books.

Constructing a digitised corpus suitable for analysis required several months of work. Under the direction of François Vignale (Le Mans University), the entire collection was first photographed on-site, after which the typewritten letters were digitised using two distinct Optical Character Recognition (OCR) programs (ABBYY Finereader and OCR Feeder). Additionally, a speech recognition protocol was developed to transcribe the handwritten letters. Nevertheless, the procedure proved exceedingly time-consuming, and the constraints imposed by a doctoral contract's timeline further limited our capacity. Consequently, only a small subset of the handwritten letters was digitised, amounting to approximately 5% of the total. All transcribed letters (typewritten and handwritten) were anonymised: names, addresses, and any other information that could potentially identify the sender were removed. In total, 1,532 letters were converted into

text and manually corrected. In what follows, this dataset will be referred to simply as “the corpus”.

Following the transcription phase, a database was constructed and populated, with each letter being assigned a unique identifier. For each letter, when available, the transcription was included alongside a range of metadata pertaining to both the letter and its sender. These metadata encompass the letter's form (handwritten or typed) as well as various details about the sender, such as gender, profession, age, and place of residence.

A statistical analysis of these metadata, conducted with the programming language R (R Core Team 2024), yielded insights into the profile of the readers who applied in 2010 and 2011. First and foremost, it is important to note that the candidates are listeners of Radio France—a public broadcasting network known for its cultural programming and for attracting an audience generally considered to be intellectual and bourgeois. Moreover, these candidates are not casual readers: they are dedicated and passionate, voluntarily undertaking the challenge of reading and evaluating ten novels within eight weeks. In this sense, they constitute a distinct, self-selecting group—neither representative of the general population nor of the average lay reader.

More than 70% of applicants are women. Among those who disclosed their age, all age groups are represented, although the 50–59 cohort is the most represented, comprising 27% of the total. The average age of candidates is 50. The letters were sent from all thirteen metropolitan regions of France, with a small number coming from the overseas territories and abroad. The Île-de-France region, which includes Paris, is particularly prominent, accounting for over 23% of the applications. The professional backgrounds of the applicants are highly diverse, ranging from healthcare workers and technicians to

employees in both the private and public sectors. Notably, a significant proportion—one in four of those who specified their profession—work in education, mostly as primary or secondary school teachers.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the group is largely composed of individuals from the middle and upper-middle classes, who invest considerable time and resources in reading. While some have backgrounds in literature and all are avid readers, they may nonetheless be characterised as ordinary readers, in the sense proposed by Robert Darnton (1985, 161): they are not professionally engaged in reading, writing, or literary criticism, as editors, journalists, or authors are. They engage with literature – for the most part, literary fiction – as part of their everyday lives rather than as a professional obligation.

4. Methodology

It is now time to get to the core of the analysis, which concerns the expression of reading-related emotions in the over 1,500 letters available in text format. A few theoretical and methodological problems presented themselves. The first one was a scale problem. What scale should be used when analysing something so personal and intimate, but also so widespread as reading emotions? Would it be better to perform a distant reading on the entire corpus, or limit the analysis to a sample of close-read letters? And how many?

The scale-problem is a real conundrum in reading studies, especially when examining articulated written and oral accounts of the inner experience of reading. As many scholars—particularly in the field of literary studies—have noted, reading is a fundamentally individual experience (Macé 2011, 27): it happens to individuals, is shaped by their personalities, and in turn, can shape those personalities. At the

same time, we cannot overlook the existence of both small and large reading communities, brought together by shared temporal, spatial, linguistic, personal, or socio-cultural affinities. These communities often attribute similar value to reading and articulate their experiences using a comparable vocabulary. To sum up, as Roger Chartier reminds us, when studying the inner experience of reading, it is essential to steer clear of a double pitfall: on the one hand, the risk of “falling into the endless collection of singularities,” and on the other, that of “overlooking the originality of each individual appropriation” (Chartier 2020, 21, my translation).

In an effort to strike a balance between the singularity of individual readers and the broader group of 1,532 applicants to the *Prix du Livre Inter* jury, the present study adopted what might be called a multiscale analytical approach. This approach combines close reading and manual annotation of a small sample of letters with a macro-level analysis of the entire corpus, based on text-mining operations using TXM, a textometry-based tool for textual analysis (Heiden 2010).

This twofold method allows to account for interindividual variations and the lexical diversity through which emotions linked to reading are expressed, while still identifying recurring themes and lexicon across the letters. These recurrences are, in turn, symptomatic of a shared way of thinking about and narrating the inner experience of reading and its emotional impact. Indeed, while a first, comprehensive reading of the entire corpus already suggested notable similarities in how jury candidates retrospectively describe their reading-related emotions, it remains true that such an experience can only be fully understood at the level of the individual reader and the individual letter.

Firstly, a close reading was performed on a sample of application letters, evenly divided between those accepted by the jury and those

that were rejected. The sample comprises 48 letters—thirty-six submitted in 2010 and twelve in 2011. It was compiled through a random selection process implemented in R. The sample was annotated using the platform developed by the READ-IT project. As illustrated in the image below, the platform allows to annotate various aspects of a reader's experience as described in their testimony—ranging from information about the reader's identity and the material features of the reading resource, to the emotional responses that reading provoked.

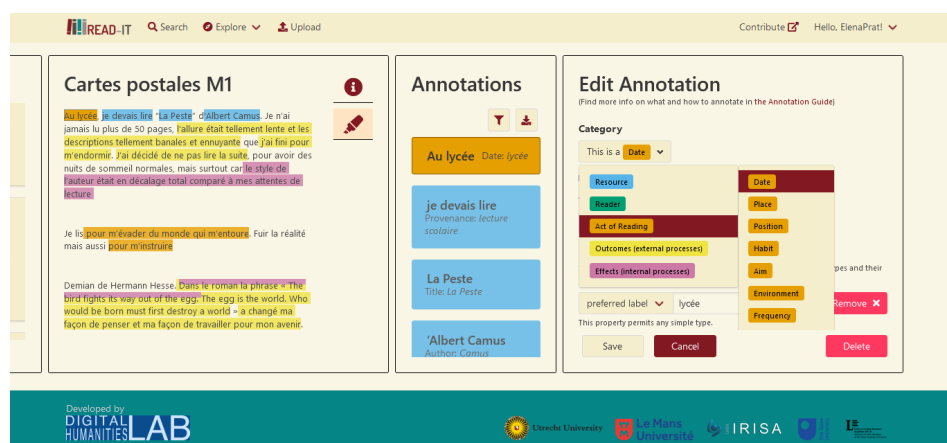


Figure1 – Screenshot of the READ-IT annotation platform

To do this, the researcher assigns a selected passage of text to one of the platform's annotation categories and subcategories—such as “reader” and “age,” “act of reading” and “date,” or “effects” and “emotions”. Within each subcategory, specific labels can be created manually—for example, “30 years old” under “age,” or “romance” under “genre.” Designed as a collaborative tool, the platform stores all previously entered labels, making them available for reuse by

other researchers. The platform proved to be particularly valuable for exploring the sample of 48 letters, especially for analysing the wide spectrum of emotions expressed by the candidates—ranging from joy to sadness, and beyond. This aspect will be discussed in more detail shortly.

5. Results

The insights drawn from the annotation were subsequently tested against the corpus of 1,532 letters through a series of text-mining operations, carried out using TXM. The following sections outline the results of this multiscale analysis, intended to provide some answers to the research questions guiding this study.

5.1 Reading: a dynamic interaction between the text and its reader

First, the analysis suggests that most readers explicitly acknowledge the central role of their emotional, sensory, and intellectual engagement in conferring both existence and meaning upon the text. They describe their interaction not only with the content of the text, but also with its style and structure, its material features, and even the perceived personality of its author. In doing so, they demonstrate a clear awareness that reading is a creative, interpretive, and dynamic act. The following quote, drawn from one of the letters, illustrates this point.

That's more or less what I call a conversation with the text. And that's how the dialogue works for me: I respond with my sensibility to the form of the text, the style of the writing, the rhythm of the words and phrases, the sounds that can be heard.¹

¹ All the translations are mine.

Several text-mining operations confirmed the widespread dissemination of this perception of reading as a dynamic interaction with the text in the entire corpus. For instance, readers place considerable emphasis on their physical engagement with the book, as indicated by the frequency of lemmas such as “touch” (387 occurrences), “smell” (79), “peruse” (104), “sniff” (19), and “stroke” (62) across the corpus. Moreover, the hypothesis that these ordinary readers see themselves as legitimate and active interlocutors of the text and its author is supported by the 62 co-occurrences of the terms “encounter” and “author”, as well as by the frequent appearance of the lemma “dialogue” (70 occurrences), which is often found in proximity to “text”, “receiver”, and “incessant”. Finally, readers frequently describe situations of deep absorption in the fictional world, as evidenced by recurring expressions such as “to be pulled in” (122 occurrences), “to live vicariously” (8 occurrences, with 27 additional instances of “vicariously” alone), and “to be transported” (160 occurrences).

Their reflections—articulated in non-specialist language and grounded in personal memories and life experiences—remarkably align with the definition of reading as the actualization of the text, a concept first formulated in the 1970s by reader-response theorists and subsequently expanded and enriched by later developments in anthropology (de Certeau 1984) and literary studies (Macé 2011).

5.2 A wide array of reading emotions

The second finding is that this dynamic relationship with the text, as described by the readers, is associated with a wide array of emotions. To enable a more in-depth analysis of the nature, objects, and effects of these emotional responses, a systematic method for identifying and extracting them was required.

Accordingly, the sample of 48 letters was annotated by linking the emotions expressed by candidates to 21 pre-established emotion categories. These categories are derived from the *Aesthetic Emotion Measurement Scale* (AESTHEMOS), a system specifically developed to classify emotions elicited by artistic experiences—including reading—by a team of neuroscientists led by Ines Schindler (Schindler et al. 2017). This system is distinctive in that it encompasses not only the full spectrum of emotions typically associated with responses to the intrinsic qualities of artworks—such as admiration or the experience of beauty—but also includes categories commonly found in general emotion taxonomies, such as joy, sadness, and boredom. The annotation process was conducted using the READ-IT interface, following the procedure illustrated in the image below.

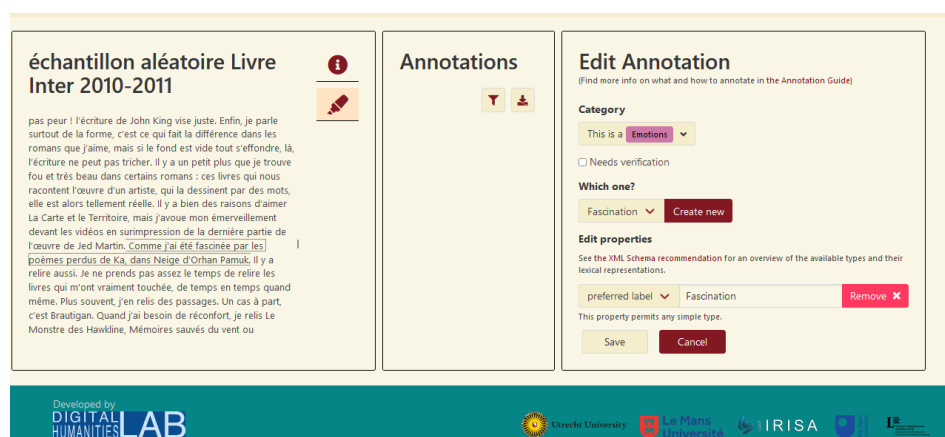


Figure 2 – Screenshot of the READ-IT annotation platform

Each underlined text segment (displayed on the left side of the screen) is assigned to the annotation class “Emotions”—a subclass of the broader annotation category “Effects” already available in the READ-IT interface—and subsequently linked to one of the twenty-one

emotion categories defined in the AESTHEMOS framework. These categories are manually added as “preferred labels” on the right side of the screen. In the example above, the segment “How fascinated I was by Ka’s lost poems in *Snow* by Orhan Pamuk” is first annotated as an emotion and then linked to the relevant AESTHEMOS category, in this case “fascination”. The annotated segments vary in length, ranging from a few words to several paragraphs. Due to its high degree of flexibility, the READ-IT interface initially allowed for the annotation of text segments of diverse lengths—an essential feature given the heterogeneity of ways in which subjective reading experiences are articulated. Once annotated, the segments were exported in both .txt and .csv formats and compiled into an Excel file to facilitate sorting, grouping, and comparative analysis.

The annotation process inevitably entails a degree of ambiguity, which stems from the inherently elusive and subjective nature of the object under study: emotions. Without claiming objectivity or replicability, this process aims to produce a form of atlas mapping the emotions expressed by candidates to the *Prix du Livre Inter* jury. The goal is to capture the diversity of emotional responses articulated by readers and to begin formulating answers to the research questions concerning the objects, nature, and effects of reading-related emotions.

Two examples may serve to illustrate how the letters have been annotated according to the emotion categories defined in AESTHEMOS. In the first one, a reader describes their emotional response to the characters in the novels of the 19th-century author Stendhal: “And I’ve decided to leave Stendhal behind for good: I forced myself, I read *The Red and the Black*, then *The Charterhouse of Parma* [...] It’s impossible—he and his characters irritate me. Too

much silliness kills romance...". This utterance has been annotated under the emotion category "anger."

A second example concerns *And Quiet Flows the Don* by the Russian author Mikhail Sholokhov (1928). A reader recounts the joy they experienced not only from the aesthetic pleasure of reading the novel, but also from the sense of posthumous connection it evoked with a departed family member: "Beyond the immense jubilation I felt devouring those thousands of pages, I had the impression of sharing, beyond death, the joy of reading with my grandmother—I saw her again, seated at the window, carefully deciphering those lines of tiny print." This extended and evocative reflection was annotated under the emotion category "joy".

The analysis suggests that the candidates to the *Prix du Livre Inter* jury articulate a remarkably broad spectrum of emotions, ranging from a sense of vitality elicited by the rhythm of a literary style to the joy provoked by a fictional character's achievements. It also indicates that certain emotional responses—such as joy and the feeling of beauty—are predominant, whereas others, including the feeling of ugliness and confusion, appear to be underrepresented. While this analysis does not capture the immediate, spontaneous reactions experienced during the act of reading, it nonetheless provides valuable insights into the ways in which ordinary readers retrospectively reconstruct and interpret these affective responses.

5.3 The objects of reading emotions and their evaluative nature

While some readers mention their emotional responses only briefly, many reflect back on the processes underlying these experiences. Their testimonies offer valuable material for formulating an empirically grounded definition of the nature, objects, and effects of emotions elicited by reading. The evaluative theories of emotions that

underpin this analytical framework had led to the hypothesis that reading-related emotions are not directed at the act of reading itself in a general sense, but rather at a range of intentional objects—characters, narrative events, particular sounds, rhythms, and so forth—to which readers ascribe specific value. The *Prix du Livre Inter* corpus can therefore be interrogated as follows: what are the intentional objects of the emotions expressed by the jury applicants? Clearly, not all readers explicitly identify the objects of their emotions; many are content to note that reading makes them feel happy, sad, or otherwise affected. However, when readers do attempt to specify the objects of their emotional responses, these tend to cluster into two main categories.

The first category comprises the situations and characters depicted in the literary work. The results of the annotation and text-mining of the emotions expressed in the letters indicate that candidate-jurors frequently report being deeply affected by the personalities and actions of fictional character. In the following example, a reader refers to *Madame Bovary*, the protagonist of the eponym novel by Gustave Flaubert (1857): "I suffered for this woman, deluded by her mawkish reading in the convent, who suffers from a life that is too conformist, a devoted but failed husband and illusory love affairs". Emotional responses are also often attributed to the places and events described in the texts. One reader, referring to the novels of Arturo Pérez-Reverte, writes: "I think I 'devoured' them all. I still remember the description of Seville, the smell of the orange trees, the lapping of the water...".

However, readers' emotional responses are just as frequently directed toward the formal qualities of the literary work—emotions that arise not from engagement with fiction as such, but from the perception of the text as a crafted artefact. In such instances, readers often describe

affective reactions triggered by the discovery of a particular rhythm, sound, or linguistic playfulness within the narrative. One reader, for example, writes: “Prévert also moves me: I open *Paroles*, a simple paperback, which I leaf through to savor small and large texts that are sensitive, funny, surrealist, often challenging, and also play on words and sounds”. Emotions are also commonly associated with the perception of stylistic mastery—how the literary style itself shapes and intensifies the reader’s experience of the literary work. This is illustrated, among others, by a reader reflecting on the prose of Albert Camus: “From the very first pages, one sentence amazed, delighted, and won me over: ‘I feel strange aches.’ I must admit, I briefly visualized my own life, searching for strange aches... My enthusiasm remained steady throughout the book: the beautiful images, expressions, comparisons... How beautiful the French language is when seen through the eyes of Camus...”.

Overall, the analysis empirically confirms the argument, made by literary scholar Vincent Jouve, that reading triggers two types of emotions: “situational emotions” – emotions whose object is the situation depicted in the literary work – and “aesthetic emotions” – emotions whose objects are the literary work’s form and style (Jouve 2019, 107).

The second research question concerned the way in which readers elucidate their emotional process retrospectively. Why did this or that object trigger this or that emotion? Naturally, only a subset of participants engaged in this level of reflection, while others offered only superficial remarks on their reading emotions. Nonetheless, a thorough analysis of the testimonies from those who did engage in this introspection yields valuable insights, particularly concerning the relationship between emotions and values.

Consider, for example, the following citation: “I still have Hector Malot's *Sans famille* in the Bibliothèque Verte, and the discolored stains on the cover are due to the tears I shed over Joli-Cœur's death”. In this case, the reader identifies the death of a character as the trigger for their emotion. Literary fiction features a theme (death) that belongs to the set of themes that Vincent Jouve calls “universal” (Jouve 2018, 303). These are themes that appeal to the value system shared by the vast majority of individuals: death is generally associated with sadness, fulfilled love with joy, and so on. In this case, the reader draws on a collective value system, which leads them to associate the death of someone, and therefore the loss of someone perceived as important, with sadness.

In other cases, it is by appealing to their individual system of moral values that literary works resonate emotionally with the reader. To illustrate this process, we can turn to the testimony of a reader who says they were “amazed” by Modesta, the protagonist of Goliarda Sapienza's *The Art of Joy* (1994) : “I was amazed by this heroine who assumes her paradoxes without guilt, dodges the lie of words and tells her epic story without altering anything”. In this case, the reader confronts Modesta's actions and worldview with their own personal system of moral values. In this way, the reader realizes that the text appeals to them because it features something they apprehend as “amazing”, namely the heroine's ability to assume “her paradoxes without guilt”, to dodge “the lie of words” and to tell “her epic without altering anything”.

In still other cases, readers call on their memories and life experiences to explain why a certain aspect of the literary work has touched them. Consider, for example, the case of this candidate, who states: “Needless to say, a few years ago Maryse Condé took me back to my African childhood in Ségou with much emotion”. In this case,

the reader explains that Condé's novel *Ségou* has touched them because the places and events it depicts resonate with their own experience. The reader's real life becomes the criterion for evaluating and measuring the importance and interest of the literary work. Such emotions can have actual consequences on readers' real life. Indeed, they can prompt readers to reflect upon their life experiences and moral values. Such as all the other emotions experienced in everyday life, they can orient individual choices and actions in the private, social and professional sphere. In the following example, a reader describes their admiration towards Cosimo, the protagonist of Italo Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees* (1957): "I admired this strength to leave a society that doesn't suit you by running off into a tree. This book raised a number of questions for me: how can we find a way to live in accordance with our values? How can we stay true to these values?". The reader explains that the admiration triggered by this character gave rise to moral questions. Inspired by the protagonist's decision of following his own ideal of freedom by taking refuge in the trees, this reader wonders how, in real life, one can live accordingly to their moral principles.

When the emotions described by the readers relate to the formal qualities of a text, it is particularly clear that these entail an evaluation of the text. Consider, for example, the case of an emotion whose object is the style of a literary work. In the following quotation, a reader declares their admiration for the "musical gaiety" of Christian Gailly's writing: "And then I came across the novels by Christian Gailly – with his humble and whimsical writing [...]. *Un soir au club*, of course, but also *L'accident*, *Dernier amour*, *Les oubliés* and, recently, *Lily et Braine*. I admire the musical gaiety of his writing". The reader identifies a feature of the literary work (the musical gaiety of Gailly's writing) that deserves to be admired. By expressing their emotion,

they also pass positive judgment on Gailly's writing ("I admire the musical gaiety of his writing"). Such an assessment obviously implies that the reader possesses a certain literary knowledge and an appropriate vocabulary, that they use to identify and express emotions linked to the perceived literary quality of the text. What is more, in this particular case, the reader also brings their sensory perception into play (they speak of "musical gaiety"): elucidating what makes a literary style strong and of high quality is a complex process, which seems to call on both the intellect and the body of the reader. Another reader describes the "shock" and "upheaval" caused by the perception of the force of Yevgeny Zamyatin's writing in his novel *The Flood* (1929). By wondering about the reasons for their shock, the reader is able to explain precisely what the mysterious force emanating from this novel is all about: "Zamyatin ... (I owe him the shock of *The Flood*, which I read three times in a row until I could unravel the construction of the sentences to try to understand how, with such sobriety, it was possible to distil such an intensity of violence into such a short novel: shattering!)". Based on these and other similar examples drawn from the letters, it would appear that, by describing the emotions aroused by the form and structure of the text, the candidate-jurors are able to measure the aesthetic value of a literary work.

In conclusion, the analysis of the corpus provides some supporting evidence for the evaluative nature of reading emotions. If readers react emotionally to literary works, it is because they have assessed, even unconsciously, that something in these literary works has value: the reading emotions expressed in the application letters for the *Prix du Livre Inter* jury are the more or less accomplished result of the effort to consciously and rationally elucidate this instinctive evaluative process. It is by reconstructing their spontaneous reading reactions

retrospectively that the candidate-jurors are able to measure what, in their eyes, confers importance and value to a literary work.

Building on these findings, a preliminary, empirically grounded definition of reading emotions can be proposed, as possessing a dual quality: they are both “ordinary” and “aesthetic”. On one hand, the emotions triggered by fictional characters, settings, or plot situations encourage readers to reflect on themselves and their surroundings, sometimes affecting their personal, social, or professional lives in tangible ways. On the other hand, when readers consider the emotions triggered by a text’s stylistic and formal elements, they engage in an evaluation of its aesthetic value.

6. Conclusions and further research venues

Informed by Robert Darnton’s argument that the inner experience of reading can only be explored indirectly through readers’ testimonies, the present study examined the expression of reading-related emotions in a corpus of letters written by contemporary French readers. Given that “reading emotions” as a theoretical construct remain understudied, it was necessary to develop a dedicated analytical framework, positioned at the intersection of reading studies and emotion research, for identifying and analysing these emotions within our corpus. This approach yielded intriguing insights, contributing to an empirically grounded definition of reading emotions.

The findings can be summarised as follows. Readers perceive the act of reading as dynamic: rather than passively receiving the text, they bring it to life by mobilising their intellectual, affective, and sensory faculties. In recounting their past reading experiences, they articulate a wide array of emotions, both positive and negative, ranging from joy to boredom, from fascination to confusion. Moreover, these

emotional responses appear to be linked to a dual evaluative process: an appraisal of the text's form and style, on the one hand, and an evaluation of the situations, settings, and characters depicted in the text, on the other.

It is important to acknowledge that these findings derive from the application of a tailored analytical framework to a specific community of French readers—a group characterized by a genuine passion for reading and, in most cases, favourable socio-economic conditions. To assert the broader relevance of these findings, it would be essential to test this framework on testimonies from readers belonging to diverse linguistic, social and demographic backgrounds. Such accounts might include letters, essays on reading produced in educational contexts, and comments from online communities like Babelio and Goodreads. The challenge of studying literature through its reception has been central since the pioneering critical works on reading at the end of the 1960s. Today, new multidisciplinary contributions in reading studies, alongside major progresses in emotion research, are casting new light on this challenge by focusing attention on how texts are perceived, transformed, and reappropriated by actual readers. This study on reading emotions hopes to provide a small contribution to the exciting phase of research unfolding today. It is rooted in the conviction that, to truly comprehend the effects of literary texts, it is essential to examine how ordinary readers recall these texts and relate them to their identity and everyday life.

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Instagram shelfies and everyday readings of *Heartstopper*

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Abstract: In this chapter I discuss a pragmatic sample of Instagram posts relating to *Heartstopper*, the global hit queer YA graphic novel by Alice Oseman. By examining shelfies, I identify different ways these posts can show everyday reading histories: reading aesthetics where the arrangements display a reading history on visually pleasing principles; tactile reading, where the materiality is centred; assemblages locating *Heartstopper* within a broader reading history; emotional responses which capture something of the way these books made people feel and the how readers felt about reading; those where queer temporalities are made legible; and bibliographically attentive reading, which focuses on reading histories where materiality is privileged. Together, by mobilizing queer theory, a small number of examples show how rich a way these posts can be to access everyday reading.

Keywords: queer bibliography; young adult fiction; affect; temporalities; *Heartstopper*

1. Introduction

Alice Oseman's queer Young Adult graphic novel *Heartstopper* is a love story between two boys at an English grammar school.¹ For the

¹ These are selective possibly fee-paying schools.

uninitiated, it is a long-form web-comic, drawn as 1820 panels so far since 2016 as part of an ongoing project, with five of six projected print volumes published (2018-present) plus several novellas. In 2022 the first *Netflix* live-action series was released, produced under the care of the author, these have played close fidelity to the originals, and bear many syntactic elements of the comics, such as framing and visual effects, as well as what I called elsewhere “Osemanic” designs such as the falling leaves (Noble 2024c). *Heartstopper* occupies a complex transmedia reading landscape to unpack, in common with much of YA literature (Mygind 2023). Undoubtedly there is a need for a generous transmedia reading of *Heartstopper*, because this is how readers have experienced it. It has found an audience in many languages and countries, aided by free access, translations, and Netflix dubbing. Yet, however popular the adaptation has been, the books remain central. Millions of print copies have been sold. I am not attempting to historicize *Heartstopper* here, but even a few years ago queer representation in YA literature was very limited indeed (Gillingham 2018). Far beyond simply occupying the mainstream confidently, this is a runaway, global success.

Briefly, the plot is this: Nick and Charlie are seated next to each other for registration at an all-boys grammar school in England: Charlie is bookish gay nerd; Nick is an apparently straight rugby player. Spoiler: he is not that straight. However unlikely, they become friends, kiss and romance follows. The first time they spend together outside school is when it snows and they play in it with Nick’s dog Nellie; he presents a photograph of this as a short-notice birthday present to Charlie. The back cover states: “Boy meets boy. Boys become friends. Boys fall in love.”, offering a concise and unambiguous peritextual plot summary.

2. Queer bibliography

In the last decade, the rise of critical bibliography has been a striking development, challenging the underpinnings of and ways in which we study material texts. It is a slippery idea, given that, as Lisa Maruca and Kate Ozment note, “there is not a settled definition of what the term is or does” (2023, 231). This has not held back the field. A long historical tradition on which it draws is of liberation bibliography (Spires 2022), developing into a healthy field of Black bibliography (Goldsby and McGill 2022). In turn, this has inspired other reappraisals of the field. Feminist bibliography (Ozment 2020) and approaches challenging the settler colonial logics (Cohen 2020; Peiser 2023; Mattes 2023; Wisecup 2025).

More recently, queer bibliography has emerged as an area of shared academic enquiry, mobilizing queer theory in the service of studying material texts, recovering historical and vernacular queer textual practices, and queering the field of study itself (Noble and Pyke 2024). In the 2010s, at least some felt queer theory had run its course, and it was time to develop queer methods which aligned with these theories saw exactly this kind, but the material studies of texts was curiously absent from these discussions (Browne and Nash 2016; Ghaziani and Brim 2019), although these were not concerned with texts, less still material ones.

Two of the things which reading requires are time and manual handling. We must spend time reading, and we must physically handle books, even electronically. It follows that thinking about time and our involuntary reactions to the way things make us feel makes sense. In this chapter, I use two aspects of queer theory to help parse everyday readings of *Heartstopper*: Queer temporalities and affect theory. It is my contention that these ideas have application to non-queer reading, too.

The notion of queer temporalities might mean a rejection of traditional life milestones: as Jodie Taylor notes, “[q]ueer lives often skip over some of the steps of the heteronormative timeline [instead enjoying] a prolonged youthfulness and a lingering within early adulthood,” “placing queers outside many categories of age-appropriate behaviour” (Taylor 2010, 894). An obvious example of this would be the reading of YA literature as former young adults.

There is a temporal quality to reading: it must take time which cannot be avoided, whatever the promise of planet-destroying copyright-infringing LLMs; reading must therefore occur within chronologies. In this sense, notions of queer temporalities can help us understand experience reading where time appears irregular in some way: perhaps time melts away whilst engrossed in a book, or when re-reading something we are transported back to where we first read it. Or, indeed, reading might take place at different stages in the lifecycle. There is an inherent temporality and flow to how books circulate and are read. Robert Darnton’s conceptualization of a “communication circuit” has had an enormous impact on the history of the book, outlining and indeed conceptualizing visually the passage of books in a connected model starting with the author to the publisher, printer, shipper, seller, and reader. Although designed in relation to eighteenth-century France, this notion might be adapted for other purposes, and indeed has been, in great number, to the extent it is hard to imagine book history not involving diagrams charting these flows (1982; 2007). Queer bibliography, simply by embracing the skips, lags, short-circuits, and other temporal distortions in circulation, from writing to reading, adds a dimension to such circuit-based models. Indeed, many queer texts can be seen as physical instantiations of queer temporalities. Consider the late

publication of E. M. Forster's *Maurice* written 1913-14, but only published in 1971 after the author's death a year earlier.

Queer temporalities are to some degree historically contingent, and not just because of the constructed nature of the heterosexist norms against which they push. Halberstam describes how "[q]ueer time perhaps emerges most spectacularly, at the end of the twentieth century, from within those gay communities whose horizons of possibility have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic" (2005, 2). Another event which is more context-specific is the odd lags created by Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988, which prevented Local Authorities in the UK from using funds to "promote homosexuality" (On this legislation see: Freshwater 2009; Baker 2022). This had the broadly chilling effect which its architects intended, and in practical terms made it impossible to supply books like *Heartstopper* in school libraries, and, in reality, making the commercial viability of such titles impossible. This is certainly one factor in explaining why queer adults have turned to queer YA material as it has become available, even if reported reactions to this are more complex. It is important, however, to note that male/male romances find voracious readers – and indeed markets – in straight women (Foster 2015; Whitman-Hess 2022).

3. A pragmatic sample

In *Heartstopper*, Oseman presents bookshelves as a way to display reading histories, making explicit invitation to read Charlie Spring's bookshelf in a drawn shelf in one of the comics showing an eclectic mixture of classic literature and queer YA titles including some of Oseman's own (Oseman 2020a, np). Popups of his bedroom were displayed at Waterstones in Piccadilly London to celebrate the Netflix release. There is a timeliness to this too, in the sense that domestic

shelves became visible during the large number of videoconference calls which came to shape lives after lockdowns due to the covid pandemic after March 2020 (Norrick-Rühl and Towheed 2022). All shelfies are surely staged to a lesser or greater degree, in that some will arrange their shelves or frame their shot to give a certain view, others will privilege ergonomics over aesthetics. Cultural discourse criticised the politics implied by the presence of particular books, terming them “red flag” (King 2022) or otherwise “problematic” (Bullen 2022).

Indeed, just as reading is an emotional activity, so is holding books: they can feel particular and we have an involuntary response to handling them. Affect theory can be applied to the study of material books. For example, I have argued elsewhere that our involuntary, affective reactions to books are valuable and legitimate sources of bibliographical information (Noble 2024a). This however, is most obviously recoverable for the bibliographer at work recording their own. Accessing them for others than our selves is not straightforward, however, some of these shelfies and their accompanying texts provide access to these emotional reactions to books – both materially and the stories they contain. In this sense, shelfies offer access to our emotional experiences of reading.

Platforms such as Instagram are not designed for scholarly research: results returned on queries are typically unstable and therefore irreproducible. This does not, however, mean that they cannot be used in some ways. In this chapter I demonstrate how such posts can be read to understand some reading histories and practices, not to present a representative sample. Instead, I take an assorted sample in response to the search terms “Heartstopper” and “Shelves.” I excluded anyone appearing under 18 and with under 1000 followers, so that we have adults speaking to larger audiences. Whilst these are

public posts, and can, by some accounts, be used legally without further permission, I adapted the strategy used by Beth Driscoll and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, not citing usernames to protect privacy or including weblinks (2019, 250–51). Three responded to provide permission and screenshots are included in these cases. These are illustrative literally and figuratively.

Fundamentally, my task here is to find some of the ways in which some users post about these books and show how these images and accompanying texts can be interpreted as evidence about everyday reading. Using them, I discuss various aspects of visible reading histories: reading aesthetics, extended reading, tactile reading, visible reading histories, emotional reading histories, temporalities, and materialities and reading histories.

4. Reading Shelfies, reading histories

Fundamentally, the Instagram selfie is an aesthetic proposition, in which books and other objects are arranged to achieve a certain look. The “shelfies”, I discuss include some other stagings of books not on shelves, are more than mere aesthetics. We can use these as affective evidence of reading histories, of the emotional decisions, as peritextual discussions of texts beyond the contents in the pages. The arrangement of books in these shots is, first and foremost, aesthetic. I interpret shelfie broadly here, based on the tags mentioned above and included those posts which included *Heartstopper* books.

4.1. Reading aesthetics

The queer semiotics of the rainbow are obvious and taken as an organizing logic both by Oseman and readers. Several posts grouped together titles with pink spines. The spines of the *Heartstopper* books are building toward a pastel rainbow. Many posts successfully do this,

simply placing the titles in sequence. However, for some posters this is quite intentional. Several bookcases and shelves were arranged as rooms. To expand the visual effect, some users supplement the rainbow. One posted showed a shelf of books containing the first four volumes plus *Loveless* to produce a “rainbow shelf”. This is both echoed and disrupted by those achieving their own rainbows across one or more shelves using both *Heartstopper* volumes and other Osemanverse titles, such as *Cherie*, as shown in figure 1, who achieves a rainbow by placing the books out of sequence, aligning the base of their spines, and cropping the right as the comics are larger than the novels (2023).



Figure 1: Oseman, a favourite author, with a serious collection of books and other objects relating to *Heartstopper*. Reproduced with kind permission.

The rainbow is achieved by expanding to include other Oseman titles, including, *I was Born for This* a YA novel unrelated to *Heartstopper*. Using different colours of hearts matching the covers, a very bare-bones bibliography is presented.

- ❤️ This Winter
- 🧡 I Was Born For This
- 🧡 Heartstopper Vol. 4
- 🧡 Nick and Charlie
- 💚 Heartstopper Vol. 3
- 💚 Radio Silence
- 💙 The Heartstopper Yearbook
- 💙 Heartstopper Vol. 2
- 💜 Loveless
- 💜 Solitaire
- 💜 Heartstopper Vol. 1

This expansive approach goes beyond just books. Oseman has not commercialized the comics to the degree other franchises have. Cherie has posted Youtooz figurines of Nick and Charlie sold by Netflix as official adaptation merchandise (2023). I have argued elsewhere that *Heartstopper* candles indicate strength of identification with the books and a desire to extend the story and space (Noble 2024c). Candles appear in many of the posts, both related and unrelated to *Heartstopper*. Candles share a deep affinity with books. Useful props in shelves, they can be deployed to underscore the most important parts – reasonably inferable as the strongest emotional reactions – in these visible reading histories. For whatever reason, candles share a deep affinity with books, and in these shots are deployed as useful props on shelves to underscore the most important parts of a reading history. Many of the posts contained other artworks and objects on display as part of these stagings. With pictures, candles, figures, and a notebook with an illustrated cover, Cherie's is an effective reflection of these, although I would argue it is very pleasingly composed. Such a display, perhaps

akin to a reading shrine, speaks much about how much readers can love their favourite books.

4.2. Tactile reading

As Gillian Silverman notes, “[a]ll touched objects function briefly as prosthetics,” including books, so that “[r]eading usually begins with touch, but accounts of literacy tend to downplay the contact with the text, creating a contradictory experience of the reader” (2020, 191). The experience of reading is tactile, even if by kindle or tablet, the book must be held. The shelfie does not show the act of reading, but they do offer clues. One poster asked if people annotated or appended tabs to their books, with a mug showing highlighter pens and document tabs. Next to it sat a heavily flagged book. At this point it is worth noting these are leisure readers, not lawyers preparing documents for court, or students revising for examinations, or academics reviewing. Reading is thus taken seriously, or at the very least, posters would like it to be thought they are taking it seriously. Other evidence of the tactile quality came from one poster asking others if they own more hardback or paperback books. An aesthetic choice, these are also ergonomic. If we accept that these books are read, and the discussions certainly imply they are, there is a curious challenge, in that all but one spine was posted uncracked. A fairly light touch can be used to read through graphic novels quickly, as discussed below. However, an ethos of care is shown, about how much readers love their books, they take good care. Some show the special protective book sleeves during transport for reading outside the home. The general immaculate condition speaks of a different logic to wanting to show them having been read. An old Alex cartoon strip saw the protagonist tease his colleague Clive for buying a paper *A Brief History of Time*, whereas ‘being the owner of a hardback version

no-one will ever know I haven't read it' (Peattie and Taylor 1995). A different logic is in play here, and it is counterintuitive: the love of these books mean they are protected carefully. These posts, then, hint at specific ways that these users have handled their books whilst reading.

4.3. Visible reading histories

More than anything, the shelfie makes reading histories visible. One poster says they have been reducing the number of shelves in their book-room to contain strictly favourite books only, and noting *Heartstopper* amongst a small number of titles worthy of comment. Their shelves are entirely legible visually, as well as textually through the discussion. By dint of a slight focus adjustment, another poster's books are rendered illegible other than those they wish to highlight. Some shelfies are only *Heartstopper*. Others, show a more mixed diet, such as Chris (2024) (figure 2), posting books he intends to read, including books in translation from Japanese Yoko Tawada, *Scattered all over the Earth* translated by Margaret Mitsutani ([2018] 2023), and Korean, Kyung-Sook Shin, *I went to see my Father*, translated by Anton Hur ([2021] 2023). A German novel by Thorsten Nagelschmidt, *Arbeit: Roman* (2023), about contemporary Berlin nightlife is also pictured. Kimmery Martin's *The Antidote for Everything: a novel* (2020) completes those shown, and in the text supporting the post, some e-reading is discussed. Here, a single post offers a complex view of a rich reading life.

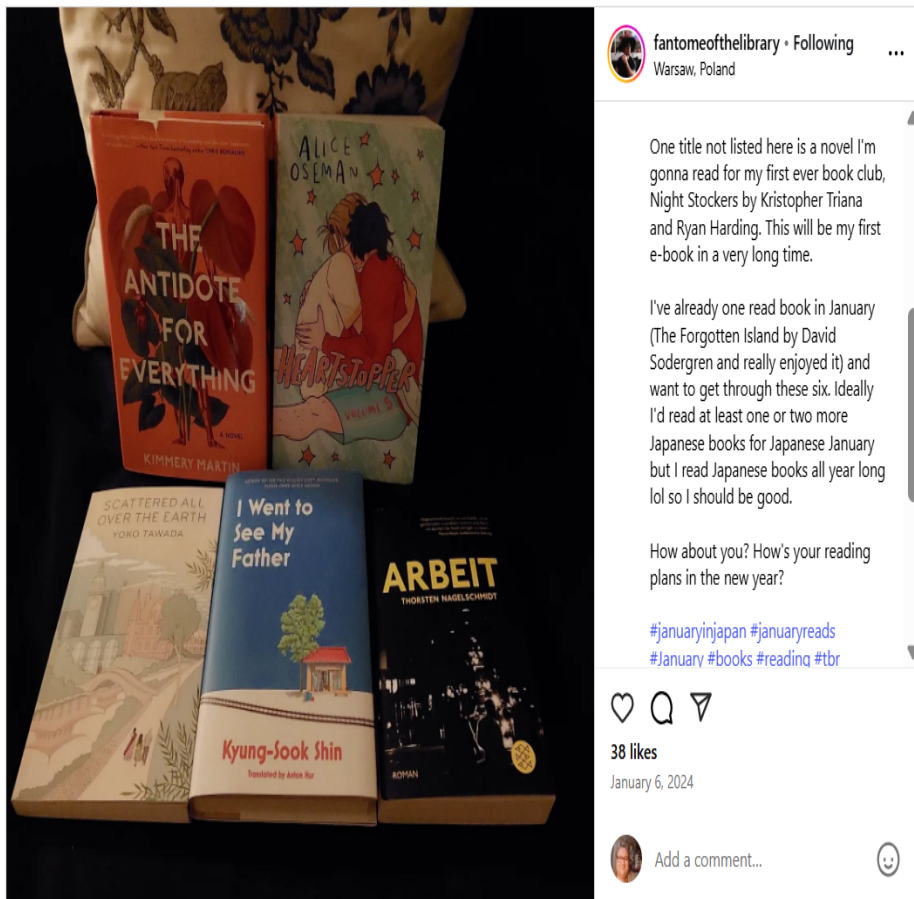


Figure 2: One user, Chris, posts a selection of books he intends to read. Reproduced with kind permission

4.4 Favourites and fluffy season: emotional responses

Many shelfie posts focus on the subject of favourites: thirteen of the posts in the sample used the word, and it was implicit in almost all of them. The notion of favourites, however construed, is significant because it belies a profoundly strong emotional response. *Heartstopper* is often interpreted as charming and sweet by many. Indeed, *Heartstopper* itself, particularly the earliest chapters, revolve

around a happy young love story; as it develops, the dark themes of self-harm, bullying, and eating disorders, emerge, which come out in *Nick and Charlie* and *This Winter* (Oseman 2020b; 2020c; Noble 2024b). For many, *Heartstopper* is simply a favourite. Another wants to read them as part of “fluffy season” as an alternative to spooky season. Almas (2023) offers a fun post likening books to various preparations of coffee. In common with Chris above, invisible reading histories are also a challenge: “[m]any of my reads are ebooks and audiobooks so pose a bit of a problem when I want to take photos of them 🥺.” Limiting to books owned physically, Almas offers some answers. Firstly, comes espresso – a strong, short drink translated as “[a] book that was hard to get through,” which was found impossible, despite familiar with the author: “I’ve never had any issue with any other Kristoff book.” The addition of a little foam and steamed milk, a cappuccino, is taken as “[a] book everyone has read but me!” to which “*Pride & Prejudice* by Jane Austen. Or anything by Jane Austen really!” is offered in reply. In contrast to familiarity with Jay Kristoff’s oeuvre, Almas has not yet gotten round to Austen. A theme of unreading is something to which we will turn next. *Heartstopper* is offered as “[a] sweet read”- noting it as a “series” and that they are “[w]aiting eagerly for the next instalment!.” Mochas are “emotional reads”, in this case a collection of love stories by Trent Dalton, and macchiatos are “[a] favourite read”: the *Hobbit* “is a forever fave”. Others are invited to do this challenge, which provides a powerful prompt to interrogate one’s reading history. In particular this an emotional consideration: it offers a direct impression of how reading *felt*, how the book made the reader feel.



Figure 3: a coffee challenge perks up discussion.

For shelfies which do not only include Oseman's titles, some others come up frequently. From the evidence of readers posting favourites, a queer romcom canon emerges, even across a small sample. Casey McQuiston's *Red White and Royal Blue* (2019), about a romantic entanglement between a Prince of Wales and the son of a US president, Aiden Thomas's *Cemetery Boys* (2020) a gay YA ghost story, and Madeline Miller's *Song of Achillies* (2011), a non-YA queer romance which has been enormous hit, queering – or making visible the queer

romance between Patroclus and Achillies during the Trojan War, which has received an enthusiastic queer response, if focused more on adults. A range of special editions are shown in these posts, with sprayed edges and other particular features. Publishers are busy supplying these markets including what Rebecca Romney calls “made collectible” editions (2023). I discuss some *Heartstopper* examples below. The point here is that, together these readers are constructing a shared canon based on feeling, and this is often reflected in how the materiality of the books is arranged in these posts.

4.5. Temporalities

The act of reading of course is evanescent: the moment someone tells you they are reading, they have stopped, however fleetingly. Queer temporalities help explain how queer people experience life courses differently. Time is an element in many of the shelfies in the sample, and their discussion. Some posters have titles supplied as ARCs (advanced reader copies). The giveaway for these in a shelfie is that they typically have the publication date printed at the top of their spines. None of the examples I found were of *Heartstopper*, but the inclusion of these indicates the bookish culture in which posters are participating, and they warrant a little comment here. Typically, these would be positional goods (Hirsch 1976; Tyssedal 2025), because of their scarcity – specifically they cannot be bought. Exceptionally, with *Heartstopper*, the content is already distributed gratis online, so the plot does not risk being spoiled. In a sense Oseman has played with these features of the book trade. Nonetheless, as embargo dates imply, the materiality of these books in effect changes over time. Until that date they are secretive and special, allowing readers to jump ahead in the communication circuit, heralding their proleptic quality at the head of their spines; after the book is published, they become a

curiosity for the collector, and the question of corrections having been made looms, offering the reader the chance to move backward in time.

Readers also post what they intend to read, discussed above. With copies acquired, there is serious intentionality, but it also offers an optimistic futurity. Time allocated to reading can – and perhaps should – feel different. Beyond reading for work, settling down with a book might relate to the luxurious dedication of time to reading for pleasure, or filling time whilst travelling. An absorbing novel sees time disappear, when a glance at the clock shows hours to have passed and then it is 3 o'clock in the morning, at least for nocturnal reader. Graphic novels, by their multimodality, can be read at different speeds. One might revel in each pane of *Heartstopper* as a piece of visual art, as if viewing a volume of engravings, inspect each drop of ink; where learning the plot is the issue, readers may choose to work through a volume very quickly. One reader posted with a note that they had read volume one in 17 minutes. Certainly, a first-time reader will see their impatience rewarded if they demand a similar level of celerity of disclosure of the plot. It may also explain how spines are protected. This remark about speed does not indicate a desire to be finished and one with it, but rather points to a powerful compulsion to learn what happens.

Queer lives might mean celebrating other milestones than those thrust upon all by the heterosexist patriarchy. Marking other moments in the life course can therefore be seen as a radical alternative. As Jodie Taylor has argued, for some queer people, attending musical events can loom larger in their lives, taking the place of more conventional events (2010). We have seen positional goods produced by ARCs. Another poster includes *Heartstopper* in a “Bookstaversary” post, celebrating the anniversary of participating in

bookish Instragram, suggesting – if perhaps wryly – an alternative milestone marker. One user posted about rereading the *Heartstopper Yearbook*, a supplementary text prepared in which characters are explored in ways which it would be hard without disrupting the narrative flow in the graphic novel (Oseman 2022). This user noted that they had read it multiple times, front to back, such was their enthusiasm for it, and because it was found to be so very “cute”. The act of re-reading, of course, erodes temporality. We must also note that enthusiasm for the romance – and the implicit but offstage eroticism in *Heartstopper* reminds us – might be appreciated in different ways. Lucy Neville, for example, has explored the heterosexual female audience for gay male pornography (2018; 2015). Here, the cuteness reports a particular emotional response to the texts.

4.6. Bibliographically attentive reading

Finally, I wish to consider a particular inflexion of the physicality – or materiality – of these titles. Choices made around particular editions will be of particular importance. One user was particularly proud of a set of Fairylot editions of *Heartstopper* and they feature frequently. Sold on a semi-subscription basis, they are not readily available to purchase in conventional bookstores. Instead, copies are primarily sold to subscribers, although there are occasional surplus sales, and books can be obtained at relatively high prices on the secondary market. These revel in special features such as sprayed edges and decorative end papers. Rebecca Romney dubs this type of production “made collectible”, “[i]ts target audience is mostly young (i.e. averaging in their 20s), mostly female, and significantly less interested in “classics” than in contemporary books that match their own reading taste” (2023). In affective terms it is important to note

that the various features deployed to make these books collectible, make them *feel* special too. Handling the smooth jackets with foil details, which must be removed to see the decorated, foiled hardcovers underneath, makes for a particular experience, and invites owners to pore over the material features in a way they probably do not in standard editions. Slightly heavier, due to the bright white paper on which it is printed, is the crowdfunded edition. One user shows off, perhaps with a certain insouciance, what would be expected to be the real prize for collectors: a copy from the crowdfunded print run in 2018. This is the first edition, only printed in a single run of under 2000, and therefore claims clear bibliographic precedence. Readers, however, have, for now, identified alternative priorities.

Impressionistically, it seems *Heartstopper* readers are willing to accumulate multiple editions of these comics. Anyone buying more than one printed copy occupies a realm concerned with something beyond the ergonomics of reading in print rather than on screen. One user shows four copies of the first volume, centring a Waterstones special hardcover edition, complaining they had found it irresistible in hardback with some additional content. Another shows the first three of the same edition. These posts make clear the bibliographical attentiveness of these readers, not least in display books on bookshelves, text blocks outward, to show off decorated edges.

5. Concluding remarks

Social media postings are rich in potential for those researching books and reading, but require careful handling to look below surface aesthetics. In this paper I have attempted to show how reviewing a small, pragmatic sample of shelfies posted on Instagram involving *Heartstopper* books.

Deploying queer bibliographical lenses, it is possible to discern the scraps of reading histories shared in these posts. They are specifically attuned to the task of amplifying quietest statements and detecting even the subtlest signals. Queer bibliographical methods should not be limited to those studying queer materials. Indeed, these might be deployed in other contexts to help those seeking to recover everyday reading practices.

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Bound Together: Understanding the Wellbeing Potential of Shared Reading

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Abstract: Poetry offers an especially valuable resource at this moment of tremendous need for language that not only informs but also connects, enacts, and creates. With precision and wonder, poetry can shake us from slumber, from fear, from loneliness and can beckon us across a bridge to a mended world of possibility. For many, the reading aloud and facilitated discussion of poetry and other literature in a community group setting is an amplified site of comfort and connection.

Founders of the shared reading model established reading groups with the conviction that collective engagement with poetry and literature can support personal, collective, and relational wellbeing. With this article, I present selected findings from the poetic inquiry phase of my dissertation examining what can happen within shared reading groups. I present three sets of poems: found poems from the transcripts of conversations I had with shared reading group participants, found poems from the work of theorists whose scholarship extends our understanding of processes integral to shared reading, and threshold poems that weave together the voices of participants, theorists, and myself as the poet-researcher. Through these poems I reveal how the cultivated liminal space of shared

reading engenders a practice of listening otherwise which makes possible resonant relations of wellbeing.

Keywords: poetic inquiry, liminality, listening otherwise, resonance

Introduction

On a drizzly and dark February afternoon, a small group of people gathers around a table, copies of Elizabeth Jennings' poem *Comfort* in hand. The group's facilitator, Claire, reads the poem aloud, slowly:

Hand closed upon another, warm.
The other, cold, turned round and met
And found a weather made of calm.
So sadness goes, and so regret.
A touch, a magic in the hand.
Not that the fortune-teller sees
Or thinks that she can understand.
This warm hand binds but also frees.

A brief, comfortable silence falls before Claire asks if anyone would like to re-read the poem aloud. Max volunteers and reads the poem. Not all, but most of the group members then take a turn sharing where and how the poem resonates, what it prompts them to remember or to reconsider, drawing from their personal experiences and building on one another's perspectives and stories. Elaine repeats the phrase 'a weather made of calm' and remarks how rare that occurrence seems to be now. I talk about how my children used to hold my hand every day and the bittersweetness I feel now that they are older and holding other people's hands. Freya recalls a time when they were comforted – not with words, but with the gentle

touch and presence of another – the dignity offered in just sitting side by side, much like it often is within this group.

This vignette offers a small glimpse of how, for many, the reading aloud and facilitated discussion of poetry and other literary texts in a community group setting is a site of comfort and connection (Longden et al. 2015, 117). Poetry provides precise and wondrous language that informs but also connects, enacts, and creates (Prendergast et al. 2009, 743). Founders of the shared reading model established reading groups with the conviction that collective engagement with poetry and literature can support personal, collective, and relational wellbeing (The Reader n.d.). With this paper, I reveal a selection of findings from the poetic inquiry phase of my doctoral research study examining what happens when people are brought together to read aloud and discuss literature and what is made possible in and from that experience. After providing a brief overview of the terms relational wellbeing, shared reading, and poetic inquiry, I offer more details of the methods I employed in my study. I then present my findings in the form of poetic clusters. Through the poems, I reveal how the cultivated liminal space (Turner 1969) of shared reading engenders a practice of listening otherwise (Lipari 2009) which makes possible resonant relations of wellbeing (Rosa 2019).

A Note on Terminology

At the heart of this work lie three key concepts: relational wellbeing, shared reading, and poetic inquiry. The definitions I offer here are imperfect, partial, and proposed as the most relevant within the context of my work.

Relational Wellbeing

My conceptualization of wellbeing draws from the work of Atkinson (2013), Smith and Reid (2018), White and Jha (2020) and others who characterize wellbeing as relational, collective, and situational. Rather than a set and immutable outcome to be achieved, I understand wellbeing to be a dynamic process, a set of interrelated practices in relation to self, others, place, and material/ immaterial objects: *accessing* and *sharing* valued resources; *experiencing* self-worth and confidence; *exercising* participation; *building* social connections; *enhancing* physical and mental wellness; *finding* meaning and purpose (Ryan et al. 2008; White 2015; Smith and Reid 2018; White and Jha 2020). A relational ontology of wellbeing rejects the primacy of the individual and considers relatedness not only as a support or constraint to individual wellbeing, but as “fundamentally constitutive” of how people experience wellbeing (White 2017, 129; Atkinson et al. 2020). Our sense of who we are and how we are is always in the process of being produced by relations with others.

Shared Reading Groups

Shared reading groups are distinct from more traditional book clubs. The material is not read in advance; poems, short stories, and novels are read aloud with groups of people in a range of settings (e.g., libraries, community centres, homeless shelters, prisons, health care clinics). Led by a trained facilitator in a supportive environment, the reading is interrupted regularly for participants to share their responses and reflections. Group members are free to choose how they participate; they may listen, read portions of the text aloud, and/or contribute to the discussions (Longden et al. 2015; Billington et al. 2016). My research examines what happens in shared reading groups modeled after those developed and delivered by the United

Kingdom charity, The Reader, and since adapted by groups throughout Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.

Poetic Inquiry

Originating with feminist scholars in the 1970s as a way to make space for different forms of knowing, doing, and being, Prendergast first proposed the term 'poetic inquiry' in 2009 to comprise the myriad ways in which researchers incorporate poetry through the process of their work. Leggo (2006) argues that "human science research needs to be challenged, even unsettled, by the perspectives of poets and novelists and artists" (87). This unsettling is not destructive but generative, opening up space for richer and complex interpretation with emotional depth. Those conducting poetic inquiries view the divide between arts and science as artificial, resist objectivity, and do not seek certainty. Poetic inquirers fully acknowledge how their experiences and identities inform their engagement with research participants and data, and take an epistemological stance committed to situated authority and a relational process of knowledge generation (Freeman 2017; Faulkner 2019; Cooms and Saunders 2024).

I chose poetic inquiry as a means of conveying my findings in a way that more authentically communicates the substance and tone of research participants' voices (McCulliss 2013). Poet-researchers blend the scientific with the contemplative, reflexive, and emotive; they honour that "humans naturally take pleasure in rhythm and rhyme" (Lahman et al. 2019, 9). In using poetry as a method of thinking, analyzing, and presenting data, I acknowledge the complexity of experience, create space for the expression of felt experiences, and

seek to engage the readers' senses so they might feel moved by and connected to the world, whatever their interpretation – an echo of what happens in shared reading.

Data Gathering and Analysis

I gathered data from nine shared reading group members from several sites across Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, by interviewing each of them twice. Through those conversations, I elicited stories about their motivation and participation in shared reading, what wellbeing means to them, what they value (and possibly don't value) about the shared reading experience and why, what they perceive as being important components of shared reading, and whether or how they perceive participation in shared reading to influence their wellbeing.

Within my poetic inquiry, I performed a thinking with theory, weaving data from research participant interviews with selected theoretical concepts. In their seminal 2012 book, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) describe 'thinking with theory' as "putting philosophical concepts to work via disrupting the theory/practice binary by decentering each and instead showing how they constitute or make one another" (5). Thinking with theory is not linear; it involves moving back and forth between theory and data, allowing each to inform and evolve the other. This emergent process encourages creativity and the generation of new insights that might not have been possible through a more traditional application of theory (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). I selected theorists whose concepts can extend our understanding of what shared reading does and what it makes possible (two of which are presented here in this paper): Turner (1969), liminality and Lipari (2009, 2015), listening otherwise.

Immersed in the data, I took note of phrasing and imagery that might give rise to a “poetic occasion”. Syntax, rhythm, pauses and tone are all important consideration when translating the voice of an individual into a poem. To stay close to the essence of the text, to facilitate my reading the text while thinking with theory, and to present the findings, I enacted Prendergasts’ notion of ‘vox’ (voice, in Latin). Vox Theoria are poems written from, or in response to, academic literature. I extracted phrases from relevant theorists and reshaped them into poetic representations. Vox Participare refers to research participant-voiced poems. For these, I took the transcripts from my interviews with research participants and extracted phrases verbatim (though I sometimes rearranged or repeated them). Finally, to connect and juxtapose the voices of my research participants with those of the scholars and that of my own, I wrote what I call Vox Nexum poems. Here, I present a selection of the poems in clusters, accompanied by brief narratives, to allow for the exploration of central themes.

Findings

Liminality

Poems in this *liminality* cluster help us unfold the spatial aspects of the orientation, processes, and practices through which shared reading can be experienced as relational wellbeing. Liminality, derived from the Latin term *limen* meaning “threshold”, was first used by ethnologist Van Gennep (1960) to describe the middle, transitory stage of a rite of passage. It was later developed by Turner (1987) to include all temporary, in-between phases through which an individual or community passes from one state or space to another. A liminal

experience is characterized by a withdrawal from everyday habits, routines, rules, social order, and structures (Turner 1987).

Vox Theoria

I crafted the Vox Theoria poems below from various pieces of Taylor's seminal writing.

Between and between
Positions arrayed by law
Neither here nor there
Momentarily free
Free from the norms

the values

the roles

the status

the responsibilities

brought by gender, social class, other
structural niches

Momentarily free (Turner 1982, 48)

Within a liminal space, new relations have room to flourish
while hierarchies of difference are constrained.

Presented with a moment
In and out of time
Reveals however fleetingly
Some recognition of a social bond
That has ceased to be
And has simultaneously yet to be (Turner 1969, 360)

Most of us
See only
What we expect to see

What we expect to see
Is what we are conditioned to see
When we have learned the definitions of our culture

Liminal personae are
At once
No longer classified
Not yet classified
This condition, these persons
Elude the network (Turner 1969, 95-96, 359)

In a liminal space, typical rules and relations are dissolved, creating a disorienting process that engenders the possibility of transformation or something new.

the doffing of masks
the stripping of statuses
the renunciation of roles
the demolishing of structures (Turner 1986, 107)

making possible
the deconstruction of the
“uninteresting”
constructions of common sense
generating openness (Turner 1977, 68)

Vox Participare

The poems below, created from research participants' interview transcripts, suggest that inherent to shared reading are the characteristic elements of liminality: removal from everyday norms, roles, and routines, creative engagement in a facilitated activity, and building community within the group.

Participants spoke almost wistfully about how engagement within the shared reading space involved a suspension of the social rules and roles that governed their everyday lives. In these two poems, Janice and Sue evoke a sense of relief in escape from normal obligations and the resultant possibilities.

We sit for an hour and half with tea
Not having to think
The shops, the milk, the eggs
Oh yes, the eggs
I've got to do this
I've got to do that
We shut the door on the life that's outside (Janice)

It's not just a cup of tea or jar of lollies on the table.
It takes you out of a space that is mundane, ordinary
And sometimes incredibly lonely
It opens up opportunities to being heard
Which is very interesting
Not only is the author or poet being heard
But the people themselves,
Us ourselves
In company where we are respected
Where we connect
Huh
Where we belong (Sue)

To Juliane, shared reading offered respite and an opportunity to be part of the group, but at a certain remove.

Layers that slowly come off
Slowly peeled away
Slowly edit your understanding of who a person is
You're not friends

And yet again
I'm an outsider in the group
And yet again

We are not paying enough attention
To the importance of feeling connected
Without being friends

It's a kind of being
In moving water
But at eye level with the others
A feeling of safety for me
With others without losing control entirely
Being able to step away from it
It's a practise
Slower to judge
More curious
A companion practise
In opening up
In watching, attending

The lack of pressure for prescriptive participation and the genuine invitation to share with no 'right answer' was welcomed, as Kimberley's and Jennine's poems below show.

whether it's you know
little miseries or big miseries
it's that one hour break
where they can turn that off
just enjoy being with other people
and reading and benefiting in that way

for that brief time
talk or not,
share or not,

smile or not

low stakes

no agenda

no need to come prepared

invited to share, no judgement

valued (Kimberley)

There's no time requirement.

There's no reading requirement.

There's no understanding requirement.

You come with what you have and as you are.

To shine a light on your corners of knowledge. (Jennine)

Jennine and Juliane seem to characterize the literary text itself as a liminal object and/or an object that facilitates experiences of liminality.

Comfort through the lens of the text

Support through the filter of literature

Encourage through the lens of the text

Share through the filter of literature (Jennine)

Text has this kind of Winnicott play object quality

It can be retrieved and discarded

Retrieved and discarded

You can project onto it

It's always the mediator (Juliane)

Vox Nexum

Stretched out on a rock ledge next to the lake, I wrote this Vox Nexum poem to braid together my own evolving understandings,

questions, and insights with those of Turner and those of my research participants.

I am in a liminal space here, where I write
A blue cabin, accessible only by the lake which today
Is painfully, plainly just as you might imagine
Lapping, loon-licked
Away from our kids, home, campus
Is being here why this idea of liminality resonates?

No matter. The poets, the participants, have uttered it themselves.
Not uttered liminal, not directly,
But in-between world words like
Loose, porous, blooming, slowing down, no agenda, curious, peeled away,
creative, fluid, immediacy, democratizing, equals, difference, present,
attending, attention, attend
What these words *do* generates openness – to self, to text, to other, to world

Around the table, text in hand
Refracting and reflecting experiences
Through the eyes of Chekov's head gardener
Through the eyes of glamorous Dorothea who turned 90 last month and
thinks
That story is a load of rubbish

One experience of liminality cocooned within another
Stepping into the pages, having stepped into the reading circle
What happens when we play here awhile, play with who we are and could be?
What happens when we pay attention to what else could be?
And what happens when we get up from the table?
Have we limbered up for a different way to be?
Can new recognition leak out
Once we step back from the pages, step back from the circle?
Or maybe it is enough to just return to the table, to the in-between

The liminality afforded by participation in shared reading renders it a creative and supportive space of openness, of possibility. Group members temporarily leave their everyday lives and enter the space to engage with unknown (at least initially) others. The group's facilitator purposefully and actively cultivates and sustains a supportive, nonjudgmental atmosphere of quiet boldness, emphasizing that all responses are valid and valued. Compared to other spaces, participants experience a relatively flattened hierarchy, enabling a sense of *communitas*, an atmosphere of trust, mutual vulnerability, and compassion.

Shared reading demonstrates that literature, too, can be viewed in liminal terms. Always, the poem or literary text is at the centre; entering the world of the poem or story crosses a second threshold where participants are given access to new landscapes and to the interior thoughts, feelings, and experiences of characters. Group members can identify and discuss feelings or perspectives of a character and not have to disclose them as their own, thus allowing a depth of exploration that might not otherwise have been comfortable or possible. Moreover, shared reading group members described feeling disoriented or uncertain as they wade through the liminal spaces of the text, individually and collectively attempting to cross the threshold to new understanding (of text, themselves, one another).

Listening Otherwise

Poems in this *listening otherwise* cluster prompt us to consider how space is created for listening as a critical, creative practice in shared reading, and what is made possible when we turn toward another (and an other), rather than away. Communication scholar and philosopher Lisbeth Lipari argues that "listening brings humans into being" (Lipari 2014, 2). Grounded in an ethic of compassion,

attention, and holding difference, listening otherwise is an invitational approach that emphasizes deeper engagement. It is an effort to suspend self-interest and foreknowledge, to attune to sounds of difference, and to receive the vulnerability of others in all their complexity (Lipari 2009).

Vox Theoria

Lipari's scholarship on listening otherwise was used to create the Vox Theoria found poems below. I open with two monostich poems to convey Lipari's insistence that our usual way of understanding dialogue is inadequate.

hearing	listening
perception, receiving from others	attention, giving to others (Lipari 2014, 187)

Through listening otherwise, we connect with others in an openness to their perspectives, insights, and experiences regardless of how we understand them or whether they reflect our own. In this process, we submit to discomfort and unpredictability. Listening, therefore, can be a site for the emergence of a new way of relating to ourselves, one another, and our environments.

I come to the conversation empty
not empty of my experience or history
but empty of the belief that my experience or history
defines the limits of possible meaning and experience (Lipari 2014, 35)

I don't have to "feel" what you feel
I don't have to "know" what it feels like to be you
I do need to stand in proximity to your pain.
I do need to stand with you, right next to you,
I do need to belong to you

I do need to let go of my ideas about who you are, who I am, what “should” be
(Lipari 2009, 350–351)

listening otherwise
arises from welcoming the other
as a guest
as a not-me

doesn't insist on understanding or familiarity, or shared feelings
does insist on listening with a kind of awareness that makes space
space for the unthinkable
space for the unimaginable (Lipari 2014, 186)

Lipari (2014) implores us to become, at least temporarily, unmoored, to dwell in the “groundlessness” that emerges when we can stretch beyond what we ‘know’ to be true and genuinely try to understand what others know to be true (184). Though this new understanding may not lead to a change in opinion or behaviour, listening otherwise does necessitate an openness to that possibility.

Listen otherwise
Listen unflinchingly
Despite discomfort
Engage on their terms
Receive insights of others
Despite discomfort
Intentionally engage with what is strange
Not already understood
Receive (Lipari 2009, 56)

Vox Participare

These Vox Participare poems, composed from the interview transcripts of research participants', suggest that shared reading can

be “a kind of dwelling place from where we offer our hospitality to others and the world” (Lipari 2009, 102). From this dwelling place, the listener does not have to fully understand (much less agree with) what the speaker (a character in a book, another reading group member) is describing; it is enough to sit alongside, in openness to receiving.

Catherine is grateful that shared reading begins with and nurtures listening.

One-on-one conversations?

Tricky, a bit intense

My personality type and anxiety?

Means I always feel like I’m “on”, that I need to have an answer to any question

Do I listen to the question?

No, my brain is leaping ahead

But as a shared reading participant?

I can listen, sit back, enjoy being read to, no pressure to respond.

Then when I do respond?

Not panicked, more genuine.

In the following poem, Melinda further laments that, for the most part, we have lost the art of respectful conversation. She feels shared reading might help to hone the requisite listening skills and the willingness to consider and accept the views of others.

In shared reading we’re given permission

To hold difference and to listen

To listen and to hold difference, gaze at it, attend to it

To try to understand when someone says something

Something very different to our own perspective on life

Multiperspectivity - what a mouthful of a word!

But you know what I mean

That is gold

Kimberley and I spent some time talking about the too-often occurrence of speaking with someone and knowing that the other person, instead of actively engaging with what you are conveying, is instead preparing what they want to say next. Kimberley feels that something different happens in shared reading.

At first you could tell the men were like, ugh
I do not wanna be here this is stupid
You know when you're listening to someone
You're You're getting your rebuttal ready

But then as we started talking the walls
The walls came down even they were surprised
How connected it was and how engaging

To talk about a poem and about
What the poem led to talking about

They connected they listened differently

Though we never spoke directly about the concept of listening otherwise, Om nonetheless captures the idea and its effects beautifully.

A continuous practice of listening with acceptance
A continuous practice to not be "Oh, that's not the way *I* think."
Like even when you have an internal dialogue with yourself
Like, "Ohhh, I think that's not quite right."
To be able to get to the place like "Ohhh, this is how *they* see it."
To be able to accept that very special (Om)

Vox Nexum

I wrote the Vox Nexum poem below with the intention of bringing my voice into conversation with Lipari's voice as well as those of my research participants so that together we could create something new.

Sitting on the log with Owen, listening
Slap of a beaver tail
Tremolo of a loon
Chatter of two squirrels up the birch tree
Shaking down the impossibly yellow leaves

Around the dinner table with Owen later that evening
Sure, there is a bit of whinging about kale
Mostly, though, he is listening, wide-open
Turning around the ideas he is hearing
Presenting them back to us, unvarnished

"That's how the bath water gets hot?"
"This song makes you sad? I think it's zippy."
"I want to feel strong arms swimming to the island, too."

Owen is four
He is a magnificent listener
Perhaps, being four, he has fewer objections, fewer assumptions, fewer convictions
But those who know four-year-olds know this isn't likely true
His roots are still tendrils, just below the surface
Not as frayed with complicated cuts and bruises
Not as knotted and bound up with long-held loves and loyalties

Glancing around I see what happens when we are not magnificent listeners
What happens when we fail to listen to the other, for the other
Families smiling (painfully), but unknown to one another
Communities shouting past one another
Fires set, walls set up, instruments set down

Owen comes to the conversation on the log, at the table empty
Not empty of his (still limited) experience or (still short) history
But empty of the certainty that what he knows, what he has experienced
Outlines the limits of what can be known, what can be experienced
We can do that, too

I see it happen around the not-empty table in shared reading
Comprehension and consensus not prerequisites for compassion
Softened boundaries
Listening matters, being listened to matters

Framing shared reading as a space for cultivating listening otherwise extends our understanding of listening as an ethical, relational practice (not just a cognitive function) with an emphasis on openness, vulnerability, and responsibility. If the ethical call is not to necessarily understand one another, but to *try to* understand one another, shared reading is a space in which group members can practice heeding that call. Shared reading, when viewed through the lens of Lipari's concept of listening otherwise, becomes not just a reading group, but a relationally attuned and ethically charged space. It invites participants to listen with care and mutual regard, not only to literature but to each other's stories, silences, and selves. This framing suggests that listening is the very medium through which shared reading works. It is not an adjunct to reading, but its relational core.

I propose that four components of shared reading practice facilitate listening otherwise: text as mediator, slow reading aloud, emphasis on affect, and lack of prescribed goal. Each of the facilitators emphasized the important responsibility of text selection. Key criteria were poems or stories that introduce multiple possible meanings and perspectives. These texts help to foster conversation

that does not fall into debate, argument, or even quick agreement. This mediating function creates a buffer that enables deeper, less defensive listening. Group members' everyday worlds are invariably more cacophonous and hurried. Hearing a story or poem voiced aloud, slowly, group members are better able to feel and acknowledge their relations and be open to self, other, and their environment.

Listening is not unidirectional (speaker to listener), but circular, involving text, listener, speaker, silence, and space. The facilitator draws out people's personal and affective responses to the poems and stories – how their experiences and lives are reflected or refracted. Finally, shared reading has no prescribed outcome; group members are not required to listen with a certain agenda or to prepare the right response. Listening otherwise, as enacted through shared reading, enables plural, layered interpretations to exist simultaneously, without need of resolution. This can enable a more generous listening orientation and a greater comfort with discomfort or not-knowing and disrupt complacent thinking and relating.

Concluding Discussion

My conversations with research participants, engagement with theorists, and the resultant clusters of poems reveal liminality and listening otherwise are not isolated, independent elements of shared reading. Each element contributes to the conditions necessary for the others to emerge, and together, they create a living ecology in which relational wellbeing is not only possible but co-produced through the interplay of affective forces. Relational wellbeing is an emergent quality of the shared reading experience, ground in mutual recognition and reflective co-presence. The facilitator, group, and text enter a threshold space of liminality where ordinary roles and

routines are suspended. This liminality supports listening otherwise by suspending conventional dynamics and patterns of interaction. It disorients in a productive way to enable openness to new kinds of experience, insight, and connection. Group members enter an ethical, responsive mode of listening not to evaluate or fix, but to be present to the words (and silences) of the text and one another. Listening otherwise allows for the emergence of complex truth and shared vulnerability; it sustains the ecology by deepening the quality of relations. Creative, collective literary engagement can generate trust, an eagerness to listen deeply, a willingness to risk depth of sharing, and opportunity to both attend and be attended to.

German sociologist and critical theorist Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance, well documented in his monograph *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (published in German in 2016 and translated into English in 2019), offers a powerful lens for understanding the relational wellbeing potential of shared reading. For Rosa, resonance is a mode of engagement with the world that is characterized by a sense of being in tune or attuned with the environment, other people, and oneself. Resonance is not merely an individual experience but *a relational* quality that emerges from the interaction between an individual and their surroundings. It is a harmonious, dynamic, meaningful connection that shifts and evolves as a person moves through different contexts and experiences (2019).

Shared reading's key components (the presence of a rich literary text, a skilled and supportive facilitator, a group of open and non-judgmental participants, and an atmosphere of care) create conditions in which participants may be addressed and may respond; they can be (re)interpreted as the infrastructure of resonance. Its processes of intersubjective engagement, (in)articulation as a catalyst

for new insight, expansion of the boundaries of self, and collective wondering embody the lived enactments of resonance. Furthermore, the poetic inquiry revealed how listening otherwise (Lipari 2009, 2015) emerges within the liminal space of shared reading (Turner 1969, 1987), offering additional specification of how resonance unfolds in practice. When considered through Rosa's framework, shared reading can be understood as a resonant assemblage in which wellbeing is not delivered as an outcome but emerges as a dynamic relational process.

According to Rosa (2019), resonance always involves a relation of appropriation, in which both self and world are changed through the encounter. This dual movement begins with receptive affection - being touched, addressed, or moved by something outside the self, and culminates in responsive emotion and self-efficacy - answering back, responding, or allowing oneself to be transformed. It is the openness to be affected, and the capacity to respond that distinguishes resonance from mere stimulation or instrumental relation.

In shared reading, such processes are evident at multiple levels. On the individual side, participants often reported that a line of literature "spoke to them" in unexpected ways. A phrase could call forth a memory, unsettle an assumption, or articulate something long felt but unexpressed. In responding by sharing their thoughts aloud and by listening otherwise to one another, they did not simply consume the text but allowed themselves to be reshaped by it. This exemplifies the appropriative movement: the text becomes woven into their sense of self, while their interpretive engagement reanimates the text with new significance. The group setting amplifies this dynamic. When participants felt genuinely listened to,

or when their interpretation resonated with others, they not only saw themselves differently but also altered the collective understanding of the text. The literary text itself does not remain static. Each reading, each emphasis, each response extends its life, bringing forth meanings that would otherwise remain latent. The “world” of the text is therefore also transformed and made present in new ways.

Thus, in shared reading, Rosa’s claim that resonance transforms both self and world is borne out. Group members appropriate literature and one another not as inert resources but as responsive presences; in turn, their own subjectivities are altered by this reciprocity. Relational wellbeing can be experienced here not as comfort or affirmation but as the unfolding of a mutual transformation that expands what both the self and the world can become.

Through this work, I have responded to Sarah Atkinson’s (2013) call: “A shift is demanded away from how to enhance the resources for wellbeing centred on individual acquisition and towards attending to the social, material and spatially situated relationships through which individual and collective wellbeing are effected” (142). Importantly, the findings of this study carry suggestions for how (and why) arts-health practitioners and policymakers may likewise respond. By valuing the role of art, literature, and collective practice in generating resonant relations, communities can be supported to create the kinds of relational assemblages that enable individuals not only to survive, but to live well together.

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What do we feel when we read: Interpretation of Results of the Readers' Survey

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Abstract: This study combines reader-response theory, affect theory, and embodied aesthetics to examine how readers engage with the emotional aspects of literature. Taken together, these theories suggest that literary reading is an affective, embodied, and culturally embedded activity. Memories, personal contexts, and bodily responses are integral to the reading process, not just peripheral phenomena. To substantiate these insights, I developed an online survey with six closed-ended questions focusing on aspects of the reading experience: (1) how often readers recall personal memories, (2) whether story or style more significantly influences emotional impact, (3) the persistence of emotional effects, (4) the role of cultural background and life experience, (5) the effect of current events, and (6) whether reading is seen as purely cognitive or also embodied and emotional. The analysis of the survey results reveals several consistent patterns regarding how men and women experience the emotional impact of literary reading.

Keywords: reading experience, survey, emotions, gendered reading, memories

Theoretical standpoint

The present study situates itself at the intersection of reader-response theory, affect theory, and embodied aesthetics in order to explore how readers experience the emotional dimensions of literature. Literature is not only symbolic, but it is also alive and realised through embodied experience. Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique* (2015) stresses the importance of the reader's emotional responses in interpreting meaning. She advocates that literary criticism should go beyond revealing hidden truths and encourage a constructive dialogue with the text, so that the reader's emotions can shape their understanding of the text. From the perspective of reader-response theory, reading is not a unidirectional act of consuming a fixed text but a dynamic interaction between text and reader. Wolfgang Iser's notion of the "implied reader" (*The Act of Reading*, 1978) highlights that literary meaning emerges through the filling of interpretive gaps, an activity shaped by the reader's own experiences. Similarly, Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, 1978) posits that the meaning of a literary work arises in the transaction between a particular reader and a particular text, in a specific context. Within this theoretical framework, recollections of personal memories or associations with lived experience are not peripheral but essential to the literary work's meaning.

Affect theory extends this model by emphasizing how literature generates not only cognitive but also emotional and bodily responses. Marco Caracciolo argues in *The Experientiality of Narrative* (2014) that literature is more than an abstract system of signs - it is an experiential practice influenced by the reader's sensorimotor and cognitive interactions. The idea that narratives are experienced rather

than merely processed supports the notion that readers simulate perceptual and physical experiences rather than simply imagining the worlds of stories (Caracciolo, 100). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Touching Feeling*, 2003) emphasizes the reparative and affective dimensions of reading, highlighting how texts generate intensities that resist purely rational analysis. To develop this further, I will borrow the terminology of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2006), who in his text on aesthetic experience presents what he calls the *presence effects* - chills, atmospheres, or moods that saturate the reader's body in ways that escape semantic explanation - which are intimate feelings, impressions, and images that are produced by our consciousness and that are inaccessible to us in our historically specific everyday world - a content of aesthetic experiences. (Gumbrecht, 2006: 305) Joshua Landy notes that the value of fiction lies not in conveying explicit moral lessons or factual knowledge, but in enhancing and developing our cognitive abilities. In *How to Do Things with Fictions* (2012), he describes certain literary works as "formative fictions" that offer readers mental exercise rather than direct instruction. These works develop essential skills such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and self-reflection. For Landy, the importance of fiction goes beyond its narrative content; it also influences the reader through its structural elements, teaching individuals how to navigate complex ideas, embrace uncertainty, and expand their intellectual capacities, much as exercise strengthens the body. These accounts make visible the embodied dimension of literary response, which is particularly relevant to survey items that explore whether reading is perceived as a purely mental or a bodily-emotional activity.

In reading literature, the expression of emotions occurs through a

complex interplay of cognitive judgment, affective empathy, activation of personal memory, and culturally mediated interpretation. Cognitive theories and neuroaesthetic research demonstrate that readers actively engage with literary texts. In reading, the emotional cues of a text combine with an individual's affective predispositions to create a subjective emotional experience (Lüdtke et al, 2014; Jacobs, 2015). The mood empathy hypothesis assumes that readers not only perceive but also internally replicate the moods expressed in poetry, thereby emphasising the situational and experiential aspects of literary affect (Lüdtke et al., 2014). The appreciation of literature depends on readers' use of knowledge derived from their personal experiences. This cognitive process is called personal resonance. Memories of personal experiences and culturally grounded expectations are fundamental in forming emotional resonance, as highlighted by studies on the activation of autobiographical memories during reading (Larsen and László, 1990). From a cognitive perspective, liking something can activate broader neural networks responsible for emotion regulation and memory retrieval, drawing on deeper personal and cultural schemas (Larsen and László, 1990). Literary studies show that the process of reading can enhance these differentiated experiences. While a well-crafted narrative with its cumulative aesthetic effect can trigger a deep emotional experience, expressions of liking can result from enjoying the style or readability of a text without the deeper emotional commitment associated with love (Hogan, 2011; Papp-Zipernovszky et al., 2021). A deepened emotional experience during reading can lead to lasting emotional experiences that reflect the complexity of love. In contrast, liking is often associated with more superficial processing, where the emotional experience is fleeting and primarily guided by the text's immediate aesthetic qualities (Tilmatine et al.,

2024).

Finally, aesthetic and sociocultural perspectives frame reading as a practice embedded in wider cultural contexts. Arnold Berleant (2005; 2017) develops the concept of *aesthetic engagement*, which stresses that aesthetic experience is participatory, embodied, and socially embedded. Martha Nussbaum (*Poetic Justice*, 1995) argues that literature fosters moral imagination by cultivating empathy, suggesting that cultural background and life experience strongly mediate interpretation. Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984) adds a sociological lens, showing how cultural capital and habitus shape patterns of taste and interpretation. He sees taste as a marker of class (Bourdieu, 1984: 2). Wendy Griswold argues that cultural meanings emerge from the interaction between audiences and cultural objects, which are significantly shaped by their social context. In her article *The Fabrication of Meaning* (1987), she suggests that cultural objects, such as novels, and the individuals who engage with them create a collaborative framework for the development of meaning, not just for its reception.

Taken together, these theories suggest that literary reading is best understood as an affective, embodied, and culturally situated practice. Readers' memories, life contexts, and bodily reactions are not marginal epiphenomena but constitutive of the act of reading itself. This provides a solid conceptual foundation for quantitatively examining demographic differences—especially gender and age—in reported emotional responses to literature.

Empirical structure

The empirical part of this study is based on a quantitative survey

designed to explore how readers describe the emotional and embodied dimensions of literary reading. The survey consisted of six closed-ended questions addressing distinct aspects of reading experience: (1) the frequency of recalling personal memories, (2) the relative importance of story versus style for emotional impact, (3) the presence of lasting emotional effects, (4) the role of cultural background and life experience, (5) the influence of current events, and (6) the perception of reading as a purely cognitive or also an embodied and emotional activity. In addition, participants provided demographic information on gender and age group, which served as independent variables in the analysis.

The survey was distributed online and completed by voluntary participants who read primarily in the Slovenian language. It was completed by 159 participants. While the sample is not representative of the general population, the recurrence of similar patterns in the responses suggests that the data had reached a degree of saturation. In qualitative and survey-based research, such repetition can indicate that the sample is becoming exhausted in terms of variability, meaning that additional participants would likely reinforce existing trends rather than introduce substantially new perspectives. The sample included a range of age groups (18–30, 30–40, 40–50, 50–60, 60–70, 70–80, 80+) and both male and female respondents, with women forming the majority. Regarding the global trends in reading, the gender difference was expected. Multiple studies across diverse populations have consistently shown that women are more likely to read than men, in terms of reading frequency, preference for fiction, and overall book consumption. For example, in the United States, the gender gap in fiction reading remained steady over a decade: in 2022, 46.9% of women but only 27.7% of men read novels or short stories in

the past year (Iyengar, 2025). A 2025 iScience analysis of the American Time Use Survey revealed a persistent difference in leisure reading, with 18.6% of women versus 13.7% of men reading for pleasure (Bone, Sonke, & Fancourt, 2025). Also, other studies around the world (readers from USA, readers from Philippines, International students in China) consistently show that women favor fiction and read for entertainment more often, whereas men lean toward informational genres such as newspapers, biographies, or factual books (Thums, Artelt, & Wolter, 2021; Milal, Jannah, Sa'adah, & Fitria, 2021; Hu et al., 2023). In Slovenia, several editions of the *Knjiga in bralci* surveys shed light on national reading patterns. While neither report provides a direct gender breakdown, they offer insights into reading frequency and book consumption trends. The 2024 edition of the survey showed a modest increase in reading trends: non-readers decreased from 49% to 42%, occasional readers increased, and regular readers remained stable at approximately 13% (Gerčar, Kovač, Blatnik, & Rugelj, 2024). It also showed that fiction for adults remains the most commonly read genre among leisure readers, followed by practical and factual literature. Although the Slovenian data does not yet differentiate by gender, the sustained prevalence of fiction among readers suggests that, aligning with broader international trends, women may again comprise the larger share of fiction readers. Future editions of the *Knjiga in bralci* surveys (survey is held every five years) with gender-disaggregated data would be valuable for confirming this hypothesis.

To explore gendered differences in emotional responses to literature, the survey data underwent quantitative cross-tabulation and descriptive analysis. Responses were first extracted and organized into categorical variables representing six thematic areas: memories,

emotional impact, lasting effects, cultural background, influence of current events, and nature of reading. The data were then grouped by gender to allow comparative analysis of responses. Then I created data visualizations to identify patterns across questions. This approach allowed for the detection of both subtle and obvious gender differences, such as women's stronger association of reading with emotion and embodiment versus men's tendency to see reading as a cognitive activity. I interpreted percentages qualitatively within the context of the theoretical framework, rather than as population estimates, since the sample was non-representative and voluntarily composed. This combined statistical and interpretive method provided a solid empirical foundation for connecting quantitative patterns to theoretical ideas. This design enables us to bring empirical evidence to longstanding debates about whether literary reading is primarily cognitive or affective, disembodied or embodied, universal or culturally situated.

The results

The analysis of the survey results revealed several consistent patterns regarding how men and women experience the emotional impact of literary reading. Although the dataset is not representative of the general population, it provides sufficient grounds to identify meaningful trends within the sample.

A first area of difference emerged in the responses to the question of whether readers recall personal memories when moved by a literary work. Both men and women frequently reported this phenomenon. However, women were somewhat more likely to select the option "*always*", whereas men more often opted for "*sometimes*". This suggests that autobiographical memory plays a key role for both

genders, but women tend to draw on personal associations more consistently. This pattern implies that women might engage in a more introspective reading style, where literary experience becomes linked with self-reflection and personal stories. The finding aligns with Rosenblatt’s transactional theory (1978), which views reading as a reciprocal process where the text and the reader’s lived experience work together to create meaning. According to Rosenblatt, the reader’s affective and experiential background serves as an interpretive lens that highlights certain aspects of the text while downplaying others. Similarly, Iser’s concept of “filling the gaps” (1978) highlights the reader’s active role in completing unclear parts of the text through imagination and memory. In this context, the greater use of autobiographical memory among women can be seen as a form of aesthetic participation—transforming reading into a deeply personal, emotionally engaging experience.

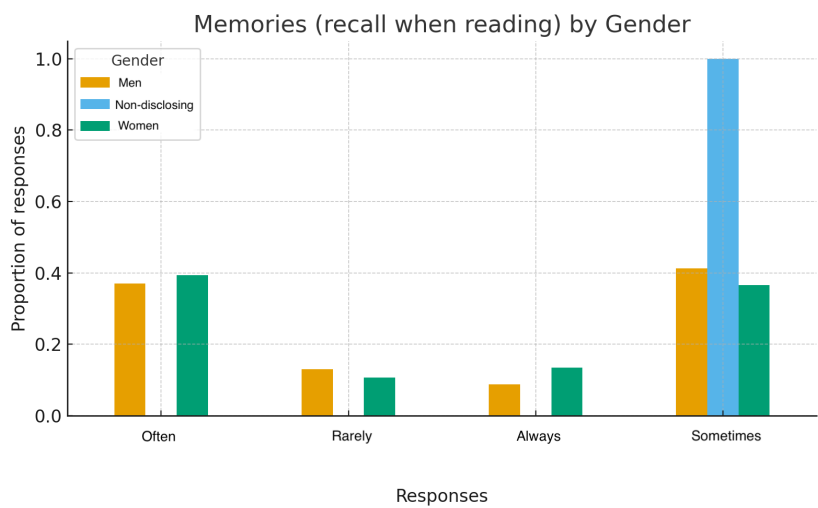


Figure 1: Memories when reading

A more noticeable gender difference was seen in responses to the

question about the source of emotional impact—whether it stems primarily from the story or from the style. Women tended to emphasize “both equally”, indicating a balance between narrative content and aesthetic form. Men, by contrast, leaned more heavily toward “story”, privileging plot and events over stylistic qualities. This difference shows a subtle but meaningful distinction in how men and women perceive the mechanisms of literary affect. Women’s balanced responses may indicate a heightened sensitivity to the interplay between what is told and how it is told. Men’s stronger focus on story may reflect a more linear and content-oriented engagement, where affect is derived chiefly from narrative progression or identification with events and characters. These differences can be understood through Bourdieu’s (1984) framework of cultural dispositions, suggesting that interpretive preferences may reflect broader, socially constructed orientations toward cultural goods. The tendency to value form and texture alongside content suggests a cultivated mode of reading. At the same time, Sedgwick’s (2003) notion of *reparative reading*, a form of attention oriented toward texture, nuance, and affective possibility, resonates with the female pattern of integrating form and content. This reparative orientation situates emotional reading as an act of openness rather than mastery, allowing literature to be experienced as a dynamic aesthetic event rather than a closed narrative structure.

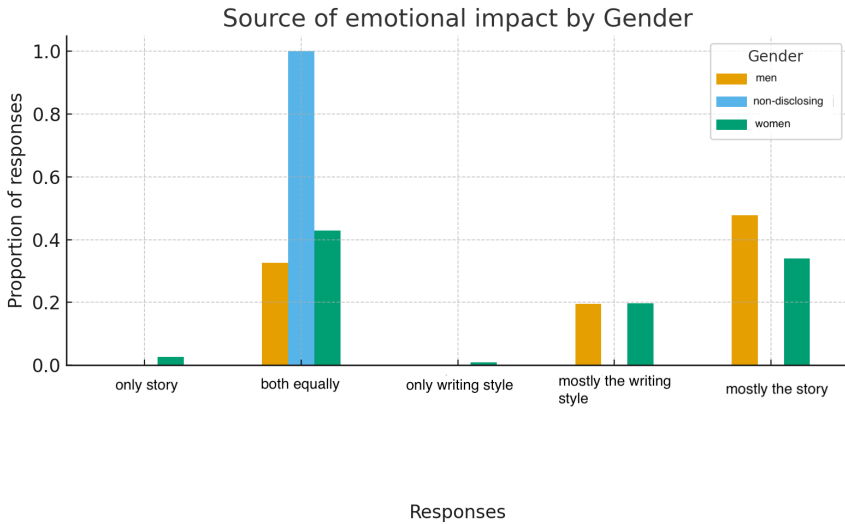


Figure 2: Source of emotional impact

When asked about lasting emotional effects, both genders responded mostly positively, with 92% of women and 89% of men indicating that a literary work left lasting traces on their mood, perspective, or thinking. Here, the gender gap was minimal, suggesting that literature’s long-term transformative power is broadly shared across demographic groups. The widespread acknowledgment of such enduring effects, regardless of gender, highlights literature’s ability to serve as a shared emotional medium—one that connects readers through feelings and reflections that extend beyond the reading experience. In this way, literature becomes both a personal and collective space of transformation, where emotional experiences are linked with ethical and existential growth. This aligns with Gumbrecht’s (2006) idea of presence effects, where literature creates atmospheres, moods, and emotional intensities that last beyond the act of reading and stay embedded in daily life. These effects show literature’s ability to generate not just

fleeting emotional responses but also ongoing emotional impressions—lingering feelings that influence the reader’s continuous view of the world. This also matches Laundy’s (2012) idea of “formative fictions,” where he sees literature as mental exercise rather than direct teaching. This way of reading helps develop critical skills, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness.

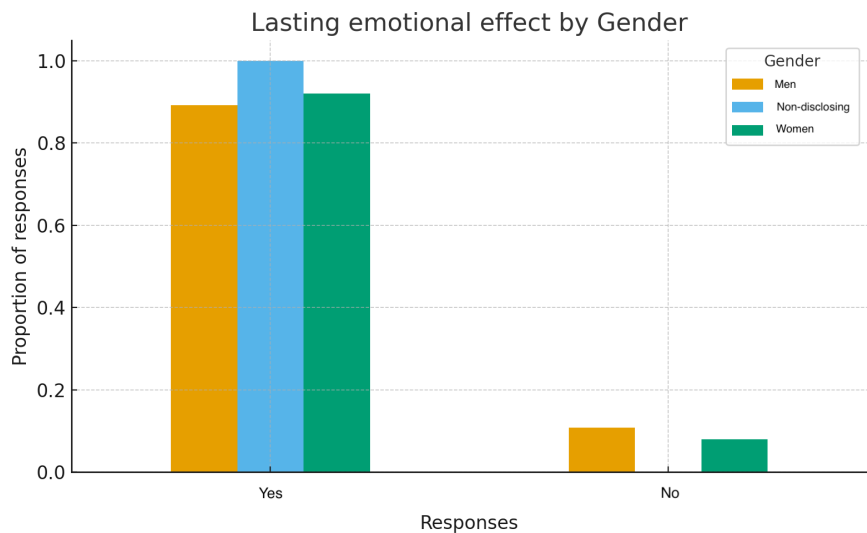


Figure 3: Lasting emotional effect

By contrast, sharper distinctions re-emerged in relation to cultural background and current events. Women more often answered that their cultural and personal contexts strongly influenced how they interpreted a text, while men were more likely to downplay these factors. Similarly, women tended to perceive contemporary events—whether domestic or global—as shaping their reading experiences more than men did. This suggests that women situate literature more readily within broader socio-cultural frames, whereas men more frequently treat it as an autonomous object of interpretation. Such

results directly engage with Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of habitus, which explains how cultural background shapes patterns of interpretation, and with Berleant’s (2005, 2017) notion of aesthetic engagement as a relational process embedded in context. The gendered variation underscores that recognition of cultural embeddedness itself may be a socially shaped disposition. This finding also situates women’s responses closer to what Sedgwick (2003) calls reparative reading, a mode attuned to external contexts and affective resonances. By contrast, men’s responses reflect a more autonomous or formalist stance, treating literature as separate from current realities. These orientations reflect a long-standing tension in literary theory between contextualist and text-centered approaches, here manifested in gendered reading practices.

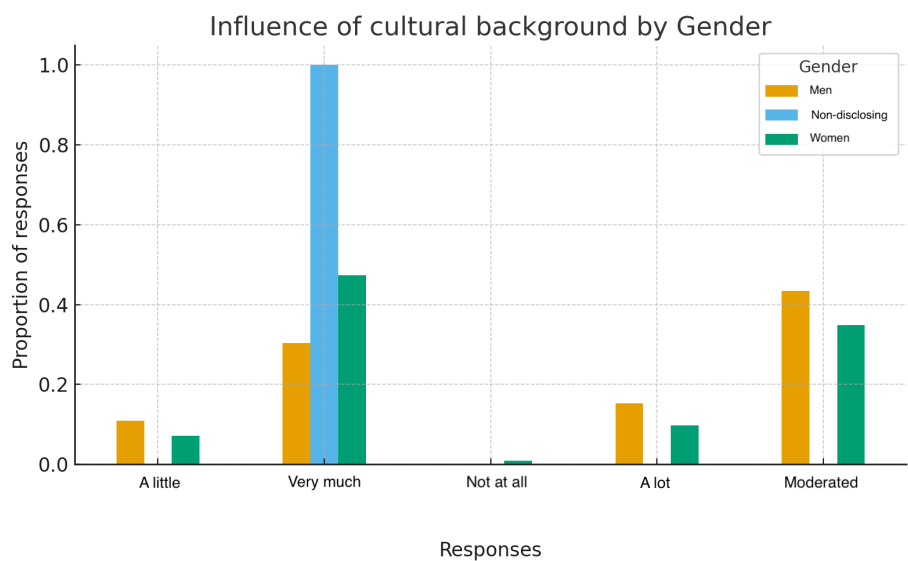


Figure 4: Influence of cultural background

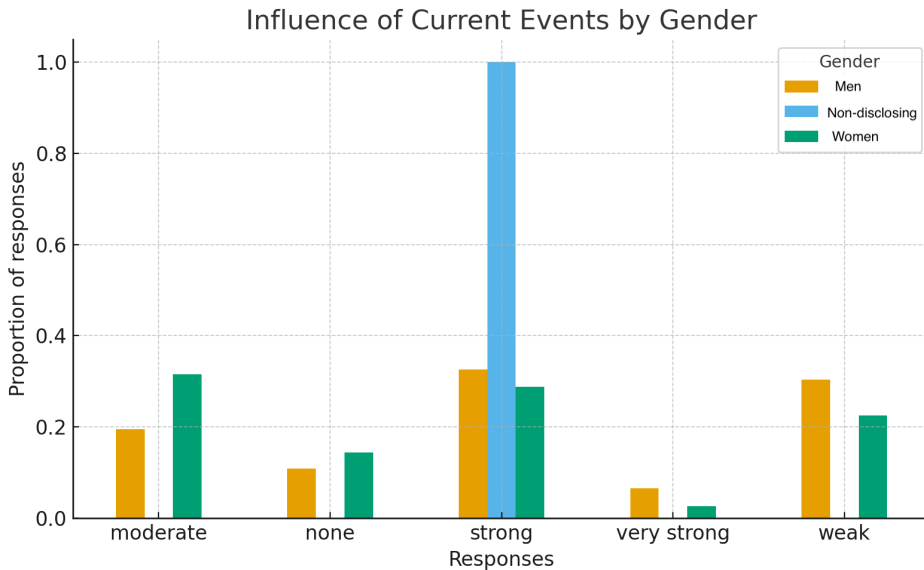


Figure 5: Influence of cultural events

The divergence appeared in responses to the final question on the nature of reading. Women in the sample were more likely to describe reading as either balanced—combining cognitive, emotional, and bodily dimensions—or as mostly emotional/physical. Men also tended to frame reading as a mostly balanced activity. However, they were more often emphasizing intellectual engagement over affective or embodied responses. This divergence resonates with the theoretical perspectives of reader-response and affect theory. Rosenblatt's transactional model (1978) underscores that meaning emerges through the interplay of text and reader, including emotional and experiential input, while Sedgwick (2003) and Gumbrecht (2006) highlight how affective intensities and presence effects are constitutive of reading rather than incidental. The tendency of women to report reading as balanced or embodied supports these frameworks by showing how readers themselves

articulate literature as more than a mental exercise—it is a felt, situated practice. Conversely, the male tendency to privilege cognition aligns more closely with a traditional, text-centered view of literature, echoing Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of cultural dispositions that shape interpretive stances. Taken together, the results suggest that gendered orientations toward reading reflect broader theoretical debates: whether literature is to be understood primarily as a cognitive object or as an embodied, affective, and socio-cultural event.

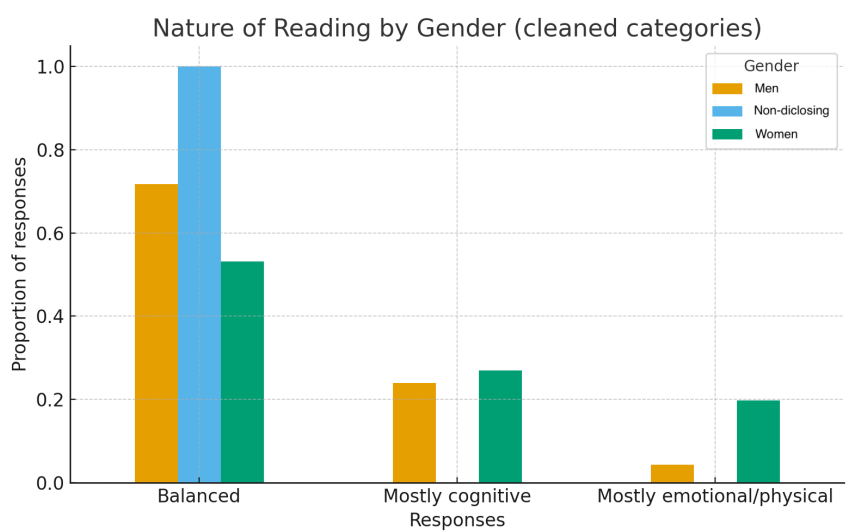


Figure 6: Nature of reading

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that literary reading is not just a mental exercise but also an emotional, embodied, and contextually grounded activity. The survey responses show that readers consistently rely on autobiographical memory, experience deep emotional resonances, and see literature as intertwined with their

cultural backgrounds and current realities. These findings align closely with reader-response theory, which highlights the interactive relationship between reader and text (Rosenblatt, Iser), and with affect theory, which emphasizes the physical and emotional aspects of engaging with literature (Sedgwick, Gumbrecht, Caracciolo). They also support aesthetic and sociocultural theories (Berleant, Nussbaum, Bourdieu, Griswold), which argue that meaning develops within social and cultural environments and is influenced by dispositions and embodied participation.

Gendered patterns in the survey responses further clarify these theoretical claims. Women in the sample tended to balance cognitive, emotional, and embodied perspectives, framing literature within broader social and cultural contexts and describing literary reading as an experience that simultaneously involves thought, feeling, and sensory engagement. Their answers often positioned literature within wider social, cultural, and ethical frameworks, indicating an understanding of reading as a practice that is both personally affecting and socially significant. Men, on the other hand, more frequently adopted a primarily cognitive approach, viewing reading as an intellectual or analytical activity focused on comprehension and interpretation rather than emotional immersion. These perspectives reflect long-standing theoretical debates—whether literature should be approached as an autonomous, text-focused object, as argued in formalism and structuralism, or as a lived, emotionally charged, and socially embedded practice, as argued by reader-response, affect theory, and cultural aesthetics. The survey results demonstrate that contemporary reading practices cannot be easily categorized into purely cognitive or purely emotional domains. Instead, they occupy a continuum of interpretive approaches shaped by socialization,

education, and personal experience. The findings thus call for a reevaluation of literary engagement as a diverse and interconnected practice, where cognition and affect, autonomy and context, coexist in a dynamic tension rather than mutually exclude each other.

The implications go beyond this study. For reading practices, the results emphasize the importance of recognizing emotion and embodiment as central to interpretation, encouraging readers to engage with texts not only analytically but also with openness to emotional and personal resonance. For teaching, they promote pedagogical strategies that build links between literature, students' real-life experiences, and contemporary cultural events, thereby cultivating empathy, critical self-reflection, and moral imagination. For literary analysis, they support moving past purely critical or cognitive approaches toward methods that incorporate emotional, embodied, and sociocultural aspects. This approach not only enhances our understanding of literature's influence but also redefines reading as a crucial practice for intellectual, emotional, and ethical development.

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Part III Social and technological aspects

Virginia Woolf and the New Common Reader

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Abstract: In 1925 and 1932 respectively, Virginia Woolf published two volumes of essays titled *The Common Reader*, designed to make an array of literatures comprehensible to ordinary readers. These volumes were compiled when the growth industry of literary criticism was gaining in traction and influence with elite periodicals defining highbrow against middle and lowbrow literature in what is commonly referred to as the ‘Battle of the Brows’. Woolf, a highbrow, was among those who were deeply critical of sought after, mass produced popular fiction, made widely accessible through new print technologies to a rapidly growing reading public born of nineteenth-century educational reforms. A century later, new technologies in social media, alongside a renewed interest in reading cultivated during the COVID-19 pandemic, has amounted to an ever-expanding reading public whose interest in popular fiction has been subjected to the same harsh criticism. The term ‘middlebrow’ – not coined by Woolf, but widely associated with how she defined it in an unsent letter to *The New Statesman* – has re-entered discourse describing readerships that closely resemble a significant sector of online ‘Bookish’ communities. Considering the striking parallels between then and now, Woolf’s definitions of what it means to be ‘a common reader’ and ‘middlebrow’ provide a useful starting point for

interrogating critical responses to contemporary readers and reading practices. Drawing on an overview of current social media trends on BookTok (one of the largest subcommunities on TikTok), opens avenues for exploring what it means to be middlebrow and a common reader today, and how this aligns with and differs from Woolf's definitions, showing the historical continuity of how reading communities are formed, how readerships are categorised and critiqued, and their influence on literary production and literary criticism.

Keywords: Reading, Social Media, Modernism, Middlebrow, BookTok

1. Introduction

Interwar Britain was a period of rapid change, culturally, technologically, socially and politically. The Labour college movement, building on the nineteenth-century educational reforms that had rapidly expanded the reading public, increased education for the working classes, and advancements in print technology made a wider variety of literatures accessible across class lines. The gatekeepers of culture – the highly educated critics, literary scholars, and literary elites – clashed with the common reading public fuelling the demand for mass-produced popular fiction, and whose tastes and preferences threatened to unsettle the divide between high and low culture. This tense moment of cultural debate is commonly referred to as the Battle of Brows.

A century later, new technologies in social media, coupled with a renewed interest in reading cultivated during the COVID-19 pandemic, have rapidly expanded and continue to expand the

reading public. Millions of readers, seeking connection, have transformed an ordinarily solitary activity into a foundation for community building (Attridge 2021; Wiederhold 2022; Puolakka 2022). These 'Bookish' communities can be found on Instagram (Bookstagram), YouTube (BookTube), and on more reading-focused websites and apps like Goodreads and Fable. The most expansive is concentrated in one of the largest subcommunities on TikTok: BookTok. The contemporary reading masses, like their interwar counterparts, have had a significant impact on literary sales and production. Over 52 million posts, garnering 370 billion views by January 2025, reintroduced and re-popularised older titles like Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015), while rapidly elevating debut novels like Lottie Hazell's *Piglet* (2024) to bestseller status (Accio Business, 2025).

Concerns about the consequences of innovations in how the public accesses the written word can be traced as far back as 370BC, when Plato warned that the invention of writing will produce "forgetfulness", and those who read will "entertain the delusion that they have wide knowledge, while they are, in fact, for the most part incapable of real judgement" (1956, 68-69). In recent decades, scholars sounded an alarm on the impact of digital reading on critical thinking, attention and deep reading (Birkerts 1994; Carr 2010; Wolf 2018; Gordon 2023). The marked change in reading practices since 2020 has re-energised interest in exploring the drawbacks and benefits of social reading online (Pianzola 2024; Birke 2021; Puolakka 2022).

Scholarship produced against the backdrop of digital panic tends to pivot on the effects of changes in the *practice* of reading. Reading as

practice does feature in the critiques of BookTok, but these discussions extend beyond digital reading. These are cultural debates about what constitutes high and low literary culture, what should be published, what should be read, and who should be recommending it. The Battle of the Brows, relatively subdued until now, has been reinvigorated with unprecedented intensity in scholarship and the media, with the term 'middlebrow' re-entering discourse to describe readerships that closely resemble a significant sector of Bookish communities online.

The definition of 'middlebrow' is constantly in flux, and scholarship on it is broad. It is widely accepted that it was coined in the 1920s (Chowrimootoo 2018; Jaillant 2014; Driscoll 2014; Humble 2001). This claim is typically accompanied by a reference to *Punch, or the London Charivari's* short note in their 23 December 1925 edition about "a new type, the 'middlebrow'" (673). Others cite the appearance of 'middlebrow' in "A Musical Renaissance", published in the *Freeman's Journal* on 3 May 1924 (Freeman's, 6; Macdonald 2011, 7; Driscoll 2014, 7). There are, however, earlier uses. Keble Howard writes about the middlebrow, highbrow and lowbrow in "Motley Notes" printed in *The Sketch* on 27 October 1920 (38), and the 23 March 1916 edition of *Bioscope* discusses highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow audiences in "Pictures and the Public" (1235). *Bioscope* uses the word without explaining it, which suggests that it was already familiar to their readership.

Generally speaking, 'middlebrow' signified a position between high and low culture, or "someone with high intellectual or aesthetic aspirations, but who lacked the cultural capital necessary to understand high art" (Jaillant, 2014, 5). A constant in scholarship on

the Battle of the Brows is mention of Virginia Woolf's definition in "Middlebrow" (1932), that they are of "middlebred intelligence", preoccupied with fame, money, and social esteem. They occupy a cultural middle ground, lacking the authenticity of the lowbrow and the intellectual refinement of the highbrow (1966, 198-199). Woolf's definition haunts criticism of Bookish communities, thought to privilege the aesthetics and commercialisation of reading, the accumulation or commodification of books, social capital, and middlebrow novels over classic literature and deep, critical reading. BookTok users have been accused of misreading classic literature, ruining literature (Marsden, 2024), ruining reading (O'Regan-Reidy 2024, Sinha 2024, De Melo 2024), and affecting readers' intelligence by exposing them to "a combination of unimaginative novels, unnuanced marketing tactics and a readership that is continually growing more intolerant to complex thought processes" (Madruga, 2024).

Whether explicitly stated or implied, the pattern that emerges in these critiques is that they correlate intellectual capacity and reading practices, posit that there is a right and a wrong way to read, and assign value to the ability to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' literature. These are all ideas that Woolf wrote about over the course of her career. In "How Should One Read a Book" (1935) she proposes that "reading is a complex art". To read, "you must be capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination if you are going to make use of all that the novelist – the great artist – gives you" (1959, 260-261). In an earlier version of the essay, published in the *Yale Review*, she writes, "We have to remember that it is one of the qualities of greatness that it brings heaven and earth and human nature into conformity with its own vision. It is by reason of

this masterliness of theirs, this uncompromising idiosyncrasy, that great writers often require us to make heroic efforts in order to read them rightly. They bend us and break us" (1926). The revised version of "How to Read a Book" was included in the second of two essay collections titled *The Common Reader*.

Both collections comprise discussion of and judgements applied by Woolf to a range of literatures. Her essays were, according to Melba Cuddy-Keane, designed to "scrutinize the process of reading, to locate reading in a context of historically and ideologically variable standards, and to outline a model for active, self-reflexive reading practices" (2003, 1). As Cuddy-Keane and others understand it, *The Common Reader* is "empowering and pedagogical: Woolf's penetrating readings make a vast range of literature accessible...they also offer the tools for readers to gain that access for themselves" (2003, 1). But, although Woolf encouraged readers to "follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions," she also made clear that the common reader was only empowered insofar as they learned to read without impunity, and to distinguish between what was and was not worthy of attention and preservation (1959, 258). In "The Leaning Tower," read to the Worker's Educational Association in May 1940, she makes clear that "We have got to teach ourselves to understand literature...we must teach ourselves to distinguish - which is the book that is going to pay dividends of pleasure forever; which is the book that will pay not a penny in two years' time?" (1966, 180-181). The literature that Woolf promoted, and sought to make accessible, was limited to what she and other highbrows, approved of.

The Common Reader encouraged the development of a certain *kind* of reader, different from the reader common when Woolf published the first series in 1925, and the second in 1932 – incidentally, the same year that she wrote “Middlebrow”. The *First Series* begins with a reference to Samuel Johnson’s “Life of Gray” in which he describes the reader as governed by “common sense” and “uncorrupted with literary prejudices” (*Lives of the English Poets* 1925, 392). Woolf, like Johnson, “[rejoiced] to concur with the common reader” because he “differs from the critic and the scholar” and “reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others” (1925, 1). Woolf explains that if Johnson’s claims are true, she and other autodidacts without a formal education are justified in recording their responses to the books that they are reading and have read. Elizabeth Madison argues that “emphasis here is on the reader’s creative involvement in the world and his subsequent derivation from that involvement kind of whole – an insight into the author’s personality, apprehension of the historical elements reflected in the literature, or an awareness of the characteristics of the genre. And in practice, each of the essays concentrates on one of these aspects” (Madison, 1981, 62-63). Ultimately, the common reader whom Woolf was most interested in was herself, noting in her first reference to a “Reading Book” in her diaries, “the more I read of other people’s criticism the more I trifle; can’t decide; nor need I just yet. But how I enjoy the exercise of my wits upon literature – reading it as literature. And I think I can do this the better for having read through such a lot of lives, criticisms, every sort of thing” (1978, 120). In her initial description of a common reader, they are only capable of piecing together a “rickety and ramshackle fabric” out of the odds and ends that they collect in an attempt to construct a whole (1925, 1). What follows is a collection of essays that do the opposite, and despite

Woolf's concurrence with the common reader, she encourages them to follow her example. Although it may differ in some respects from formal literary criticism (even Woolf notes the underlying formality in her style), there is nothing rickety or ramshackle in Woolf's critical method. The essays develop the common reader into an *uncommon* reader who can, despite their lack of education, move past their deficiencies to positively and productively contribute to literary culture.

The true common readers of Woolf's time, "uncorrupted with literary prejudices", "snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or of what nature it may be", and reading for pleasure alone, were the middlebrows that she despised. Woolf, in her interpretation of Johnson's idea, moves from "the *common sense* of readers" to an "*instinct* to create for *himself*" (emphasis mine, 1). The difference is slight, but important. Instinct is an inherent aptitude or impulse in an individual. Woolf's common reader is solitary, introspective and consumed by literature, or as she put it in a letter to Ethyl Smyth, "the state of reading consists in the complete elimination of the *ego*" (Woolf 1982, 319). In contrast, common sense is socially (communally) constructed and learned.

The common reader today – the new common reader – can be found on social media. They are driven to read by common sense, with the broad reading habits of the middlebrow (a category taken here as positive). They develop a subjectivity in relation to the common and the individual experience of the common. The common in this sense is a community of 'common reading subjects' who, like Woolf, are autodidacts but develop a sense of themselves and others as 'readers' premised on, in Rancierian terms, an equality of intelligence. An

overview of current social media trends on BookTok, paired with Beth Driscoll's useful "Eight Defining Features of the Middlebrow" in *The New Literary Middlebrow* (2014) provides insight into what it means to be middlebrow and a common reader over a century after Woolf published her essay collections. How this aligns with and differs from her definitions, and how the language of the Browns influenced and continues to influence how we think and talk about literature, is central to uncovering how reading communities are and were formed, how readerships are categorised and critiqued, and their influence on literary production and literary criticism.

2. Female and Feminised

In the interwar period, elite periodicals like *The New Statesman* defined highbrow against middle and lowbrow literature, erecting barriers around what should and should not be considered high art. Self-proclaimed defender of the intellectual, T.S. Eliot, "despised the development of a thriving market in escapist and entertaining reading matter" (Humble 2001, 28). Woolf was deeply critical of sought after, mass produced popular fiction, or as she called it "the middlebrow version of what they have the impudence to call real humanity...this mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calf's foot jelly" (1966, 200). In *The Common Reader*, she permits a degree of "rubbish-reading" in "How Should One Read a Book" (*The Common Reader: Second Series*). By "rubbish reading" she does not mean contemporary popular fiction. She refers to the pleasure of reading "half-truth" in non-fiction like Tate Wilkinson's four-volume *Memoirs of My Own Life* (1739-1803), concluding that "we tire of rubbish-reading in the long run" (1959, 263-264). Woolf's arguments about reading "books written to escape

from the present moment, and its meanness and sordidity," were primarily illustrated by texts written before the twentieth-century (1959, 263). In "The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia" (*The Common Reader: Second Series*) she moves from an account of the sensory joy that she experiences when first taking up Sir Philip Sydney's prose pastoral romance, *Arcadia* (late 16th Century), to her loss of interest which she justifies with a more technical account of the deficits in the writing, plot and characterisation. Typical of her instructional method, Woolf does not tell the reader what to think, instead modelling her reading practice. She *shows* how best to sift through the rubbish pile and draw the correct conclusions.

In her critique of early twentieth-century fiction, "Modern Fiction" (*The Common Reader: First Series*), she does not overtly state her aversion to middlebrow novels, rather using the examples of H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett to signal her distaste for middlebrow narrative form. The writer, she says, is "constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability...The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn" (61). In "Middlebrow" she is more direct. She tries to read a middlebrow book, finds it "not well written; nor is it badly written...it is betwixt and between," before tossing it out of a window. She explains to her "friends the lowbrows" that she, or rather "we, the highbrows, never buy a middlebrow book, or go to a middlebrow lecture, or read, unless we are paid for doing so, a middlebrow review" (200). The 'tyrant' in Woolf's formulation is the limitations placed on the author by novelistic conventions, but it is also the reader whose tastes and preferences sustain these conventions.

In affronts on the middlebrow, the tyrant, both the reader and literary convention, is “female and feminized” (Driscoll 2014, 29). Middlebrow literature “is often produced and disseminated and overwhelmingly consumed by women” (2014, 29). Historically, women have participated in large numbers in writing, reading and popularising the novel as a literary form. From its development in the eighteenth-century, through to the twentieth-century, those concerned with the state of the arts marked it as not only inferior to the higher art of poetry, but dangerous in that it “was apt to corrupt the mind with romantic ideas and with flights of imagination that diverted attention from the demands of real life” (Korsmeyer, 2004, 69). BookTok’s demographics are dominated by young women, reading and popularising middlebrow novels written by and for women (Dera 2024). The bestselling BookTok titles in 2024 were written by women, including Emily Henry’s genre romance *Funny Story* (2024), Sarah J. Maas’ romantasy *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015), and Liz Moore’s mystery-thriller *The God of the Woods* (2024). The romance has retained a privileged place in middlebrow genre fiction for well over a century, because, as Pamela Regis explains, “the Romance is the most female of popular genres. Nearly all of the writers and readers are women” (2003, xii).

Content creators on BookTok have noticed the gender bias in critiques of the community. Kehinde (@kehindeslibrary) asks, “What exactly does it mean to be well-read?”:

I have seen a lot of debates [on BookTok and in the media] but the everlasting debate that keeps on showing up is anti-intellectualism and how BookTok has ruined the publishing industry and ruined books. And, whenever people talk about this, they often associate it

to the romance genre, which really, really does annoy me because I feel like the unnecessary hatred of the romance genre is rooted in internalised misogyny (2024).

One of her followers, 'Belinda', comments, "Spot on! It really is rooted in misogyny because more women are into reading now and their genre of choice happens to be romance" (2024). @books&Stuff added that the "establishment/culture-makers use terms like [well-read and anti-intellectual] to exclude people from being considered smart/educated" (2024). Andrew Moore, a professor of literature who posts as @greatbooksprof notes that "the perceived 'threat' to literature or the 'commodification' of literature seems to take the form of women reading. The implicit formula seems to be if too many women are interested in reading, it will somehow 'ruin' literature" (pers. comm., June 19, 2025). He compares BookTok to 'Oprah's Book Club' in the 1990s, which cultural gatekeepers found similarly unsettling.

One of the primary differences between BookTok and Oprah's Book Club, Book of the Month Clubs and other middlebrow literary networks, is that the subcommunity is one of the largest on a platform with over 2 billion registered users. The sheer volume of BookTok content is distributed across for-you-pages, which not only makes *what* women are reading visible to the wider public, it shows, through recordings of reader response and reviews, *how* they are reading, and the emphasis that they place on "emotional connections with literary works" in keeping with the sentimental tone of the middlebrow reading practices (Driscoll 2014, 32). The emphasis on subjective reading and authentic, emotional reading experiences has

been effective in sustaining engagement, and increasing the impact of Bookish communities on literary production.

3. The Sentimental Tyrant

Emotional connections with literary works are central to the “constant tension between art and commerce” that Driscoll attributes to middlebrow literary culture. BookTok is “implicated in commercial distribution networks,” and makes explicit the connection between writers, readers and the intermediaries who present literary works to the public” (Driscoll 2014, 23-25). With some exceptions, the majority of content creators are new common readers who do not have degrees in literary studies, or training as literary critics, and yet they wield remarkable influence on the publishing industry.

The content on BookTok is designed to elicit an emotional response from the viewer, urging them to read and buy the book – a method that has contributed to the growth in sales of trending genres, most recently hybrid-genres like Romantasy (Accio Business 2025; Martens et al. 2022; De Melo 2024; Reddan et al. 2024; Dera 2024). Publishing houses, sensing the commercial benefits of this approach to promoting new and older titles, have capitalised on what Lyndsay Thomas identifies as “long-standing associations between consumer culture and femininity” and, citing Sarah Brouillette, “the feminization of work in the publishing industry,” where unpaid labour by readers and writers drive profits (2023). Penguin Random House has partnered with TikTok to introduce a Book Tagging Feature that invites content creators to link their videos to the book under discussion. The link takes viewers to a page populated with more tagged videos and information. According to Penguin marketing, the

Tagging Feature is designed to cultivate “a natural forum where users can engage with others interested in the same books.” They play on readers’ emotional engagement by emphasising that it can be used to “connect on a deeper level” (Castaneda, 2022). Penguin, HarperCollins, and Pan Macmillan have curated ‘BookTok Books’ pages on their websites. On a smaller scale, BookTok provides authors with the opportunity to directly interact with their readers. They can promote their work, including self-published work, on a free, far-reaching platform, thereby bypassing publishing houses and the need for endorsement from an authoritative reviewer-critic.

The notion that reading has become commercialised goes hand-in-hand with the accusation that reading on BookTok is a solely aesthetic activity (O'Regan-Reidy, 2024; Sinha, 2024). Claims that Bookish communities are more concerned with the aesthetics of being a reader than actually reading, are supported with examples of videos in which content creators act out reader response (crying, contemplating, horrified, bemused), browse bookstores, share book hauls, show off new editions with pleasing covers, set up reading nooks, or give tours of well-stocked personal libraries. Personal libraries range from haphazard displays spanning genres, to more orderly collections dedicated solely to a specific genre, or organised by genre or trope.

Part of Woolf’s vexation with the middlebrow is that he or she “ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” (1966, 199). Aesthetic trend-based content on BookTok, and the accompanying hashtags designed for Search Engine

Optimisation, stand a higher chance of registering with TikTok's algorithm, increasing visibility, engagement (connecting with like-minded readers), and attracting followers (fame and prestige), which in turn increases the potential for content creators to benefit financially through paid partnerships (money). Jasmine Rusady, identifying an increase in books built around tropes like 'enemies-to-lovers', attributes an increase in novels "written and marketed as if they are made for BookTok, manufactured to fit the app's specific audience and trends" to the aestheticisation of reading – how it is depicted, but also in the fixation on certain aesthetic trends in writing (2024).

The idea that the commodification of books and the aestheticisation of reading is a recent social-media-driven phenomenon is, as with many of the critiques of BookTok, a nostalgic longing for an imagined golden age of reading, and a failure to historicise. Richard de Bury's *Philobiblon* (1345), a collection of essays published in the 14th Century, is largely dedicated to the mere love of books, to acquiring them, justifying the time and money spent on them, and gifting them. Reading was aestheticised in paintings by Édouard Manet, Alfred Stevens, Robert Delaunay, Sir John Lavery, and others long before it was aestheticised on social media. Portraits of nobles like Sir Joshua Reynolds' painting of Dorothy Vaughan, Countess of Lisburne, often featured books to signify intellect, wealth, and social status, as did the well-stocked personal libraries of the upper classes, even if many of the books they contained were never read. In her study of marginalia in books owned and written by modernists, Amanda Golden finds that many had display copies of works to be seen and not read, such as Evelyn Waugh's edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, bound in leather, with marbled boards, and gold lettering on the spine (2020, 8). E.M Forster

shares the pleasure that he derives from owning books, lending and borrowing them, and how he ordered (or rather, did not properly order) his library in "In My Library" (1949). In the shift towards consumer culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, books were among the first items purchased using consumer credit (Striphas 2009, 8). Cultivating and showing off personal libraries signalled affluence.

The mass production of books built around specific tropes is similarly not a recent phenomenon. Edith Maud Hull's 'enemies to lovers' desert romance *The Sheik* (1919), reissued in 108 editions in Britain alone, was one of the most widely read romance novels of the 1920s. Publisher Mills & Boon, hoping to capitalise on Hull's success, produced their own line of 'desert romances' beginning with Louise Gerard's *A Sultan's Slave* in 1921. Travel writer, Rosita Forbes, "couldn't resist the temptation to cash in on the popular desert romance genre" with *Quest: The Story of Anne, Three Men and Some Arabs* (1922), *If the Gods Laugh* (1925), and *Sirocco* (1927) (Teo, 2012, 82). Kathlyn Rhodes wrote an astonishing number of desert romances, including *Under Desert Stars* (1921), *Desert Lovers* (1922), *A Desert Cain and Other Stories* (1922), *Desert Justice* (1923), and *Allah's Gift* (1933). These works were marketed as 'desert romances' so that readers who enjoyed these tropes knew what to expect between the covers.

What is often overlooked is that, outside of their commercial affordances, trends form part of community-building. The appeal of producing content that shows familiarity with Bookish culture and aesthetics aligns with Andrew Piper's view that although "we largely read in isolation today...we still wish for commonality when it comes to reading" (83). He identifies three intersecting ideas that illustrate

what brings BookTok communities together: Commonality (“We want other people to read the same thing we are reading”); Transferability (“we want to be able to send other people what we are reading”), and Sociability (“we want to be able to talk to other people about what we are reading”) (2012, 83). As I argue elsewhere, these communities are informal and unstructured: “Interaction can be generative (making content), passive (viewing content) or interactive (reposting content, commenting on content and talking to others, including the content creator, in comments threads)”, all of which are activities centred on communal participation (Timlin, 2025, 8:22). Piper notes that “Reading is never purely an act of isolation. When we read, we enter into a world of commonality, whether of language, story, or material object. Reading socializes” because we “form social bonds through our reading material” (2012, 84).

While there might be commercial and community-building incentives to produce certain types of content and read certain BookTok books, the community would not be sustainable if there was no pleasure in reading and interacting outside of financial or social gain. Assumptions that readers on BookTok are only concerned with the aesthetics of being a reader, or that they conform blindly to trends, homogenises the community. They become the reading masses, not individuals with agency who form part of a larger, diverse network of readers with different preferences and opinions. Those who seek out particular tropes do so because, despite the repetition and predictability, they find them entertaining. The majority of content on BookTok is not created by authors, publishers, distributors, or influencers (Thomas 2023). It is posted by readers who want to talk to other readers about what they are reading and, contrary to the prevailing narrative, this includes canonical literature and critically

acclaimed contemporary works. Those like speech pathology student, Trish Parkinson, review books like Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with the same care and consideration as Evie Dunmore's historical romance, *A Rogue of One's Own* (2020). As she explains it, "I read classic fiction because I believe it's foundational to the books we have today. Many of the tropes I love in modern fiction can be traced back to classic works...I also love reading popular fiction because it's a great way to unwind...For me, reading is the perfect hobby because it can both educate and entertain" (pers. comm., February 5, 2025). Readers, like Trish, are reverential, because "a veneration for elite culture underpins all the activities of the literary Middlebrow", but that veneration does not determine the limits of their reading habits, or their common sense opinions on literature (Driscoll, 2014, 21).

Continuing a now centuries-old tradition, being a reader who "ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that" (Woolf 1966, 199) makes Booktok users targets for literary elites seeking to maintain the distinction between high and low art. Seth Rogoff was devastated by Franz Kafka's sudden rise to fame on BookTok in 2024 because, in his estimation, "Kafka cannot possibly withstand the flattening and emptying forces of social media" (2024). Eva Marsden complains that "even the conversations created around books on TikTok are arguably lacking critical analysis and valuable insight" (2024). In a statement reminiscent of *The Scotsman's* comment in 1935 that "if the supplying of good modern fiction would prove the alternative to over-indulgence in the 'Woman of My Heart' and 'The Bloodstained Thumb', the cost would not be too high" (9), Marsden elaborates that "classic literature or critically celebrated contemporary work provides exactly what BookTok is missing" (2024). These statements imply that feminised reading practices, the

“feminisation of taste,” or “the sentimental and romantic indulgence in imagination and enjoyment of formless emotive writing,” preclude the reader from engaging in any depth with more complex literary works (Korsmeyer 2004, 69). In “The Love of Reading”, Woolf posits that reading “does not merely consist in sympathizing and understanding. It consists, too, in criticizing and in judging” (nd.). Although the young women on BookTok are able to do both, they are treated as if their capabilities are limited to emotive responses to literature.

4. A Canon of their Own

The shift in how new common readers engage with and drive reading and publishing, coupled with the instability of an increasingly corporatised academy, has forced literary critics to consider the urgent question that Derek Attridge asks in his introduction to *The Work of Reading Literary Criticism in the 21st Century* (2021): “What is the role of the academic literary critic in the fostering and diffusion of literature?” (2). His concern is that the profession has become “too inward-looking and self-perpetuating to be a strong force for good in the wider world” (2021, 3). In *Professing Criticism*, John Guillory proposes that this question, which he calls an “overstatement of aim,” results from an “uncertainty about the social effects of literary study,” and ignores a critical barrier to access for the average reader – “the difficulty of critical language, the prevalence of a rebarbative dialect that sometimes has a more performative than communicative function.” Language that has become “the defence mechanism of an inward-turning profession, a response to the disappointment of its great expectations” (2022, 79). The “insular preoccupations of the profession,” as Attridge phrases it, have consequences beyond the

broader relevance of the literary critic: “under the pressure of the neoliberal privileging of monetary reward and utilitarian training over a broader understanding of education, the numbers enrolling in literature courses are in decline” (2021, 3).

The concerns that Attridge and Guillory raise are useful for contextualising cultural debates and developing a more nuanced understanding of the new common reader’s influence on literary production, dissemination and consumption. In simple terms, BookTok poses a threat to the intellectual because the community is treading where it is not welcome. Its content creators, are usurping the (traditional) academic literary critic, literary scholar, and the well-educated reviewer. To add insult to injury, their literary practices are those of the middlebrow - “amateur...recreational, not academic... “defined outside, and often against, the academy” (Driscoll 2014, 36). They differ “from the critic and the scholar” and from Woolf’s common reader who refines their reading practices to preserve high culture (Woolf, 1959, 1). Instead, Bookish communities place popular and canonical literature on the same shelf.

Books spanning the literary spectrum are brought together in an informal community-constructed literary canon that “diverges from the traditional literary canon emphasized in education” (Dera, 2024). In the words of @RomanticallyLit: “well read to us means the ability to make *connections* across genres and subjects” (2025). To stay current, newcomers must familiarise themselves with novels trending on the platform so that they can orient themselves within the community and build the knowledge needed to engage in discussions and participate in trends. Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s

White Nights (1848), James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962), Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), and other 'greats' are firmly situated in the BookTok canon beside Ana Huang's *Twisted Love* (2021), Holly Jackson's *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* (2019) and Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* (2016).

There are internal debates on BookTok about what constitutes good and bad literature, but these take place on common ground, free from rebarbative dialect. And, while affective, subjective reviews and aesthetic content are pervasive on the app, BookTok is steadily developing its own academy to complement its canon with an expanding body of educational content by creators, academic and amateur, like @Booksofthedeath, @coolmelleniumbooks, and @taylataalkingtime. Moore, an academic taking an outward-turning approach to the fostering and diffusion of literature, uses BookTok (and Youtube) to create supplementary teaching materials for his students, and to "advocate for the humanities and demonstrate the value of humanistic inquiry to a general audience" (pers. comm., June 19, 2025). Responding to the conflict between the intellectual and the new common reader, Moore argues that "energizing readers is good for the humanities. How could it not be? English Literature departments probably do more to 'ruin literature' than BookTok does" (pers. comm., June 19, 2025). The divide between the academic literary critic and the amateur reader grows wider when BookTok content creators are accused of simplicity and vacuousness in their efforts to teach their followers about literature, reminiscent of highbrow concerns that interwar middlebrow educational efforts "forged in opposition to the perceived elitism or unintelligibility of modernism," which "involved representing and interpreting difficult works so that they became more accessible to the general public"

would simplify these works, depriving them of depth and meaning (Hammil, 2023, 99). At its core, the interwar highbrow's distaste for the "middlebrow lecture" or "middlebrow review" (Woolf 1966, 200), and the contemporary critics distaste for how literature is spoken about on social media, is steeped in what Erica Brown and Mary Grover identify as the "powerful anxieties about cultural authority and processes of cultural transmission" that informed the invention of 'middlebrow' as a cultural category (2018, 1).

5. The New Common Reader

Woolf's "Hours in a Library" (1916) celebrates a reader closer to the common reader that Johnson concurs with, and the new common reader, than any of the essays that she included in *The Common Reader*. She emphasises that "to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill what it suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading." Reflective of the age demographics on BookTok, "the true reader is essentially young...the great season for reading is the season between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four" (2018). Community with authors and other readers, according to Woolf, grows out of reading at an age when "all restrictions have been removed, we can read what we like; libraries are at our command, and, best of all [we have] friends who find themselves in the same position... Indeed, one of the signs of passing youth is the birth of a sense of fellowship with other human beings as we take our place among them" (2018). Like the middlebrow, readers on BookTok are reverent, and read classic literature to "show... familiarity with the greatest human beings who have ever lived in the world" (2018). The new common reader collates lists, quotes and rankings on Goodreads pages, and BookTok accounts, and like

Woolf's reader, keeps notebooks containing what they plan to read, authors and books ranked by merit, meaningful quotes, and "most interesting of all, lists of books that have actually been read...at the age of twenty, most of them probably for the first time" (2018).

Woolf acknowledges the joy and familiarity that comes from reading contemporary fiction by living authors: "We can treat them as we treat our equals; they are guessing our riddles, and, what is perhaps more important, we understand their jokes." Through this, she writes, "we soon develop another taste, unsatisfied by the great—not a valuable taste, perhaps, but certainly a very pleasant possession—the taste for bad books" (2018). Reading new books, good and bad, is done without the "vanity" behind efforts to be 'well-read' because "the kind of admiration which [new books and authors] inspire is extremely warm and genuine...in order to give way to our belief in them we have often to sacrifice some very respectable prejudice which does us credit" (2018). Woolf maintains that reading great literature is a necessary foundation for judging the value of contemporary fiction, but there is also value in reading bad books, through which the reader develops "a far keener eye for the old." This reader, approaching 'great books' with a more critical eye, could find, "probably, that some of the great are less vulnerable than we thought them. Indeed they are not so accomplished or so profound as some of our own time" (2018).

The real risk to literature is not social media, the new common reader, nor the continued popularity of the middlebrow novel. It is repeating the mistakes of critics past. When Attridge talks about "literature," he makes clear that he means "the kind of literature that offers challenges and surprises, that inspires admiration for its craft and subtlety, and that takes the reader into unaccustomed realms of

thought and feeling.” He dismisses the rest as “formulaic literary works” (2021, 1). There are two potentially damaging consequences of categorically avoiding literature that appears, superficially, to be out of keeping with ‘the greats’, and of passing judgement on those who read it.

First, a decline in reading. The idea that a reader is defined by the quality of their reading material reinforces the conflict between the highbrow and the middlebrow, encouraging readers to pick a side. Those who develop reading habits via the enjoyment of popular fiction are more likely to find their way to the ‘greats’ by encountering these works mixed in with the mass-market books promoted by content creators who read across the literary spectrum. Discouraging this kind of reading only serves to decrease diversity in reading practices.

Second, it is now apparent that the way that literature was coded in the interwar period has left gaps in scholarship on literary production. Although work is underway to address this with new categories like ‘Intermodernism’ (Blumel 2009) it seems unlikely that all of the lost great works will be uncovered, and especially those by women and the working-classes. If this is to be avoided in our present moment, it cannot be left to future researchers to do the work of recovering fiction. The most important way that the new common reader differs from the critic and the scholar is that they do not limit themselves to what the critic and scholar define as great literature, and are therefore more likely to stumble upon books that have been tossed out the window because of genre, a basic understanding of the plot, or even acclaim on BookTok.

New common readers are achieving what Woolf advised young readers to do in "Hours in a Library". It is their "delight to watch this turmoil, to do battle with the ideas and visions of [their] own time, to seize what [they] can use, to kill what [they] consider worthless." Most importantly, they realise that they "must be generous to the people who are giving shape as best they can to the idea within them" (2018).

BookTok readers have shown an ability to critically engage with popular fiction. Trish (@trishslibrary) gives Hannah Grace's *Ice Breaker* (2022) a negative review for its poor plot, one-dimensional characters, and failure to "meet the core tenets of the genre" (2023). @inlaraland, who reads, reviews and recommends philosophy, poetry, non-fiction and fiction, classic and contemporary, canonical and popular, singles out Dunmore's 'enemies-to-lovers' romance, *A Rogue of One's Own*, for its interesting plot, characters and implicit feminism (a suffragette buys a publishing house, then falls in love with a rogue), while also pointing out the flaws in how Dunmore writes people (characters) of colour. And, @kehindeslibrary recommends Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) for its underlying critique of capitalist dehumanisation and exploitation (2024).

Janice Radway provides a useful example of why a more generous approach to different types of literature is important. In *A Feeling for Books* (1997) she reflects on her biases towards middlebrow literature, middlebrow efforts to distribute literature, and how her position changed the more she engaged with the genre and its readerships (1). One of the conclusions that she draws from her interviews with readers was that "romances were not only subtle and varied but immediately relevant to the conditions of their daily lives. They showed me that romance fiction constituted a complex living

literature in the context of their day-to-day concerns, and this only increased my doubts about the intrinsic status of textual complexity and the purported universality of the sacred literary canon" (1997, 5-6). These readers found something in their preferred genre that those who dismissed it failed to notice.

The new common reader is a hybrid of the middlebrow and Woolf's common reader. Woolf could not have predicted the shape and form that this reader would assume, but she did predict the important role that they would play in the preservation and identification of great literature. In "Byron and Mr. Briggs", she writes that "the Common Reader is a person of great importance" because "literature both past and present must rest in the hands of the people who continue to read it...The truth is that reading is kept up because people like reading. The common reader is formidable and respectable and even has power over great critics and great masterpieces in the long run because he likes reading and will not let even Coleridge do his reading for him" (2025). Woolf's literature is among the works that BookTok is preserving in its canon. As of June 2025, there were 7.1 million posts tagged #VirginiaWoolf, discussing her novels, short stories and non-fiction (TikTok 2025).

Sustaining the Battle of the Brows with debates, the tone and content of which have hardly changed for over a century, has done little to alleviate anxieties about processes of cultural transmission. Considering the continued popularity of middlebrow genre fiction, attempts to reinforce the boundaries between high and low art in the interwar period were unsuccessful, and will, hopefully, be equally unsuccessful in curtailing the reading habits of new common readers or, rather, the twenty-first century reading masses – feminised,

marginalised, and placed in opposition to the highbrow minority. Moving past these debates is only possible if a truce is called, an outward-turning approach to literary studies and criticism is adopted, and how readers and their reading preferences are categorised and critiqued is revised – a revision that includes a more nuanced and considerate engagement with reading communities, and how the new common reader contributes to literary culture, not from a liminal space, betwixt and between, but as an equal and valuable participant in its production.

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Online platforms and everyday reading: the Russian case

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine how digital platforms influence reading practices, particularly on Russian self-publishing platforms. Drawing on digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, I investigate how readers choose what to read, what books they consider interesting and engaging, and how reading on a digital platform differs from reading printed books. Based on this investigation, I conclude that the digital platform provides a unique reading experience due to the wide variety of texts, serialized publishing and a specific type of engagement manifested on the platform medium.

Keywords: reading practices; digital reading; Russian self-publishing platforms; readers' engagement; platformization of literary production

This paper is a small and unfinished part of my bigger ongoing project on the platformization of literature in relation to Russian self-publishing literary platforms. I started it at my master's stage, continued at the PhD stage with a focus on author and authorial

practices, and plan to continue further at the post-doctoral stage. In this text, I focus on reading practices and how platformization impacts them. I propose more of a descriptive case study than a high-level theoretical debate, but in the end, I will try to make some theoretical conclusions.

Platformization is usually regarded as a process of *reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms* (Poell et al., 2019). In book publishing and literary practices, it particularly means developing special websites where everyone can publish their literary works without the mediation of publishing houses, such as Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, developing fanfiction platforms such as Archive of Our Own and Wattpad, and creating reading communities where readers can share reading experiences: rate and recommend texts to each other, review them and discuss both texts and reviews. On such platforms, reading often becomes “wreading” — in the sense that reading and writing activities intertwine with each other, and readers not only comment and review fictional texts, but also write fan fiction based on what they’ve read and new fictional texts.

Wattpad is the most popular resource for studying online reading and wreading. Kraxenberger and Lauer (2022) show that usage of online reading platforms, including Wattpad, Archive of Our Own, Fanfiktion.net, and specialized subreddits on reddit.com, is not limited only to adolescent users and those who read there, come to platform to find some experience which they do not have in real life: new stories that they wouldn’t read otherwise, contact with people whom they wouldn’t meet. Pianzola et al. (2020) analyzes the readers’ engagement and shows that “social aspect of reading and genre is affecting the volume of the commenting activity” (Pianzola et al. 2020, 33), but different groups of readers read differently. Shukla (2024)

emphasizes the importance of genre on the platform and its role in platform publishing, readership, and community forming. Pristed (2020) expands the scholarship on platform reading by including the studies on Russian digital reading platforms, *livelib.ru* and *bookmix.ru*. She argues that in the Russian context, social reading platforms have a special significance because institutional reading infrastructures are weak, and “social reading networks become an important part of digital compensation strategies to counteract contemporary deficits in libraries and bookstores, and outbalance the distribution of and sales problems associated with the printed book” (Pristed 2020, 410).

Thus, reading strategies on the Internet differ from reading strategies in the Gutenberg era; they are country-specific, platform-specific, device-specific. Based on this premise, in the following sections, I will demonstrate how reading strategies work on Russian self-publishing platforms. My research questions are: for what purposes do readers read? How do they choose what book to read? How does their reading practice depend on the medium and device readers read, how their reading habits are integrated into their daily lives, and how platformized serialized narration impacts the readers’ engagement in the story?

I have been conducting digital ethnography research since 2018. My main method is non-participant observation and field diary: I observe the users’ activity on both platforms, read books on them, and also follow the reading communities in the social network *Vkontakte*, where authors and readers meet. Also, I held three series of semi-structured interviews with platform users: in spring 2020, in spring 2022, and in summer 2025, 31 interviews in total and 12 exclusively with readers. All my respondents were non-professional readers —

i.e., their professional activity is far from reading and interpreting literature — and lived in different cities in Russia.

In Russia, we have a specific history of Internet development. The Internet started in Russia as a political project (Konradova 2020; Konradova 2021), and from the very beginning, online book culture took a significant place in the development of the Russian Internet (Mjør 2009; Schmidt 2020; Pristed 2020). Such specificity was conditioned by both political reasons and technological constraints, such as the Cyrillic script; as a result, we have some local services that replicate some global social networks and other digital products. For example, we have our own Facebook, it is called V Kontakte, and we have our own search engines that work much better in the Russian context and with the Russian language, such as Yandex. LitRes, Russia's largest electronic book-selling company, focused almost exclusively on books published in Russia and in the Russian language, was launched in 2007. We also have a long tradition of digital piracy; such projects as LibGen and Sci-Hub have Russian or Russian-speaking origins. Flibusta, the largest online library in Russia, hosts a lot of pirate books, scanned and digitized books published long ago, and self-published books. In this context, it is not surprising that online platforms where it became possible not only to publish but also to sell literary works have been developed in Russia in the second half of the 2010s.

Russian self-publishing platforms are at the same time similar to Amazon, Wattpad, and the like, and different from them. They are similar in that they are algorithm-driven, they host thousands of books, and everyone can publish and sell books on them simply after registering. They are different in a way that, firstly, they operate only in the Russian language and mostly within Russia, in contrast to

Amazon, Google, or Apple books, which operate in a global market, in different countries and in different national languages, and secondly, they stand outside both traditional publishers and the publishing industry and other digital services and social networks. Unlike Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, which is a part of larger digital ecosystem including printed books seller, Russian online literary platforms operate independently and function as a standalone literary institution with its own conventions and rules.

We have different digital platforms that provide various book publishing services. They work with different business models. Some, such as Ridero, offer only a digital publishing service and the possibility to distribute the book on different platforms, including a printed book using Print on Demand technology. Some offer only digital publishing and selling books on a single platform, such as LitRes, which hosts both traditionally published and self-published electronic books, or Litmarket.

I will focus on the two most prominent platforms in the Russian digital landscape: Author.Today and Litnet.com. According to the latest industrial report, they occupy almost 20% of the Russian electronic book market (Grigor'ev 2024). The number of books published on both platforms exceeds the number of books issued by traditional publishers. For example, in 2024, publishing houses published 22,044 fictional books. There is no exact data on how many books were published in 2024, but it is possible to reconstruct this amount from the Web Archive. According to it, on the Author.Today, there were 167,268 books on November 12, 2024, and 252,686 books on August 29, 2025. So the whole amount increased by 70,000 books. On Litnet, the situation is similar: from 117,109 books on November 26, 2024, to

135,634 on August 19, 2025. In the next section, I will turn to the empirical findings, which, however, require further interpretation.

Both platforms host mainly fiction books of popular low-brow genres, such as romance novels and fantasy. Platforms have a similar design with the same structural elements, such as pages with a selection of genres and various widgets that appear on the main page, but the color scheme differs: on Author.Today, the color is blue, on Litnet it is pink. One might say that the color scheme reflects a gender specificity: Author.Today looks “masculine,” and Litnet looks “feminine.” The book covers also portray different themes that support such a gender division: on Litnet, one sees couples and beautiful women (see pic.1); on Author.Today, one sees men and women with weapons and magical creatures (pic. 2). Do not be fooled by the English language on the screenshots; both platforms operate only in the Russian language, and it is just an automated translation in the browser to introduce the context.

The selection of texts and audiences also differs on both platforms: on Litnet, such genres as romance novels and love fantasy prevail, and the founders stated that their main audience is female. On Author.Today, the prevailing genres are military fantasy and accidental travel. Platform administration did not state it explicitly, but among the reading and writing community, Author.Today is perceived as a male platform.

Another important feature of both platforms is serialized, or partial, publishing: authors publish their texts in installments, chapter by chapter, while writing, and readers can comment and discuss each piece of the story.

Readers who come to the platform are not young: all my respondents were above 30, and industry reports confirm that the main audience

of self-publishing platforms in Russia is 35–45-year-old. They read a lot – one book in 1-3 days, both on Litnet and Author.Today, and they perceive themselves as readers, i.e., reading is their main hobby. They read mostly for relaxation and disconnection from everyday reality. Their reading is genre-specific: readers choose which book to read based on genre, using the special filter on both platforms: they can set up a genre, then choose what genres to exclude, audio or electronic format, and so on, and within these parameters choose the specific story they want to read.

Commenting activity differs. On both platforms, readers can comment on each installment and share their opinions and emotions regarding the book. On Litnet, readers – who are mostly female readers – comment more than on Author.Today; all my respondents who read on Author.Today said that they do not leave comments, while respondents from Litnet said that it is a good form to leave a comment on a book they like. Two of my female respondents said that they tried to write their own stories, whereas male respondents said that they haven't even tried. So, "wreading" is more common within the female audience.

They read mostly from smartphones – both platforms have a reading application, and two respondents said that they listen to audiobooks, because it allows them to combine everyday activities such as housekeeping or babysitting with reading. Some respondents combine platformized reading with traditional printed book reading; some prefer only one platform because it provides a huge variety of genre texts.

Both on Author.Today and Litnet, readers look for a story with an interesting, fascinating plot – it should be very dynamic and full of suspense till the very end. Some respondents said that the author

should surprise their readers; unexpected plot twists are what make a story interesting¹.

An interesting hero or heroine whose stories are interesting to follow is another aspect of what readers want. Female respondents, who read mostly on Litnet, said that the good book is full of emotions, maybe it even has an emotional seesaw, and they want to identify with the heroine and empathize with her. On Author.Today, male respondents said that it is more important to share adventures with the hero; they feel themselves immersed in a fictional world, as if they are standing next to the hero and co-experiencing what he is doing. These opinions correspond to the emotional and experiential types of engagement defined by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) and Caracciolo (2012), respectively.

What is specific to platformized reading and distinguishes it from traditional reading of a printed book is, firstly, the unique choice of texts that the platform provides, and secondly, a specific type of reader's engagement which takes place on the platform.

As I mentioned, readers who come to platforms read a lot, and that is why they come to platforms: no publishing house in Russia can provide such a vast number of books. On an online platform with no editorial filter and thousands of authors publishing tens of thousands of stories, the production and publishing process is very simple and fast; you should not have to wait for months while your favorite author goes through the whole process of writing and printing. Every reader can find a book that matches their taste, and most of these texts will probably never appear in printed form, so the platform provides a text that cannot be found in other places.

¹ Anna Gerasimova came to a similar conclusions, observing the reading practices on the Livelib platform (Gerasimova 2020).

Reader engagement on the platform is closely connected with partial narration, when the author publishes their text in installments, and readers receive notifications that a new installment is ready. Such a mechanism allows authors to meet readers' expectations and maintain readers' interest from the very beginning to the very end. Experimenting with the narrative structure — for instance, interrupting an action in the end of the installment² or dragging out time in tense moments — supports both emotional (in the case of Litnet) and experiential (in the case of Author.Today) engagement in the story. Serialized narration also creates an effect that events are happening right now; both the author and the reader do not know what happens next. The story is experienced as events in real life, as if readers were watching the relationships between their friends or acquaintances.

With serialized narration, which is realized differently on both platforms, readers are engaged in the process of creating a story. On Author.Today, serialized narration is performed on two levels: each book, narrated and published in installments, is a part of the whole series, which may last for a year or more. On Litnet, cyclization is less common; readers on both platforms prefer completed cycles and completed books. However, in the case of a liked author, readers follow them and receive notifications on the new installment. Keeping in mind that the primary reading device is a smartphone, which always lies in the pocket, the reader can spend – and sometimes spends – five minutes in the middle of their everyday routine to read this small piece, and during this time to switch himself or herself off from their current reality and to immerse themselves in another one.

² Some authors I interviewed said they should finish the installment with conflict or logically unmotivated actions to keep readers interested in the book.

Even without a direct influence on the text (I haven't observed, for example, any evidence of voting on how the plot should develop, or other interactive communication), readers feel themselves absorbed in the storyworld and storytime.

At the same time, respondents noted that the degree of immersion is lower in the case of audiobooks, and they prefer reading written text³. When the reader has more space for imagination and should make some cognitive effort, but not too intensive, the immersion depth increases. In the case of an audiobook, this cognitive effort is lower than in the case of a written book, and an immersion in the storyworld is less intense.

Now I am moving on to the conclusions.

Platforms provide an experience of feeling in one time and one space of story. Such publishing and reading a story in a process of narration reduces narrative distance almost to zero, and the smartphone becomes a technology that connects everyday and textual fictional reality.

Serialized narration and publishing in installments by itself is not a new technique, as it was used by such authors as Charles Dickens, Eugène Sue, or Fyodor Dostoevsky in Russia. But on web platforms and via smartphones, the reading experience differs from that of the nineteenth century: installments are read on one physical medium, and the time between receiving new installments is rather short, just a few days. And this reading experience is unique and impossible with

³ I can't help but recall here the tweet "Ever realised how fucking surreal reading a book actually is? You stare at marked slices of tree for hours on end, hallucinating vividly"

(<https://x.com/KatieOldham/status/542348626711019520>, accessed 30.09.2025). Though the author speaks about printed books, these words could also be applied to digital reading.

the printed book, when readers read either the whole piece or a number of installments in different periods on different physical medium.

Sharing of storyspace creates a feeling of co-living the story and the sense of community, which is further enhanced by genre. Genre reading is more than simply consuming stories; as Wilkins et al. argue, "Genre books are not merely texts; they are also nodes of social and industrial activity" (2022, 1), and recognizable genre patterns are a result of collaborative activity. In this context, choosing a particular genre means belonging to a specific reading community, with its own conventions, and readers who read a particular genre contribute to its further development and transformation.

Commenting during the process of narration also increases the emotional engagement in the story; however, "wreading" is more common among female audience, and at the same time, gendered platform division looks like a specificity of Russian culture and to some extent reflects the current gender order in Russia⁴, which, despite of Soviet emancipation, is characterized by "persistence of patriarchy" (Goscilo and Lanoux 2006).

Serialized, or partial, narration looks like a universal platform mechanism that allows readers to engage in the process of creating the story and living through it. This technique is common not only

⁴ At the symposium, Ze Yu, in her presentation "Global Narratives, Local Interpretations: A Comparative Study of Reader Response on Qidian and WebNovel" made the same point about gender dichotomy on the Chinese Platforms: while registering, one should mark their gender, and the recommendation algorithms and the choice of books will take into account the user's gender. It is a bit of a different situation than in the Russian case, since there are no gendered platforms; the platform is the same, but gender dichotomy still exists. This similarity requires further investigation. I thank Lovro Škopljanc for this meaningful comment.

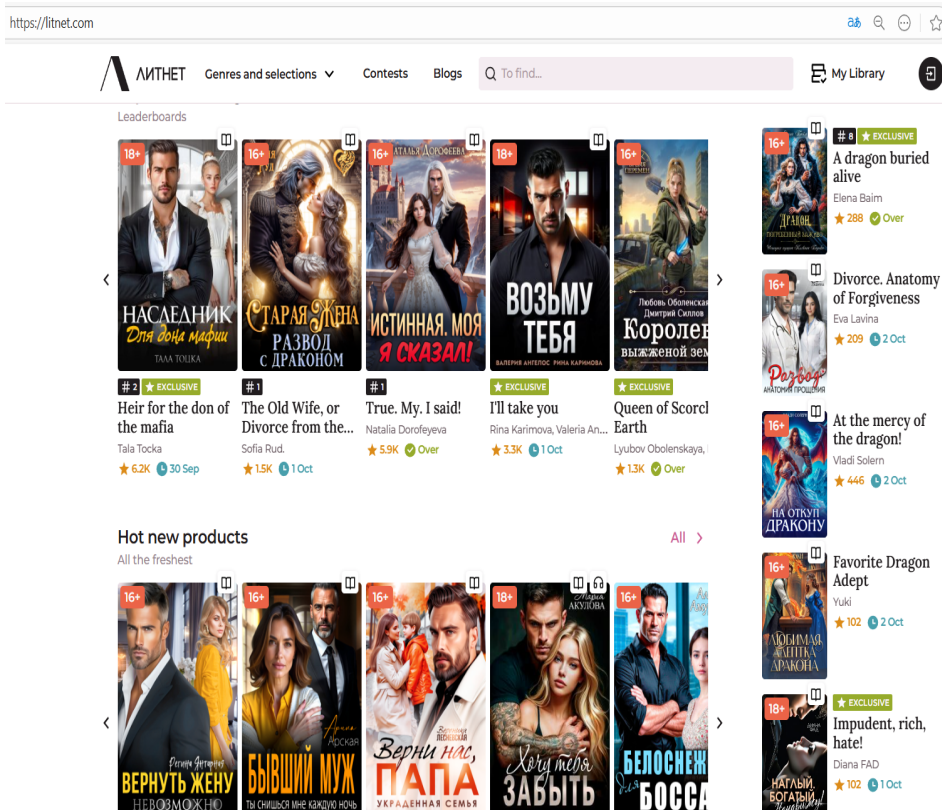
on literary platforms, but also on social media, which is further enhanced by different metrics (Georgakopoulou et al. 2020). Thus, despite the fact that online practices often stand outside traditional literary studies, especially in the Russian scientific discourse, it is a big part of culture, and Russian culture in particular.

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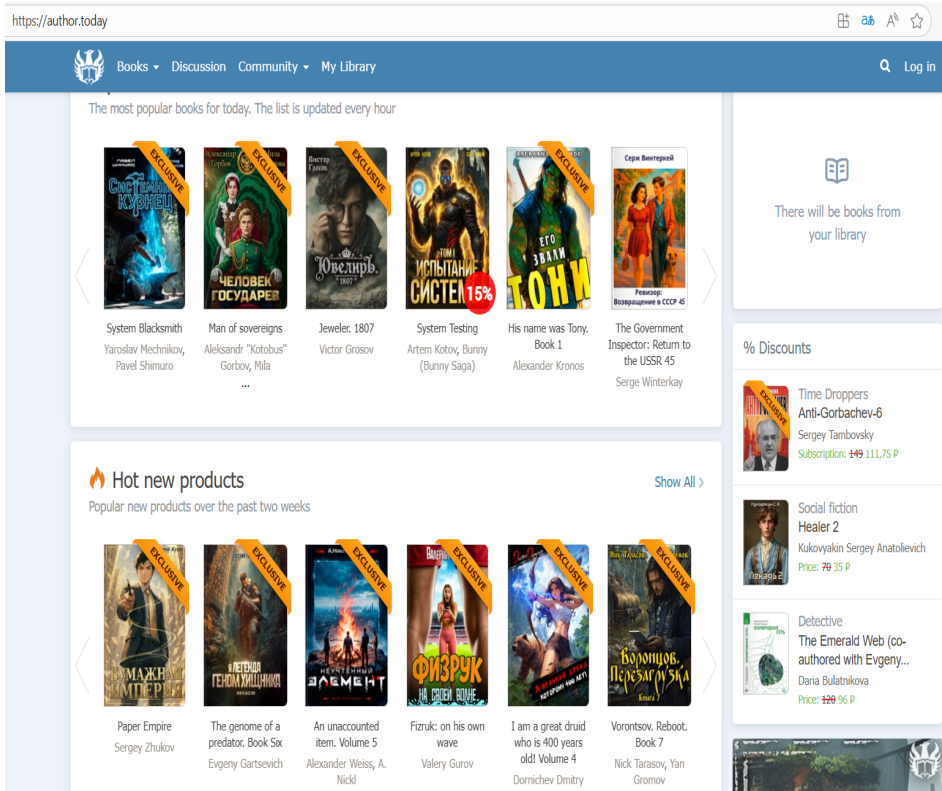
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Pic. 1. Main page of Litnet.com. 02.10.2025



Pic. 2. Main page of Author.Today. 02.10.2025

Remediation and attachment in the reading of e-books*

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‘The book is like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented, it cannot be bettered’ Umberto Eco (2011)¹

Abstract: The principal question of this chapter is what kind of attachments emerge between readers and the reading they do on electronic devices. Insofar as books’ materiality is one crucial component of the love for them, this chapter is concerned with whether the differences in the surface properties of the codex and e-books lead to differences in readers’ attachment, and how readers experience the separation of content and device in electronic books. The chapter offers two answers to these questions. The first is that e-books support attachment to the practice of reading and to favourite genres as they accelerate access and expand portability. The second is that, up to this point, the experience of e-books is closely tied to the affordances of the codex. Readers’ judgment of e-books depends on their familiarity of and experiences with print books. This is another expression of the iconicity of books and it informs the objections to e-books amongst readers of print. Departing from existing interpretations of the attachment to print, the chapter argues that the accounts of those who refuse e-books are less a nostalgic

¹ Carrière J-C and Eco U (2011) *This Is Not the End of the Book: A Conversation Curated by Jean- Philippe De Tonnac*. London: Harvill Secker, p.4

reaffirmation of print's aura and more the outcome of the subjective experience of print's specific material features and books' iconic power.

Keywords: Remediation; codex; e-book; digital reading; post-print; attachment; aura; iconicity

* This is a version of chapter 4 of the monograph *The love of books. Attachment to a changing cultural object* to be published by Manchester University Press in March 2026.

Introduction

Umberto Eco's remark is representative of a humanistic stance towards print that has been critiqued by media and book historians as normative, nostalgic, sacralising or elitist. The limits of utopian and dystopian accounts of the consequences of new media in history - enthusiastic or catastrophising stories about the impacts on memory, attention and social and political life of the invention of writing, the printing press, the radio, photography, cinema, television, videogames, or the electronic book- have been discussed at length by numerous authors (Striphas 2009; Bolter et al. 2006; Price 2019). It is not my goal to address the question of the future of the book. Instead, I refer to Eco's claim to highlight the power of the codex in readers' imaginations and experiences of books in the UK today. The influence of the humanist representations of the codex, part of the book's iconic power, is felt in different degrees by everybody, not only those who endorse a certain version of the history of the medium.

Digital books are remediations of the codex. A remediation has features that emulate another medium but also claim to improve on

it. In Bolter and Grusin's influential definition, remediation is 'that which appropriates the techniques, forms and social significance of other media in an attempt to rival or refashion them in the name of the real' (Bolter and Grusin 2000: 65). While this may change, a 'real book' for the readers in this study continues to be a print book, even for those who read entirely on e-readers. The principal question of this chapter is what kind of attachments emerge between readers and the reading they do on electronic devices. Books' materiality is one crucial component of the love for them. Do the differences in the surface properties of the codex and e-books lead to differences in readers' attachment? How do readers experience the separation of content and device in electronic books? I offer two answers to these questions. The first, developed in sections one and two, is that for those who use them, e-books support their attachment to the practice of reading and to favourite genres as they accelerate access and expand portability. E-books' convenience aids aesthetic immersion and its component processes of objectification and subjectification.

The second argument of the chapter is that, up to this point, the codex is the template with which e-books are evaluated by both print and digital readers. Just as the construction of the e-book emulates the print book, the experience of e-books is closely tied to the form and affordances of the codex. Readers' judgment of e-books depends on their familiarity of and experiences with print books. This is another expression of the iconicity of books and it informs the objections to e-books amongst readers of print. Departing from existing interpretations of the attachment to print, I argue that the accounts of those who refuse e-books are less a nostalgic reaffirmation of print's aura (Bolter et al. 2006) and more the outcome

of the subjective experience of print's specific material features and books' iconic power.

The taken for granted character of the codex changed between 1993 and 2009, the years of the two Mass Observation² directives which asked about reading and books. And by the time I conducted my last round of interviews in 2021 the digitisation of books was in full swing including a series of ups and downs in the popularity of e-books. This process has prompted not only various waves of moral panic about the future of the book (Birkets 1994; Gomez 2008), but most importantly for my purposes in this chapter, brought the codex into centre stage. As Katherine Hayles argues, 'the advent of the digital has catalysed the history of the book by bringing the codex back into visibility' (Hayles 2020: 6).³

E-books' remediation of print

Under half of the interview participants read on e-books in combination with print and only three use e-books exclusively. Those who prefer e-books invariably talk about convenience. E-books' convenient functionalities include access to hundreds or thousands of titles on a single, easily portable device, the ease and speed with which titles can be purchased, the ability to search up the meaning of

² The Mass Observation project is a popular anthropology project which gathers accounts of everyday life in the UK. A panel of volunteers write three times a year in response to questions about different topics. Volunteers are referred to as Mass Observers in this chapter. More information can be found in

<https://www.massobservationproject.amdigital.co.uk/>

³ This has also led to the meta thematization of print in fiction itself, a development that Jessica Pressman discusses as an aesthetic of bookishness (Pressman 2009).

words, the back-light functionality, and the lower prices or no fee at all for books, such as classics, with expired copyright.

Simon Rowberry examines the ontology of e-books from a perspective that combines book history and platform studies. Conceptualising e-books as platforms comprised of '1) technology, 2) text and 3) service infrastructure' (Rowberry 2017: 291) he defines 'ebookness' as the 'performative simulation of aspects of the book trade' (Rowberry 2017: 302) and e-books as 'a subset of digital books that focus on the manipulation of reading preferences and cross-device compatibility' for the primary purpose of reading rather than multimodal use (Rowberry 2017: 304). Rowberry writes that 'the rhetorical features of e-book branding are still forming. In order to help readers adjust, designers have incorporated skeuomorphisms or elements that refer back to the materiality of print culture, in the interface. The comfortable familiarity of skeuomorphism ensures e-books are likely to remain parasitic of print rather than exploiting experimental features' (Rowberry 2017: 298). The historical changes in the ontology and uses of the book as well as of other media like film and music call for caution regarding this prediction. For the moment, however, the iconic power of the codex is visible among book lovers.

Several features of e-books seek to emulate the codex. E-book hardware development has converged on a dedicated reader with an average screen size of six inches (or 15 cm approximately) which seeks to replicate the experience of reading single-hand-held print books, such as paperbacks and some hardbacks. The size and shape of e-book screens mimic tablets' 'flat representation of a page' (Rowberry 2017: 292). At the level of software, instead of the full connectivity of a webpage, the e-book formats (e.g. mobi, AZW and

EPUB) 'wrap' and display texts in ways that evoke the analogue experience of print. E-books include pages (and the turning of pages, sometimes with sound) rather than the scrolling typical of websites, and display of the 'width' of the book in the top corner.

Features that are marketed as improvements on the codex include that the text can be customised. The text in e-books is 'reflowable – that is, it is not fixed to the concept of a page but can rather be changed to fit the reader's preferences and exact screen size' (Rowberry 2017: 292). Also, the uniformity of software and its compatibility across hardware configurations, together with cloud-based storage, means 'users can read a single ebook across devices without losing their location' (Rowberry 2017: 292). What distinguishes e-books from other book-like formats, such as PDF files, is the provision of services, such as purchasing from within the software package, word-searching or social networking (Rowberry 2017: 298). While these services are central to the stories about convenience and attachment to the practice of reading, they also appear as barriers to the attachment to e-books.

Objectification and subjectification in the reading of e-books

Aesthetic immersion is a dual process of subjectification and objectification. Subjectification happens when people draw the book into the self, making its content and surface their own. Readers remember stories, characters, and the emotional experiences triggered by them and incorporate these into their personal biographies and sense of self. Book collectors store, display, protect, mark, or mangle their copies in ways that both reflect the social life of the book and the uniqueness of whoever owns them at any given

moment. A visibly previously owned book, one that has been read and marked and then passed on to a friend or relative, is a gift in the anthropological sense of the word: an object that remains bound to the previous owner, or owners. Print books remain connected to their previous owners or handlers through signs of wear, markings or marginal notes, for example, even as the print copy can be separated from its seller via payment and the end of any obligation between the parties (Muniesa 2008; Mauss [1924] 1990). Paying for the book operates as what Muniesa calls a 'detachment device' which ends the link between seller and buyer. After exchanging money for the book/commodity the parties 'call it quits' (Muniesa 2008) and the new owner can proceed to do whatever they want with their copy. The e-book, instead, can be considered to remain tied to its makers and therefore not entirely susceptible to appropriation and subjectification. E-books are a service rather than a commodity. Buyers of e-books have no guarantee that the content they can access today will remain available in the future. This is why e-books' property status is sometimes referred to as a temporary license to read. Readers also know that both the software and hardware which makes their e-books readable today will require constant updates and will one day, like cassettes or VHS, become obsolete. This is, of course, related to a wider economic and political issue about access to and control of digital information. In his examination of e-book production and circulation, Ted Striphas warns about the 'growing power of holders of intellectual property (IP) rights to make information appear and disappear whenever they see fit—often for a fee' (Striphas 2019:23). Ownership of a lasting object is of crucial importance to readers who wish to continue reading print but is not a concern for those who value convenience over subjectification of the

book as an object. One 49-year-old Mass Observer asks ‘amazon...with an e-book, do you actually ever own it?’

Objectification occurs when readers lose themselves in the object as they read it and when they submit to its formal and physical properties. Temporary abandonment (Gomart & Hennion, 1999) or immersion and enchantment result when readers voluntarily surrender to the literary techniques that can generate emotional responses, such as sadness, disgust or elation. Book owners are constrained by their physical copies’ volume or weight and seduced or repelled by books’ covers or smell. E-books’ affordances shape the experience of reading them in ways that emulate but also depart from those of print. As the discussion will show, the varieties in the subjective experiences of control and presence work in favour and against attachment to the e-book.

I take readers’ reports of their sensorial experiences seriously.⁴ At the same time, I avoid the dichotomy material/immaterial that readers use as if it equated that between analogue/digital. As Nick Prior shows in his study of popular music and digital technologies, the boundaries between the digital and the analogue are porous. Making digital music involves touching – of screens, buttons, and all manner of concrete stuff (Prior 2018: 181). Drawing on Benjamin Peters’ examination of the embodied and indexical properties of digital technologies (Peters 2016), Prior points out that ‘a strong ontology of the digital is untenable because it ends up being analogue through the sense acts of processing information’.⁵

⁴ How readers *feel* books work is key to the meanings they make of their experiences.

⁵ Nick Prior, personal communication, 23 October 2024

Furthermore, neither e-readers nor e-books are immaterial. The first are made of plastic, glass, metal circuits and batteries. The second are data stored in computer servers. They both have carbon footprints.⁶

When people refer to print as the 'real' book it is not that they are necessarily unaware of the infrastructures that sustain e-books. What they are doing is pointing to the phenomenological shifts in their experience, including the separation of content and device and the conditions under which they access the text. As has been documented by scholars like John Thompson for academic publishing (Thompson 2005, 2021) and Ted Striphas (Striphas 2009) and Beth Driscoll (Driscoll et al. 2018) for commercial publishing, the digital and commercial environment in which e-books exist operates under different logics. The new infrastructures permit the unprecedented collection of data about the behaviour of readers as consumers and the unsettling of the idea of ownership. As Striphas writes: 'E-books portend a shift away from the widespread private ownership of sellable consumer goods to the periodic licensing of intellectual properties' (Striphas 2009: 16). As will become apparent in the

⁶ Although for years now the understanding is that the knowledge sector's carbon footprint can be reduced by digitalisation (Chowdhury 2010), according to some measurements the e-book is not necessarily the greener option. For example, the research by Tahara et al (2018) cautions that the e-book has lower carbon emissions than print books only if the comparison sets aside the fact that e-readers are not used throughout their lifecycle, and, we should add, provided we also set aside the energy consumed by servers. Beyond considerations of carbon footprint, Jussi Parikka brings geology and the non-organic to the study of the materiality of the technological world. Through the study of artistic practices this work brings attention to how natural resources such as metals enable media as well as the impact of media upon the environment (Parikka 2015).

following sections, this is not a matter of concern for those who have switched to e-books and is resisted by some of the fans of print.

In her discussion of the changes to book production since the 1950s, Katherine Hayles (2020) notes that the terms in which the computational production of books and the 'postprint' separation between content and book are considered are misleading. 'The difference is emphatically not between the materiality of print and the immateriality of digital forms, as is sometimes proclaimed, but rather between different kinds of material instantiations and diverse kinds of textual bodies' (Hayles 2020: 3).

I focus here on how readers conceptualise and experience the different surface properties of print and digital books and their understandings of the ontology of the book, especially what they mean by presence. This exercise highlights further how the iconic power of the codex radiates through the interactions with paper and screen. The book's iconicity, its cultural influence, includes expectations about unity, fixity, stability and authority (Gitelman 2006; Adema 2021). These are indeed contingent and subject to change, but they hold great power in shaping the reading experience in present day UK.

Instant books! A seamless supply of fiction

Jessica lives in Edinburgh. She works in marketing and is married with two small children. She reads constantly, and 'mostly fiction', literary and genre fiction, including fantasy and science fiction, as her main form of entertainment and escape. Reading became especially important when she was breastfeeding her children. She had bought

a Kindle four years before our interview and when the 'Paperwhite' version appeared 'the one you can read in the dark, which has a back light', she switched to that. At that point she stopped buying print books. She thinks the number of books she reads per month has increased somewhat as a result. When I ask Jessica if her reading habits have changed over the years this is her response:

I think it's gotten better since I got a Kindle, it's the best thing ever. Because you don't have to physically buy a book or carry a book with you, it's just so easy to buy and everything. So I think that has really changed the way I read. It's just so easy. Before I would finish a book and I'd be like, 'oh I have to buy another book', and I'd have to wait until I bought one. Now it's just instant, everything is instant.

The interview then continues with questions about the senses in the reading experience. I ask if she used to smell books before the Kindle and if she paid attention to the texture of the paper:

Yes, I like the smell of books...I used to be not that bothered [by the paper] but now I really like cookbooks and I like nice pictures and nice smooth pages, but those get messed up anyway, but when it's all new it's nice.

I ask how the Kindle compares with the sensorial experience of print cookbooks which she appreciates:

I guess it doesn't fulfil that same thing but to me that wasn't important. It wasn't hard for me to switch. I know a lot of people won't switch, they just have this very strong connection with the physical thing but I don't have that. It's more about the ease of use, and it's just there are just too many benefits. The benefits, for me, far outweigh the whole physical connection, I guess.

I note that some people say they have difficulty going back in e-books; that when they want to re-read a certain page they find it is harder to find in the e-book.

Yes, it's harder to earmark and that is annoying, because especially if you're reading a book where it has a lot of characters and there might be one page that describes all the characters and I can never remember the names. Previously I would always just flip back to that page and maybe dog ear it or something, and now it's harder. But I still think it it's worth it.

Although she has been a reader since her childhood, e-books' portability and the speed with which she can buy them, have meant that reading is now even more embedded in Jessica's routines. Over the three years she has been expecting and raising children and on and off work, the practice of reading literary fiction, fantasy and science fiction on a Kindle has seeped into ever more moments in her life; sustaining her during breastfeeding periods, small breaks in between meals and trips to the park or the supermarket, before going to sleep at night while her partner works on his tablet or listens to music next to her. The ease and speed of access afforded by her e-books have resulted in more time for the enjoyment of objectification, of being captured by a gripping story. She likes books 'that stay with you for a long time', such as *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Shriver, 2003). The novel is about a fictional school massacre perpetrated by a teenage boy and narrated from the point of view of the boy's mother. Jessica recounts the process of subjectification, of reflecting about and brining this story into herself when she explains: 'I read it years and years ago but still I think about it' and now that she is a mother she worries, 'Oh my god, what if I have a Kevin?' E-books have

strengthened her long-term attachment to the practice of reading for leisure and to the states of being which some of them stimulate.

Comfort and new beginnings

Elizabeth is a retired GP. She is married, has four children and lives in Edinburgh. She 'almost always' has something to read with her and usually has 'three or four books on the go'. She reads 'for the intellectual stimulus. I like the knowledge, the information and the way that things fit together in a network that I didn't know of different languages, different peoples'. When she was a teenager in the nineteen sixties she read 'Agatha Christie or PG Wodehouse, that kind of thing. Then when I was working, most of the time I would have John le Carré or something like that, spy stories or detective stories (...) Since I retired I find I read much more non-fiction'. She does about half of her reading on the Kindle app in her iPad. She is especially interested in travel and landscape writing which she describes like this:

I read a lot of a guy called Robert MacFarlane. I got a book as a present actually for Mother's Day, my son and his wife gave me it. I think it was called *The Old Ways*. I thought it was just the most riveting thing that I'd ever read. He had researched a lot of ancient routes and the myths and legends that surrounded him and the peoples that surrounded them. So, it's a very multi-disciplinary bit of writing. I thought it was just the most interesting thing. So, I've got some of his other books now. They're in prose but they're quite poetic, metaphorical kind of things. I really enjoy those very much. So, I read much more non-fiction now, either the travel-y stuff... Another example of one I read recently is called *Black Sea* by Neil Ascherson who is in Edinburgh. That was again a mixture of history, geography, sociology I suppose, going way, way back into prehistory of

the peoples that lived around the Black Sea, about which although I've been to Istanbul I don't know anything. I dropped history and geography in the second year at school. I did modern studies. So, I feel very undereducated in all of that and I find it fascinating now I'm older.

She offers to tell me about the books that she is currently reading on her iPad.

I've got *Rings Of Saturn* on the Kindle and *Time Of Gifts* is also on the Kindle. I'm reading another book which I'm finding very interesting, *Small Acts Of...* it's political insurrection, effectively. It's just the most interesting book, Steve Crawshaw is the name, he's some senior figure in Amnesty International. It's just the most interesting book, each episode is only maybe two pages, but he tells you about something that somebody has done to stand up to something that they thought was an outrage. A whole series of these episodes and it's just the most sensitive thing. It was probably that book that actually almost moved me to tears, I think. Something in there and I was just so impressed by what these people had done. So that's three [books on the go].

When I ask her to compare the experience of reading print and digital she explains:

I like the e-reader from the point of view that I can look up strange words in the dictionary, if you touch it, it allows you to look it up on Wikipedia or whatever. I like that facility. I find myself touching the page of a book thinking, I want it to start working! [searching for the word] I find books uncomfortable now, I've got arthritis in my hand as well as having a stroke and I find physical books uncomfortable, especially a big hardback book. Holding a book becomes painful for me.

Since her retirement Elizabeth has been looking after her grandchildren, volunteering in a school reading support program, gardening, learning to appreciate contemporary music through her daughter who trained as a composer, and indulging in her long-standing interest in poetry. She is a visibly energetic and curious person who wishes to continue to learn. She signed up to Twitter to be updated about books and is not afraid of technology. But she has not yet figured out how to get her Kindle to tell her how far she is from finishing a chapter:

I would like to know where the end of the chapter is because sometimes you want to go and do something, you want to put the kettle on or you want to go to the toilet or something and you think, I'll finish the chapter. I'm not very good at working it, I haven't discovered how to make it tell me how many minutes are left in the chapter.

Without the e-book Elizabeth would have trouble doing the intellectual exploration she has embarked on since she retired. The Kindle app has enabled her to sustain her reading habit and expand it in new directions, feeding her curiosity. Like Jessica, she has successfully adapted to the affordances of the e-book and appropriated it in ways that enhance her attachment to reading.

Aiding the organised (bookish) self

Stephanie is a journalist from the US who lives in Edinburgh with her husband. She is in her early thirties and combines print and digital to read 'literary fiction, satire/humour, autobiography/memoir, short stories, and young adult'. Her 'main genre of interest is young adult'. Reading is a core element of her sense of self. Stephanie illustrates her attachment to books and her bookish identity by telling me the

story of her engagement in Wigtown, 'Scotland's' book town' in Dumfries and Galloway. Her partner proposed to her while they spent a weekend in one of Wigtown's many bookstores, presenting her with an engagement ring encased in a hollowed-out old book. Their story made it to the local press. Below is her reply to the question Why do you read:

It's been engrained in me. It was something I've always done. I enjoyed it as a kid, it wasn't like it was forced on me as a child but I think it's just something that's always been with me and it feels... I don't like going too long without reading because there are periods where I just don't have the time or I'll try to read in bed and I'll fall asleep two minutes later. I will have started a book and it'll be months before I get back to it. It's not a pleasant feeling for me. I love the escape of it and I love just feeling like I'm sitting in bed, I'm obviously in my home but I'm also in whatever world I'm reading. I think that's just such an amazing feeling. When people say they don't like to read, it's just unfathomable to me and I can't understand not reading. I think it's just part of who I am, which sounds really stupid. I don't know how to live without reading, I guess.

The e-book appeals to Stephanie because of the option to control the size of the font and use the backlight in her Kindle Paperwhite. Although her husband does not mind if she keeps the lights on to read at night, 'I like it on airplanes because I don't need that little tiny light, it's just there'. She goes on to explain:

I like the feel of a physical book and because I do that thing with the pages. Sometimes when I'm holding a Kindle it just feels wrong almost and tapping to turn the pages or swiping, but I don't necessarily prefer one to the other, I think, it's just a different experience.

I ask her to compare her response to the books in each medium:

I literally just finished a book, my Kindle said I had 58% left so I was like 'oh! I'm halfway through the book!' and I swiped to turn the page and it was like, acknowledgments. I was like, 'what just happened?' There were two samples of her [the author's] other books at the end that took up 40% of the Kindle thing. So I was like, that would've been very different had I been reading a physical book, I would've known I was at the end. That was the first time that's happened, that was really bizarre. Other than that, because it tells me how far I am, it tells me how much time I have left in the chapter which is quite nice because I'm a very slow reader. It's great, (...) It'll say you have nine minutes left in this chapter. It calculates based on essentially how often you're swiping to turn the page. They're getting smarter.

I ask if the fact that her reading speed is being measured is not stressful

I like it because I know if I'm reading before dinner and I'm waiting and I think, this chapter is 15 minutes, I don't have that much time so I won't even start a new chapter. Because I'm so slow I know it'll take me ages whereas if I'm just reading a physical book I'll just think, I'll just keep going. I hate stopping in the middle of a chapter. Or if it's not a break in the story. So, I quite like it. I could see how it could be stressful to some people but I think it's more organised for me in my head and I like being organised so it feels quite nice actually.

Like in the case of Elizabeth, the e-book offers increased control and enhances Stephanie's attachment to the practice of reading.

Reading for a solution

The feelings of enhanced control e-books afford, the fact that they make it easier to read, are also apparent in the case of Ifeoma. She has not completely replaced print with digital for her leisure reading, most of which is memoirs and autobiographies but mostly reads these as e-books. She combines the formats depending on the purposes of her reading and the attachment already developed with an author. For Ifeoma, reading has been a formative practice. Learning is not separate from pleasure so her account includes reading for both intellectual and spiritual development and escape. Books occupy several bookshelves in her home and she keeps hardcopies of authors she follows, such as Adiche. Reading is a part of her identity, a process that began when as a teenager she successfully used self-help and psychology books to overcome a disability. Since then she has 'always gravitated to reading as a way to escape and make sense of my situation or the world or to find solutions. (...) When I was a young mum, I'd read books about young mums and the challenges etc. Or when I decided to start a business or when I was having challenges with my kids'.

I ask Ifeoma to describe her experiences of reading digitally and to compare that to reading print. This is her reply:

I read different books digitally. I would read more fiction or things that...if I didn't want to particularly, if I don't have an attachment to a particular author, then I would choose digitally or if I was studying, where it's textbooks and it's potentially quicker and cheaper to get it digitally. If I want it immediately for something, a reference book or there's some texts that might not be available in print. So there are many reasons. For me it depends on availability but if I wanted to keep a book (...) or if I'm reading a particular author and I'm following what they're doing and I want to

keep it, then I would go for a hardback. Typically, digitally I would buy things that I don't... authors that maybe I'm either exploring or it's not available in print, or if I'm not particularly fussed or have an emotional attachment to (...) or if I'm travelling on holiday.

When I ask her to elaborate on the comparison she replies:

I think if you're not used to it, at the very beginning it takes some getting used to [e-books] but once I get lost in the story, because especially if I'm reading the fiction then the story carries me and then the physicality of how I'm reading it doesn't really matter. To be honest, if I'm reading a type of non-fiction text on it then, actually, I find it more convenient because I can dip in and out. I can be wherever, on the bus, on the train. So, depending on what I'm reading, it's actually more convenient. But as I said, it depends on if I want to read to get lost or if I'm reading my favourite that is just coming out.

The convenience of digital books support Ifeoma's quest for knowledge and spiritual enlightenment. She is what the sociology of religion would call a seeker (Roof 1993; Barker 1984) and, like many other interviewees, a highly reflexive one.

As I've gotten older I've just gravitated to autobiographies and memoirs (...) where I can draw inspiration and also to deepen my knowledge on a particular interest. I mentioned I'm reading a lot about Buddhism because I'm reorientating myself spiritually. So, it's really about self-knowledge, discovering, growing. I don't read as much genre fiction like romance or crime, except when I really want to switch off and get lost because that then is a different experience, literally, because find I can completely get lost in a story, whereas if it's non-fiction or memoirs, it's a different feeling.

The ease with which she can access new titles on her e-reader has assisted Ifeoma in her work on herself and her spiritual journey. Like in the case of Charlotte, below, her e-reading is a complement rather than a replacement for her reading of print.

The joys of serial reading

Charlotte is in her late forties, works as an accounts assistant and lives in Barbados. She reads every day on a Kindle and her favourite genres are 'romance, mystery and paranormal'. She describes herself as:

a reader with no exclusions. I am one of those people who can take a book to a concert and read (...) We had a concert here with Fantasia and I went with my sister, we were all dressed up, we took the requisite pictures and everything. We were sitting probably early, so we get a good seat, an hour before the show. I reached into my bag and pulled out my Kindle and she looked at me with horror on her face.

When I ask her why she reads she explains:

It transports me into another world. That's not to say that my current world has anything wrong with it, but there are people who play sports because that's where they get their energy. Reading gives me my energy. And there are people who have some hobby that takes their mind off whatever stresses they're going through. Reading does that for me. So a lot of the things that other people have that do these things for them, reading does for me. Reading is multi-faceted where I'm concerned. There are times when I have things to do when I get home and instead of doing them I will pick up the book and read because my mind has recognised that I need to disconnect. And so I will immediately reach for the book.

Charlotte was raised in a religious household. Her father is a deacon in a protestant church and she continues to attend Bible study sessions. The reading of the Bible and religious books is a chore whereas her romance and mystery reading is her 'calming, downtime hobby'. Unlike her sister, who she describes as more progressive, she avoids books with 'black writer style of swearing'. Describing her preferences she tells me:

I've read a lot of books like Dick Francis and John Gresham. I like books that have meat in them and for me, a novel should be fairly thick. Anything less than 250-300 pages isn't enough book for me, really... Harlequin is a little bit better than Mills & Boons. But I am more of a romance with mystery. Somebody got kidnapped, you have to figure it out, they fall in love. Stuff like that. I like some sort of meat. Or I like lawyer types series or a book not necessarily murder but it may have some murder in it. As long as it involves solving something. I like mystery, along with the romance.

Charlotte reads series and does so intensively. When a new book in the series she is reading 'comes out I reread the whole series before I read the new book because I will read it so fast that it will go quickly. Then it takes months to see another one, so if it has 20 books in the series I will reread all 20'. The Kindle is instrumental in keeping a fast pace. But the intensity is also emotional. One of several stories she tells me in order to convey how central reading is to her is the following:

I had a miscarriage that year when I went to England. It was at the beginning of the year and I went to England in the middle of the year, and I wasn't sleeping, I was binge reading. I would literally read a book, no matter what time of the day or night it was, I would get up and pick up

another book. It didn't matter if I had read the book before or not, I just got up and got another book and then I would see morning has started and I'd be like, 'oh I have to go to work, I have to get ready for work' and go to work. I did that consistently for weeks and weeks because my mind just would not let me rest. Eventually you read everything you have in your house but it didn't stop me from going back and rereading the books because I just could not shut my mind off. I was handling it very badly and I guess psychologists or psychiatrists would have some really classy explanation for it but for me it was just my way of dealing with it. If I didn't read, I probably would have committed suicide or something. Reading saved my life.

I share with Charlotte that some of my other interviewees say that depression prevents them from reading because they cannot concentrate.

No, that is not the same for me at all. If I am depressed, I will read. If I'm hungry, I will read. It does not matter where I am, what I'm doing, how I feel. Reading takes that pressure off of my body. I transport myself into a different world and I've a great imagination so reading has always been that place to go. It is very difficult to explain it to others but it's the thing that keeps me from going crazy. One would think that if you live alone, you have no children, no man in the house, no pets, you don't really watch television, then you must be bored to tears. But I'm kind of... how do you put it... I'm not necessarily an outgoing person but I can enjoy myself when I'm out. I am more of a homebody. They don't get that I need to recharge. Reading is a recharger for me. I can be in the middle of the noisiest party and I will read. And I'm fine, you may think there's something wrong with me but I'm fine in that environment.

While Charlotte's vivacity is unique, the practice of intense reading of e-books in series form, especially of romance and fantasy, is

widespread. As McAlister et al. (2023: 2018) note, romance 'was a principal factor in the uptake and popularisation of e-books and e-readers' from the 2010s onwards, part of a burgeoning publishing ecosystem that includes also crime and a blend of traditional and self-publishing (Driscoll et al. 2018). Other participants in this study who read series also do so digitally as the e-book version is cheaper, faster to acquire and occupies much less space.

For e-book readers convenience is experienced as an increase in control that enhances the subjectification of the practice of reading and the objectification involved in getting lost in the book, because it enhances their ability to mould the reading to their circumstances.

Unlike with mobile phones, which users tend to personalise with cases, stickers, backgrounds and ringtones (Bell 2005), in a clear process of material subjectification, no participant in this study refers to customisation of their e-books or tablets.

Refusal

The focus of this chapter is on the kinds of attachment that emerge between readers and the reading on e-books. So far, I have shown that while there is no attachment to the device of the e-reader or the object of the e-book, which together work as replaceable instruments for access to fluid content, attachment to the practice of reading is enhanced by e-books. This is evident in the accounts in the previous section of readers who are stimulated by the possibility of a virtually instantaneous and uninterrupted supply of reading material. In this final section I discuss the preference for print books over e-books. The point of the contrast is to illuminate the mechanisms of attachment

that this study is concerned with, in particular the iconic power of the codex and the interplay between surface and depth, action and passion. Love and the desire to possess converge easily, the drive to be in the constant presence of the loved object/subject easily understood in common language and experience, even when problematic. This section's stories of a drive to own, to touch, to point at, to pass on, exhibit this same attitude towards print books as loved objects. In these accounts, the full exercise of this love is curtailed by digital books. The affordances of the e-book provoke these readers to revert to ideas of presence and reality as co-presence in space and time which only print can provide them.

Closeness and immediacy

Angus is a journalist in his mid-fifties who lives in Edinburgh. Reading has been crucial for his career and his personal development. He reads science and history during the day and fiction in the evening. He does not read digital books because:

Somehow it feels a bit more distant when it's online. You're conscious this is on a website somewhere out there, whereas the book is right in front of you, you feel directly linked up with the author of the book. You feel almost as if the author is there with you. Whereas if it's online you feel rather detached looking at it. (...) It's that intimacy I think, when you've got the book, the author with you, on your lap or wherever, compared with online.

We know that screens' intrinsic features do not preclude intimacy or closeness. The ethnographic work on video-gamers, for example, describes in detail the immersive experience of near incorporation between the human body and games' interfaces and narratives

(Murray [1997] 2017; Keogh 2018). Arguably, there is no radical break between the sensorial experiences involved in holding a print book, touching a page, reading the script on it and being 'absorbed by the story' on one hand, and the actions and sensations afforded by certain videogames on the other. There may be some phenomenological overlaps here with the experience of the 'half-real' in video games. This involves the simultaneous engagement with the real rules of a game, which determine whether the player wins or loses, and the fictional worlds of the game (Juul 2011).

For readers formed in a print culture the event of reading a book is tied to a type of presence that demands analogical rather than digital or virtual interaction. Print books' presence *appears* more 'real' than e-books' presence. Readers who refuse e-books have felt the weight and bulk of the e-reader or tablet on their hands and seen the e-book clearly on display in a decodable format, co-present with their own bodies in the same room, at the same time as they are, and yet the remediated presence of the electronic book is either too opaque (I don't like not being able to turn the page back and find the character's name) or too transparent (where is the book?). The disconcerting feeling of e-books' virtuality is apparent in the account by Amber, a 26-year-old marketing executive. She explains her dislike for e-books by reference to tangibility, presence and 'real' ownership.

I can definitely see. Like there are times, like, for going on holidays and stuff, where you can just, like, you've just got one light thing and you can have as many books as you want on it. I can definitely see why it would be useful. But for me, it's just not the same. And I don't know, I could maybe see myself one day getting one to use for holidays and stuff, but I don't particularly want to look for convenience.

When I ask her to tell me more about the appeal of print for her, she adds:

Just having that specific copy of it, like, you know, that that's your copy and it's like... [the -e-book] 'is it really there in front of you?' Whereas if it's online, like it's less tangible, like you don't feel like at least for me, like, if I'm listening to... I don't know, if I've like, downloaded an album on my iTunes or something, I don't feel like that's like *my* album like *my* CD, you know? It feels like it feels different to me. And yeah, I think it's like having that attachment to a physical object. I just don't get it with digital things.

The e-book makes it harder, if not impossible, for Amber and readers like her, to make the book her own, its virtual presence an obstacle to the subjectification of the object. Striphas (2009: 181) notes how 'some e-book technologies literally have been programmed with locks, time limits, usage caps, and more, all of which allow hardware developers, software engineers, and digital content providers to oversee the circulation and longevity of e-books'. These 'locks' are a barrier to attachment because by tying the e-book to its developers they prevent its full incorporation into the reader's life and sense of self. Although most readers do not often consider the political economy of the technology, the phenomenology of the e-book is strikingly patent to them: they perceive what feels, aesthetically, as detachment devices (Muniesa 2008) embedded in the e-book as a service platform (Rowberry 2017).

Very much like the readers who relish what they perceive as a more active involvement with reading print, Hellen, an interviewee in her mid-forties who reads crime and romance as well as literary fiction explains that she sometimes will read first on the kindle and then on print: 'because I love them [the print book] so much'. In her case, e-

books are convenient but not the preferred medium. Her interpretation of this is that more of her senses are engaged in the reading of print.

I wonder whether it's because you engage with it more you've got the smell and the feel of it. Rather than just reading the screen just reading the screen or something I kind of associate with work, I read a lot of reports and stuff on the screen. With a book you've got more of your senses engaged, you can smell it, you can feel it, if you're really weird you can taste it, I don't do that, but you could and maybe that's why I prefer I prefer a real book, it's a tangible thing. And I think that is quite important to me it's, it's a thing, it's something that I own, that I like, that is attractive to me, it's, it's like a piece of art and it's yeah.

Passing on and gifting books

Heather, an avid reader of fantasy and science fiction, explains the importance of being able to share physical copies of the books she has enjoyed with her loved ones. I include below a section of our dialogue:

H: For me there is real pleasure in enjoying the book and then being able to say to somebody else, 'I think you'd really like this'. It gives me a real kick, knowing the sort of books that would appeal to friends or family, to be able to say, 'you'll love this', and then they come back and say, 'you're right I did love that'. So, as well as being able to pass books on, so it's not that I'm anti-e-books at all, it's just for me that's not how I've really chosen to interact with books because obviously you can't just go, 'here read this', or something.

A: Unless you send them a...

H: I think for some you can share, yes. But depending if that other person has got the right device and blah, blah, blah, so for me it's really about being able to share the books. I think what's kind of interesting is that you still get these articles in magazines and newspapers which are, is the book dead. Before it was like, is the book dead because now we've got television and now it's, is the book dead because now we've got e-readers. It's like well, not really, because it's not either/or. A lot of the people that I know that read using an e-reader or their smartphone, whatever, they still sometimes buy hard copy books and they're still sometimes reading hard copy books. It just depends where and how they're reading.

A: Would you under any circumstance switch to an e-reader?

H: Never say never. At present I'm quite happy with my reading habits. I'm able to read that stuff that I want to read. I think the thing for me about the e-reader is that I wouldn't just be able to go, I've read this book, now here you go, I don't need this copy anymore, you can just... it's not quite the same.

A: You mentioned that at the beginning, so that's important to you, the sharing of it after you read it?

H: Yes.

A: What you seem to be saying is that your reading would be incomplete if you couldn't share, is that correct?

Yes, my other friends who readers and stuff, I like to tell them what I've been reading, I like to hear what they've been reading, so I like the discussion part of it and I actually like the swapping of books.

The acute importance of subjectification of print books as objects that can be touched, held, stored and then given to loved ones which is evident amongst this type of reader, contrasts with experimental conceptions of publishing in digital environments, alternative models to individual notions of property that imagine literary and academic work as open, collective and virtual (Adema 2021).

Ownership

Like Striphas (2009) and Rowberry (2017), cited earlier, scholars have for some time now been mapping the new forms of property and access brought about by digital books. Alexis Weedon and collaborators have noted that the:

systematic classification of these emerging forms of the book by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions has sought to categorise books, artworks and media for retrieval and access. The Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR), originally developed in the 1990s, has an underpinning conceptual framework based on a relational database. FRBR is a conceptual entity relationship model that, at its top level, identifies a distinct intellectual and artistic creation: a work, expression, manifestation and item (IFLA, 1998) ... The relationships describe the link between the entities: the draft is the realisation of the story, the e-book is the embodiment of the story, the item is one particular example such as the e-book download or the on-demand printed paperback (Bennett et al. 2003; Eden 2006; Hickey et al. 2002). Significantly the FRBR distinguishes between the responsibility or custodianship of the different entities identifying who – person, family or corporate body – is the creator of the work, the realiser of the draft, the producer of the e-book form and the owner of the download. (Weedon et al. 2014: 112)

This type of networked or diversified ownership is obviously not aesthetically equivalent to that of print and is not part of the phenomenology of the reading experience for e-book readers.

Katrina reads fantasy and young adult novels intensely in both formats. She treats her print and digital books differently.

K: I highlight them in my Kindle. But if I have a book, I put bookmarks in, I don't write in my books. With the Kindle it's easier because it's easier to carry 100 books around than actually carrying 100 books around. But I love books still, I still buy books, the physical copy of my favourite books.

A: When you read something on the Kindle, do you then buy the printed copy?

K: If I really love the book, yes.

A: If the material book disappeared entirely would you care? If they were available on the digital version, would it matter to you at all?

K: I suppose it could be good for the trees but I would care, yes.

A: Why?

K: Because books are books, this is knowledge. This is something... a book can never break down or something, a book is a book. Kindle can die, a computer can die and not work anymore. The electricity can be gone in 15 years, then we would have books, and no books, no knowledge. In the electronic version, we would be all dead.

A: By dead, you mean...

K: No way of gaining knowledge except talking. So, books are important, they should stay.

Katrina's view brings us back to the remark by Eco at the start of this chapter, his claim that the print book cannot be improved upon, that it is already 'perfect' (Carrière and Eco 2011: 45, 122), a device that has survived for hundreds of years and is an efficient way of carrying information which does not need electricity or to be plugged in. The idea that print appears to be less ephemeral⁷ is often also invoked alongside the sensorial experience of print books. Invariably readers talk about their 'solid feel'. A retired Mass Observer explains: 'It is unlikely that I would ever enjoy reading books on a computer screen, however clever the technology, as the solid feel of a real book is part of its pleasure'. But this is also the case for younger readers in this study. Elizabeth, who was 19 at the time of the interview, and who reads young adult series and literary fiction explains why she prefers print and, in her account, gathers together several of the features favoured by others in this study:

[I prefer the print book] because I like to hold it. It's also being able to see your progress instead of seeing a percentage or something. I don't know how, but it does feel different, looking at the thing. Although the more I get used to it, the less difference there is on the e-reader. But yes, I do prefer to hold a book and being able to turn the page physically and touch the paper and experience it. And also being able to loan it to somebody and have them read it and have their thoughts and return it. I feel a little bit more connected to the book and the story and then to other people who might want to read it, on paper rather than the on the e-reader.

⁷ In the conversation with Eco, Carrière points out that given how quickly they become obsolete 'long-term media formats', such as the CD-ROM for example, have proven more ephemeral than print (Carrière and Eco 2011: 12-35).

Although research comparing reading on paper and screens is inconclusive regarding the impact of screen reading on readers' ability to find their way around the text, that is, their spatio-temporal experience (Mangen and Kuiken 2014),⁸ readers frequently invoke this as an important difference, even those who have switched to e-books. When I ask Heather, cited above, what is the most appealing thing about the hard copy for her, this is her response:

Sometimes if you're reading something and you get to the point and it makes you think about something you've read in that book earlier, it's much easier to flick through and go, oh yes that was the bit I read earlier that I want to revisit. I just like the physical element. Also, I think the other thing that I really like in terms of hard copy books is picture books, so I get real pleasure in choosing those for younger children that I know. I think that is something about, I suppose, when you're first encountering books and understanding how they work, having that understanding there is a beginning and a middle and an end, and that's how you get from one to the other, just that understanding of that physical format.

The flow of it and it's easier to see that, I think. Sometimes if you're reading something that's a really huge, fat book it can be a bit heavy but it's also quite nice to go, yes I can see how far I've got through this now. You can't really do that with an e-reader in such a satisfying manner.

Like Heather, for whom recommending and passing on to loved ones is essential, Elizabeth the university student cited earlier, plans to keep her print copies in order to gift them to her younger cousins. Some of the books she has now were given to her by her older cousins

⁸ The data about other dimensions of reading on screens also appear to be inconclusive (Hakemulder and Mangen 2024).

and other relatives. Both accounts illustrate how closely tied the aesthetic experience of reading is to the maintenance of important social relationships. These readers' social bonds are sustained by print books through the sensorial enjoyment which they wish to share with others.

The material presented so far shows two things. First, that e-books support subjectification and attachment to the practice of reading and to favourite genres as they accelerate access, expand portability and give a sense of enhanced control. Second, that for those who prefer print, books as objects that can be touched, held, smelled, stored and then given to loved ones as a form of sustaining their reading as well as meaningful social connections, these are affordances specific to the codex which are highly valued. These evaluations of the e-book vis-à-vis the codex revolve around key elements in media history and aesthetics: aura, presence, and remediation. I conclude with a reflection on these themes within the framework of books' iconicity.

Conclusions

In their discussion of the applicability to new media of Walter Benjamin's ideas about the loss of aura in art (Benjamin 1968a, b), Bolter et al. (2006) write that 'Benjamin was wrong if he thought audiences and producers would accept a final and irrevocable loss of aura in their popular media forms. What Benjamin identified was not the end of aura, but rather an ongoing crisis, in which the experience of aura is alternately called into question and reaffirmed' (Bolter et al 2006: 22). In their summary of Benjamin's argument in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin 1968a), the

reverence elicited by works of art that Benjamin called aura belongs to works of art that are unique. Reproduction is a threat to the experience of the 'here and now' afforded by traditional art where the physical presence of a painting or sculpture paradoxically produces a sense of remoteness and reverence towards its unique history (Bolter et al 2006: 24). The automatic, reproductive technologies of film and photography, on the other hand, mean the decline of aura. Noting that the concept of aura in Benjamin's later work about lyric poetry shifts away from nostalgia and sentiment (Benjamin 1968b), Bolter et al. point to the ambiguity in the definition of aura as the 'unique phenomenon of a distance, no matter how near' (Bolter et al 2006: 26). They do this to highlight 'the tension between the unapproachable and the approachable both at the psychological level and at the cultural and economic level (...) [which] ensures that aura as our collective or individual reaction to art can never simply disappear' (Bolter et al 2006: 26). Their overall argument is that the media landscape is characterised by a state of constant crisis of aura and aura's concomitant desacralization: the non-hierarchical co-existence of an auratic and a reflective style in media production and consumption ('reflective, because they reveal, rather than conceal, their own representational techniques'). Discussing VR technologies Bolter et al. (2006) remind us that 'any medium can potentially generate a sense of presence, if the user is made to forget the technology (...) [which becomes transparent]' (Bolter et al 2006: 26). 'A media technology's capacity to generate aura depends on the degree to which it convinces the user that she is in the presence of the authentic' (Bolter et al 2006: 29).

The accounts by readers seeking to explain their adoption or resistance to e-books presented in this chapter show that the e-book

is a reflective/opaque digital object, one not different enough to be apprehended with independence of the light radiated by or the iconic power of the codex. These readers' stance might have things in common with that of video gamers' dual response of immersion and scepticism (Jansz and Martens 2005), enchantment and distance. While transparency and immersion are achieved for the reading event, especially for readers of romance, fantasy or science fiction series, the device and the e-book as an object remain opaque, its features remarked upon and considered in relation to the familiar codex.

The implications of this for attachment are significant. Insofar as the stories or the 'content' read on e-books is experienced as fluid and recognised as virtual, real but located 'somewhere on a server' aesthetic immersion will be partial when compared to the aesthetic experience of print. There is a structural limitation to attachment in the e-book itself which, so far, makes it a lesser version of print every time subjectification is at stake. Insofar as iconic experience involves the interaction with a material surface which affords also deep meanings through the imagination, then the bond between readers and their e-books will be weak even as the attachment to the practice of reading is reinforced.

Readers display a highly reflexive stance that ties in with the reflectivity of the e-book itself. However, I depart from Bolter et al. (2006) to propose that the language used and the aesthetic experiences invoked show the opposite of the desacralisation of aura.

This brings me to the final point. Can these readers' experiences be meaningfully understood in terms of a nostalgia for the book in times

of digitisation? I propose that there is attachment to the book icon across the board, in the case of e-book readers as an evaluative framework, and as attachment to the medium of the print book for those who prefer print. I suggest that this is not simply a nostalgic defence of auratic experience triggered by the opacity or failed remediation of the e-book. What readers are holding on to when they continue to read print is a rewarding and meaningful aesthetic experience which is tied to the materiality of the print book.

In their study of the vinyl record Dominik Bartmański and Ian Woodward (2015) note that:

Not all things analogue have lasting appeal just because our cultural reality got digitalized. Obviously there is more to the vinyl's enduring attractiveness...we believe vinyl's survival and revival to stem from a series of genuine cultural and sensual motivations nested alongside the material features of the object itself, rather than from an ephemeral retro mania inspired by a digital ennui. A particular lifeworld, a taste for certain experiences, and an embedded lifestyle, not a mere vintage fashion or nostalgic craze. (Preface)

Books have had a different trajectory to that of the vinyl record because they have not gone underground and then re-emerged. However, they share with vinyl in the significance of the material surfaces, and the subjectification and objectification that these surfaces afford.

The attachment amongst committed readers is not a simple matter of nostalgia but grounded in an actual experience that is rewarding and valued in its own right.

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Library Lives: Everyday Reading and Cultural Change in Delhi

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Abstract: From nineteenth-century urban institutions to post-1951 metropolitan systems and contemporary community-led and informal study spaces, Delhi's library landscape offers a distinctive lens onto everyday reading as a practice shaped by urbanization, migration, pedagogy, and politics. The paper addresses four questions: how Delhi's libraries evolved from elite and associational collections to postcolonial public systems; how institutional, community, specialized, and informal spaces facilitate social interaction and everyday literary engagement; how libraries figure as contested civic sites in moments of socio-political crisis; and how habitual reading practices reflect and reshape cultural change in a multilingual, migrant-heavy metropolis. By synthesizing historical accounts, policy reports, institutional surveys, and cultural analyses, I argue that public and *para*-public libraries in Delhi are dynamic infrastructures of access, sociality, and meaning-making, central to democratizing knowledge and sustaining dialogic urban publics.

Keywords: postcolonial city, urban modernity, public policy, leisure and learning, spatiality

Introduction

Libraries in Delhi have long mediated the relationship between everyday reading and urban change, converting textual circulation into shared practices that sustain civic literacy, cross-linguistic exchange, and social mobility. The city's institutions—ranging from nineteenth-century associational collections to a UNESCO-assisted metropolitan public system inaugurated in 1951—translated postcolonial ambitions for adult education and inclusion into spaces where newspapers, magazines, fiction, and exam-oriented texts structured daily routines and sociable literacies. Such spaces have repeatedly been reconfigured by planning regimes, library legislation debates, municipal infrastructures, and national policy imaginaries seeking to align public libraries with democratizing development, multilingual collections, and social education.

This study analyses Delhi's libraries through four interlinked research questions: historical evolution, socio-spatial ecologies and roles, contestation and civic symbolism, and everyday reading as cultural practice. The approach aligns institutional histories, official compendia, and cultural scholarship on South Asian libraries to trace how reading, especially by non-professional, 'lay' publics, becomes a lived practice at the intersection of accessibility, language, time, and place. I argue that the libraries and reading rooms in Delhi—whether municipal, autonomous, denominational, philanthropic, or community-run—operate as dynamic mediators of urban belonging and change, with their everyday uses revealing as much about metropolitan life as about the texts on their shelves.

What Counts as a Library in Delhi?

What counts as a library in Delhi? The question appears deceptively straightforward, but it unsettles any simple equation between

libraries and buildings, or between collections and access. To ask it is to inquire into the infrastructures of attention, care, and civic belonging that shape how reading becomes possible in a city marked by both density and dispossession. In Delhi, a library is less a discrete institution than a distributed public ethos—an assemblage of proximate, multilingual, and socially differentiated spaces that together sustain reading as a civic capacity.

This distributed ecology extends from municipal anchors and university libraries to smaller, often precarious formations: community reading rooms, licensed ‘study libraries’, pavement book exchanges, mobile vans, and deposit stations. What binds these sites together is not their architecture but their animating ethic. Delhi yields an aspiration toward equitable access, accompanied with the belief that the right to read forms part of the right to the city (Lefebvre 1996; Harvey 2008). Defined this way, the library is both a place and a practice, offering the infrastructural preconditions of attention, such as seat, light, safety, air. The collections reflect Delhi’s multilingual literary landscape: Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, English, along with the genres the city’s population *actually* read: exam guides, devotional literature, serial fiction, and periodicals.

Foregrounding these conditions reframes ‘access’ as a problem of infrastructural citizenship rather than mere information delivery (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018). Reading, in this sense, is not simply a cognitive act but a socio-material one. It depends on the availability of time, light, safety, and proximity, all of which are unevenly distributed across Delhi’s urban fabric (Star 1999; Simone 2004). The library thus emerges as a node within what anthropologists of infrastructure call

the social life of maintenance—those mundane, iterative labours that make collective life sustainable (Denis and Pontille 2015). A functioning library, however modest, enables citizens to inhabit the city as readers without purchasing quiet or security. It offers the mundane affordances that stabilize attention such as barrier-free entry, functioning toilets, shaded benches, steady replenishment of newspapers; and in doing so turns attention itself into a civic practice.

This infrastructural reading of the library brings into view a politics of inclusion embedded in design. Services for incarcerated or differently abled readers, Braille and large-print collections, women-only time blocks, and mobile or deposit libraries that reach distant colonies—all instantiate a principle of access by architecture, not by exception. The question is not simply whether Delhi possesses enough libraries, but whether its infrastructures of reading recognize the plural and uneven temporalities of its publics—shift work, commuting, care routines, exam preparation.

The city's proliferating 'quiet study rooms' are symptomatic of both demand and deprivation. These privately operated, fee-based spaces—marketed to aspirants and students preparing for competitive exams—have become indispensable in a metropolis where neither homes nor streets easily sustain concentration. Their emergence indexes what might be called the 'privatization of quiet', an infrastructural inequality in which safety, light, and time are commodified. If such spaces are now the *de facto* reading rooms for a generation, the challenge for policy is go beyond the commercial framework and integrate libraries into a civic framework that

acknowledges the need for licensed, fee-capped libraries held to standards of inclusivity and safety.

Governance and modernization belong within this expanded conception of the library, but as means rather than ends. Transparent oversight, predictable funding, professional training, interoperable catalogues, and statutory deposit workflows can widen discovery and institutional trust. Yet modernization must remain attentive to what Brian Larkin calls ‘the poetics of infrastructure’: the sensory and affective registers through which publics experience the state (Larkin 2013). Digitization, for instance, cannot displace the print routines and tactile sociabilities that anchor lay reading. Instead, a hybrid design—digital for discovery, print for use—would better align technological rationality with urban experience.

At the other end of the spectrum, Delhi’s community libraries remind us of reading as an act of urban commoning (Linebaugh 2008; Foster and Iaione 2016). These initiatives transform the book into a shared resource rather than a private commodity, sustaining the circulation of texts in times of strain—pandemic closures, displacement, or infrastructural neglect. They exemplify the civic impulse to ‘common’ the book, but their precarity also exposes the limits of volunteerism as public policy. They should supplement, not substitute for, institutional provision. The ethical challenge is to build state infrastructures robust enough to recognize and cooperate with such commons rather than rely upon them as compensations for austerity.

When seen as civic infrastructure, the library becomes a mesh rather than a monument. It is a safety-first, policy-aligned network through

which readers move without having to buy access to light or security. Its measure lies not in grandeur but in regularity: the persistence of benches, fans, and newspapers that make reading possible across languages and life stages. To invest in these mundane conditions is to practice informational justice: the equitable distribution of the material and social means of attention (Jaeger and Burnett 2010).

Delhi's geography of reading remains deeply uneven. The north-south corridor of university and research libraries is relatively dense, while peripheral colonies, resettlement areas, and industrial belts remain under-served. The capital's literary life—its festivals, book launches, and book bazaars—rests uneasily on this infrastructural asymmetry: a dense circulation of books but a thin network of public reading spaces. For many, especially women and students in shared housing, the public library is not a luxury but a precondition for intellectual life. To ask what counts as a library is, therefore, to ask how the city allocates quiet, who is allowed to linger, and what forms of study it deems legitimate.

From this perspective, the library is not merely a cultural amenity but a democratic institution: one of the few spaces that address the citizen as reader rather than consumer or voter. Its political promise lies in its ordinariness—the fact that it functions without spectacle, sustaining habits of collective thought through routine. A library that opens on time, maintains light and shade, and replenishes its newspapers performs a civic miracle more enduring than many proclamations of “smart city” modernity.

To strengthen Delhi's libraries is, then, to strengthen the city's capacity for collective reflection. The task is at once infrastructural and imaginative: to secure the material conditions that make reading possible, and to align technological modernization with the social realities of neighbourhood life. The right to read cannot be asserted by rhetoric alone; it must be enacted through routine. A city's reading life is ultimately measured not by its flagship institutions but by the quiet persistence of its smallest ones—the benches that stay filled, the fans that keep turning, and the multilingual publics that, day after day, keep returning.

Historical evolution

Delhi's emergence on what might be called the "library map" of modern South Asia began in the late nineteenth century, when associational and municipal forms of civic literacy began to take institutional shape. The Delhi Institute Library (c. 1862), housed within the Lawrence Institute (now the Town Hall at Chandni Chowk), was among the earliest formal repositories. It aggregated earlier associational collections into a civic-facing space that expressed both the pedagogical and urban aspirations of a newly reconstituted colonial capital (Vashishth 2009; Borah, Sonowal, and Gogoi 2024). This associational nucleus was formally inaugurated as the Delhi Public Library in 1902 (a municipal body distinct from the post-1951 institution of the same name), which moved from the Lawrence Institute to Kaccha Bagh with minimal staff and meagre funds, soon facing the recurrent constraints that defined early public reading rooms: crowding, shortages of periodicals, and irregular municipal financing (Vashishth 2009).

The Hardinge Municipal Public Library, later renamed the Hardayal Municipal Library, emerged directly from this lineage in the aftermath of the 23 December 1912 bomb attack on Viceroy Hardinge. A civic subscription of roughly ₹70,000, led by Rai Bahadur Shiv Prasad and supported by donors including the Maharaja of Kashmir, financed a dedicated building by 1916 (Vashishth 2009). This act of philanthropy exemplified what scholars of the colonial city have called vernacular civic modernity: the use of associational culture, print, and philanthropy to create semi-public infrastructures of reading and debate within a constrained imperial framework (Borah, Sonowal, and Gogoi 2024; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Renamed for Lala Hardayal after Independence, the library became Delhi's enduring municipal anchor, combining heritage stewardship, such as its early manuscripts and gazetteers, along with everyday services such as periodical reading rooms, multilingual circulation, and children's sections, emblematic of the hybrid civic infrastructures through which philanthropy, municipality, and citizen initiative sustained public access amid fiscal fluctuation (Vashishth 2009).

These Delhi trajectories mirrored wider Indian patterns in which municipal, princely, and associational actors built hybrid, subscription-heavy infrastructures of literary access long before the emergence of comprehensive public systems (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003; Borah, Sonowal, and Gogoi 2024). From the mid-nineteenth century onward, library and reading-room movements linked literacy and associational life to an expanding public sphere of periodicals, vernacular presses, and voluntary societies that fostered new publics (Borah, Sonowal, and Gogoi 2024).

A decisive institutional shift occurred in 1951 with the inauguration of the Delhi Public Library (DPL)—a UNESCO-assisted pilot project conceived to demonstrate inclusive, charge-free public library service “adapted to Indian conditions” (Gardner 1955). The project embodied post-Independence developmental optimism, linking adult education and mass literacy with democratic access at metropolitan scale. Inclusion was operationalized through free membership (with refundable deposits where guarantors were unavailable) and an explicitly networked design: a Central Library opposite Old Delhi Railway Station, a Zonal Library at Sarojini Nagar, numerous branches, sub-branches, resettlement-colony libraries, deposit stations in partnership with Resident Welfare Associations, and mobile library vans reaching underserved areas. Specialized units such as a Braille library and a prisoners’ library embedded equity into organizational design, while children’s corners and multilingual holdings materialized the new republic’s pedagogical and linguistic pluralism (Gardner 1955; Vashishth 2009).

From the mid-1950s to the 1990s, national planning documents repeatedly identified libraries as key democratic infrastructures. The Advisory Committee for Libraries (1957) proposed a four-tier system—state, central, district, and block—anchored by training, children’s services, and social education; the Fourth Plan Working Group (1966–71) urged state directorates and investment in metropolitan systems modelled on DPL; the Seventh Plan Working Group on Library Services and Informatics (1985–90) linked development to resource sharing and early automation; and the National Policy on Library and Information System (1986) and Empowered Committee Action Plan (1988) called for legislation, standardized governance, and training pipelines (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Despite these ambitions, there has been chronic under-investment: per-capita library expenditure remained at only a few paise, legislation was patchy, and urban–rural distribution highly uneven (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). Yet Delhi’s DPL stood out as a metropolitan model precisely because it operationalized equity through infrastructure: deposit stations decentralized access; mobile vans mapped reading services onto working-class colonies; and specialized units localized inclusion. From the 1990s onward, DPL entered a phase of technical modernization—adopting CDS/ISIS cataloguing under the Delivery of Books Act, reporting language-wise acquisitions, and later implementing KOHA-based workflows and DELNET resource sharing—while everyday use remained resolutely print-centric and periodical-heavy (Vashishth 2009).

Delhi’s public library system thus embodies a layered institutional arc: nineteenth-century associational heritage, mid-twentieth-century UNESCO modernism, and late-twentieth-century policy drives toward equity, federation, and automation. The resulting ecology is both infrastructural and civic: benches, hours, and cooling arrangements are as crucial as catalogues and metadata. Public reading in Delhi remains an ordinary urban practice—a set of routines through which multilingual publics claim attention, proximity, and safety as civic rights—so that the library’s historical evolution charts not only the expansion of literacy, but the slow democratization of informational citizenship in the Indian metropolis (Vashishth 2009; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Institutional and specialized anchors

Hardayal Municipal Public Library (HMPL, 1862) is the city's oldest continuously operating public library and a paradigmatic municipal anchor, with a reported stock of roughly 170,000 volumes spanning Hindi and Sanskrit (about 84,000), English (about 64,000), and Urdu–Arabic–Persian and allied titles (about 21,000), alongside 56 journals and 30 newspapers subscribed for everyday readers across Old Delhi's dense wards (Vashishth 2009). Its governance by an 11 member Managing Committee chaired by the municipal mayor formalizes a civic compact—policy setting, membership rules, and staff appointments—that couples heritage stewardship (including a rare collection of 7,543 volumes) with quotidian access through branch reading rooms, even as periodic funding constraints have limited acquisitions and a 2010 exhibition fire destroyed 91 rare documents (Vashishth 2009). The institutional infrastructure emphasizes reading room culture more than circulation—newspapers are available 358 days a year from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., with lending concentrated at the main site and two branches—while cataloguing combines an indigenous in-house classification (retained for legacy collections) with contemporary SOUL 2.0 cataloguing for reclassified rare books, reflecting an incremental modernization strategy responsive to local users and staff capacities (Vashishth 2009).

By contrast, Delhi Public Library (DPL, 1951) exemplifies metropolitan scale and specialization as a UNESCO assisted model built around a central library (Old Delhi Railway Station), a zonal library (Sarojini Nagar), multiple branches and subbranches, resettlement colony units, 22 deposit stations in collaboration with resident associations, and 70 mobile service points that spatialize access across the city's neighbourhoods (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011). DPL's social

mission translates into membership rules designed to minimize exclusion—free enrolment with a refundable security when guarantors are unavailable—and programming that makes reading a collective civic practice, including social education groups (drama, music, study circles) and competitions for adult, child, and visually impaired readers (Sohail and Alvi 2011). System metrics index the breadth of everyday readership: in one reporting year the network served 73,467 members who borrowed 1,169,734 books (an average 3,378 issues per day), consulted 20,659 reference items on site, and recorded 244,499 reading room attendances—figures that mirror the city’s periodical heavy, exam oriented, and family reading patterns observed in user studies (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011). Specialized services embed equity in routine operations: the Braille Library held 15,699 books and issued 16,421 volumes to 505 blind members, while prisoner services reached 570 registered readers in Tihar Jail with 15,839 issues, and seven “DVD corners” in select branches extended audiovisual access without displacing demand for print (Vashishth 2009). On the technical side, DPL’s workflows moved from CDS/ISIS database creation under the Delivery of Books Act (with tens of thousands of English and Hindi records) toward KOHA adoption and networked resource sharing (e.g., DELNET), while continuing to report language-wise receipts under statutory deposit and depository status for certain international publications—an evolution that augments discovery without eroding the primacy of print for lay publics (Vashishth 2009).

Delhi’s specialized and denominational repositories deepen this ecology by anchoring linguistic, religious, and philosophical traditions within everyday reading routines, while adopting modest automation where feasible. Fatehpuri Masjid Library (1926), managed

by the Delhi Waqf Board, maintains a roughly 15,000 volume collection across Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Hindi, and English with a core in Islamic studies, subscriptions to serials and newspapers, and a set of Mughal period manuscripts (about ten), offering consultation, reference, and photocopy services within a manually operated, Colon classified system and limited seating (Vashishth 2009). Ramakrishna Mission Library (1956) couples a 50,000 volume general collection and 150 periodicals with full automation (VLIS), barcode enabled circulation, OPAC access, and separate seating for men and women, supported by a small professional and volunteer staff that integrates devotional affiliation with modern librarianship (Vashishth 2009). The Raghmal Vedic Public Library (1915) adds a focused Sanskrit and Vedic collection (30,000+ volumes), while the Punjabi Academy's composite libraries seed Punjabi language access across districts (main library collection about 22,000; a 44 unit branch footprint; and staff and budget lines dedicated to periodicals and acquisitions), all of which sustain local reading through open shelf browsing, basic consultation, and paper registers in the absence of full automation (Vashishth 2009). Civic institutions like the NDMC Central Library (1984) illustrate a compact municipal model—about 13,000 volumes, 40 periodicals, 18 newspapers, OPAC and internet services, and a 45–50 seat reading room—balancing consultation with limited circulation across eight small branches, including a dedicated children's and a sports library (Vashishth 2009).

Children's libraries translate policy commitments into everyday practices by designing space, curation, and programming around graded reading and sociable learning. National Bal Bhawan's library (1956) serves ages 5–16 with roughly 35,000 volumes, open shelf access, and activities such as storytelling sessions, poem recitations

(*kavi goshti*), creative writing, and author interactions, embedding reading within playful and performative formats that suit school timetables and parental logistics (Vashishth 2009). Dr. B. C. Roy Children's Reading Room and Library (1964), funded by the Children's Book Trust, organizes its holdings by age bands (A: 5–8, B: 9–12, C: 13–18), issues photo IDs for child members, and structures differentiated borrowing privileges for local and distant readers, thereby translating an educational mission into disciplined routines that children and guardians can sustain across terms and holidays (Vashishth 2009).

Across this spectrum, a common denominator is routinized reliance on periodicals, newspapers, and practical literature as social scaffolds for reading, with fiction, devotional texts, and reference layered atop this daily bedrock, especially in institutions whose reading rooms are open and well ventilated, with long hours matched to work and school rhythms (Vashishth 2009). DPL user studies reinforce this profile: magazines and newspapers dominate preferences, English is widely chosen alongside Hindi and Urdu, and staff-mediated navigation supplements browsing, while time scarcity and distance are the principal obstacles for working readers—findings that explain the enduring centrality of reading room benches, periodical racks, and proximate neighbourhood nodes (e.g., deposit stations and branches) in driving habit formation (Sohail and Alvi 2011). Financial and governance arrangements further shape these anchors' trajectories—HMPL blending municipal grants, subscriptions, and donations under a committee structure, and DPL relying on plan and non-plan grants that historically skewed toward establishment costs over books—so that modernization (OPACs, cataloguing backlogs, digitization pilots) must be paced against steady investments in core affordances (hours, climate, seating, multilingual replenishment) that

make everyday reading possible (Vashishth 2009; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Community and informal ecologies

Community library initiatives in Delhi and North India have articulated the right to read as a civic entitlement by operationalizing free access, open membership, and multilingual curation through neighbourhood-scale spaces that welcome first-generation readers and lay publics otherwise excluded by fees, distance, or institutional gatekeeping (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Functioning as *para*-public infrastructures, these libraries bridge fiscal and capacity gaps in the state system by mobilizing volunteers, forging local partnerships, and embedding reading within pedagogic and civic programming—health information sessions, rights literacy discussions, reading circles, and homework support—that translate texts into shared knowledge practices (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). Their ethos aligns with the longer genealogy of library movements that linked reading to democratic pedagogy, while their formats and hours are adapted to the constraints of dense urban peripheries where formal branches are sparse or operate with limited seats and schedules (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Within Delhi's mixed ecology, community models often complement the metropolitan network's own outreach instruments—most notably the deposit station scheme through resident welfare associations and the mobile library service—which decentralize collections and extend lending into housing clusters that lack proximate branches (Vashishth 2009). Yet community libraries differ in governance and social programming, taking on roles that

institutional units cannot always prioritize, such as multilingual read-alouds for early readers, women only hours, and targeted collections for migrant workers and first-time test takers, thereby making access both material and culturally legible (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). In moments of civic mobilization or infrastructural stress, these spaces also act as resilience nodes—curating counter-disinformation resources, hosting reading-for-rights sessions, and sustaining slow reading practices that anchor deliberation in environments otherwise optimized for speed (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020).

Alongside community projects, informal ‘commercial libraries’ and exam reading rooms—typically small, privately run, open late into the night, and located near clusters of paying guest accommodations—have become vital infrastructures for longform study among migrant students and working youth. Ethnographic and cultural accounts describe these rooms as hybrid spaces where desk time coexists with sociability, tip sharing about exams and applications, and tacit mentoring that collectively disciplines time under precarious temporalities of shift work, circular migration, and cramped rental housing (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Their collections are lean and pragmatic—newspapers for current affairs, guidebooks and previous year papers, basic reference handbooks, and English learning materials—chosen for high throughput and predictable utility, while the true value proposition is stable attention supported by climate control, reliable seating, and peer presence.

In Delhi’s peripheries and dense rental markets, these informal rooms offer the ‘infrastructure of attention’ that public branches cannot always supply at scale or hours, which is why they complement rather than displace institutional libraries and community sites (Sohail and

Alvi 2011). System level data and user studies from the metropolitan network—periodical-heavy reading, exam-oriented demand, and strong on-premise consultation in reading rooms—help explain this complementarity, as commercial rooms absorb late-hour and high-duration study while branches and deposit stations meet daytime and family reading needs, including children's sections and social education groups (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011). In effect, everyday reading is situated at the confluence of affordability, proximity, safety, cooling, and peer ecologies, with readers moving fluidly among para-public, institutional, and private options across a single day or week (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020).

These community and informal forms also widen what counts as a 'library', making publics visible beyond walls and reinforcing that the library is as much a social relation as a building—a point sharpened in recent years by protest and pavement libraries that materialize constitutional texts, rights manuals, and reading circles in the open, transforming sidewalks into temporary reading rooms and situating books at the centre of democratic claims-making (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). The social imagination of the library in Delhi thus spans municipal benches, school-room floor mats, storefront desks, and pavement circles, each translating textual access into overlapping publics and cultivating habits of attention that endure beyond any single site (Vashishth 2009).

For policy and planning, these ecologies underscore the need to formally recognize para-public actors as partners—through microgrants, donated surplus, and training—and to coordinate hours, language replenishment, and outreach with metropolitan nodes so that readers encounter a continuous, multilingual service

day across institutional and community spaces (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). National frameworks have long urged outreach, mobile service, children's sections, and disability inclusion; extending those logics to community and informal partners can stabilize the mundane affordances that sustain habitual reading—seating, cooling, periodicals, safety—while the metropolitan system continues to modernize discovery and sharing (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). In doing so, Delhi can consolidate a plural library field in which institutional, community, and informal sites coproduce everyday reading as both instrumental and identity-forming practice for a city on the move (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Libraries as contested civic spaces

In South Asia, libraries have never been merely neutral storehouses but historically situated institutions where colonial depositories, associational reading rooms, and postcolonial language politics bound textual sovereignty to social inclusion and exclusion, rendering the library a place where authority, access, and memory are negotiated in real time (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). That long genealogy helps explain why library damage, closures, or hollowing out trigger outsized public reactions: beyond bureaucratic failure, these events are read as breaches in a civic compact that promises lay participation in the textual commons and the everyday practice of public reason (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

In Delhi, the metropolitan network makes this promise legible through the spatial grammar of its design—free or near-zero-barrier membership, open reading rooms at branches and sub-branches, deposit stations embedded in residential associations, and mobile

routes that stitch service into peripheral colonies—materializing inclusion at the level of benches, periodical racks, children’s corners, and multilingual shelves (Vashishth 2009). Yet this same architecture is vulnerable both to the slow time of neglect—budget compression, hiring lags, acquisitions stagnation that national reports have repeatedly flagged—and to acute disruptions that ricochet through campuses and civic squares, transforming libraries and adjacent pavements into signifiers of intellectual autonomy and communal solidarity amid polarized politics (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Multilinguality and gendered access are the fault lines along which this promise is either realized or deferred: institutional records point to multilingual holdings and designated services for children and visually impaired readers, but user studies show male-dominant daily usage, time poverty among working patrons, and distance as a binding constraint, underscoring that formal inclusion requires programmatic redesign—women-only hours, neighbourhood-timed deposit stations, and late-evening reading rooms—to translate nominal rights into actual reading capability (Sohail and Alvi 2011; Vashishth 2009). When those mundane affordances—hours, cooling, seating, replenishment—are missing, publics encounter “availability without accessibility,” which in turn fuels demands for alternative reading spaces and schedules that politicize the temporal and spatial regimes of library life (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Against this backdrop, protest and “pavement” libraries should be understood less as episodic novelties and more as civic techniques that recompose open space into pedagogical commons through curated reading of constitutional primers, rights manuals, and

poetry, sustaining slow attention and dialogic encounter as counter-temporalities to accelerated feeds (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). In Delhi these sidewalk assemblages echo the network's own extension logic—deposit stations and mobile services—yet carry an insurgent inflection by commoning the book as a shared resource when formal venues feel inaccessible, thereby foregrounding that the library is a practice of constituting publics as much as a building with stacks.

Because the library's promise is infrastructural, its repair must also be infrastructural: modernization agendas—OPACs, KOHA adoption, statutory deposit cataloguing and networking—require braiding with the everyday affordances that keep benches full and habits durable; otherwise discovery improves for the connected while the unconnected lose the very conditions that make lay reading viable (Vashishth 2009; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). National frameworks, from mid-century committees to informatics-era plans, have consistently paired legislative vision with mandates for outreach, children's services, disability inclusion, training pipelines, and stable financing, but their own surveys catalogue the chronic shortfalls that can hollow out service at the point of use (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Read this way, Delhi's libraries become indices of the city's public reason: when branches hum, deposit stations circulate proximate collections, mobile routes are reliable, and children's sections are lively, the democratic promise is audible in everyday life; when hours shrink, acquisitions stall, or rare holdings suffer, publics assemble their own reading commons as both attachment to and critique of the ideal (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011). Policy responsive to this

contested terrain will meet publics halfway—micro-grants and surplus book flows to community partners, training for para-public staff, coordinated hours and multilingual replenishment across institutional and neighbourhood nodes—so the institutional, para-public, and insurgent library together form a coherent ecology where everyday reading remains a shared civic capacity rather than a scarce privilege (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Everyday reading: habits, media, and language

Information, entertainment, and staying up to date: everyday reading at Delhi Public Library is patterned by practical aims, channelled through magazines and newspapers that fit the cadence of work, study, and commuting, a profile that repeatedly surfaces in user surveys and reading -room counts (Sohail and Alvi 2011). In a small but detailed DPL study, college students and retirees dominate daily use, working patrons cite time scarcity as the principal barrier to regular visits, and periodicals outrank longform books for on-premise reading, underscoring how library time is carved from narrow windows rather than reserved as an open-ended luxury (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Language choices and genre preferences track aspirations and life course roles: English is preferred by large majorities among students and working users (circa 78%), Hindi remains the salient co-language, and Urdu persists in specific nodes, while magazines, newspapers, and exam-oriented materials are the most consulted formats across age cohorts (Sohail and Alvi 2011). Housewives in the same study report both positive attitudes to reading and multi-hour daily engagement despite distance and household logistics, pointing to a gendered distribution of reading time that is not captured by raw

counts of daily visits alone and that depends on library affordances like proximate deposit stations and predictable hours (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Institutional programming makes these habits possible by turning access into routines: reading rooms, periodical racks, children's corners, and social education groups convert individual intention into collective practice, so that borrowing and reference consultation are complemented by on-premise perusal that fits a tea break, a bus layover, or a school run (Vashishth 2009). The metropolitan network's extension services—mobile libraries and deposit stations managed with resident welfare associations—push this pattern into colonies and peripheries, where proximity and predictability matter more than collection depth for sustaining everyday reading (Vashishth 2009).

Media use in this ecology is best understood as hybrid rather than transitional: OPAC and database modernization, Delivery of Books Act cataloguing, and networking improved discovery and sharing, but print circulation and on-site use of periodicals continued to rise at several units, suggesting that digitization supplements rather than displaces print centric practices for lay publics (Vashishth 2009). This hybridity is legible at the bench—readers alternate between newspaper pages, exam guides, and onscreen catalogue checks—but it is anchored by the physical affordances that stabilize attention (seating, cooling, light), which policy plans repeatedly identify as non-negotiable for public inclusion (Government of India 1957; 1990).

Historically, Indian library movements linked everyday reading to civic pedagogy and nationalist awakening by expanding associational

and municipal reading rooms that socialized readers into public debate; contemporary Delhi extends that lineage through multilingual curation, exam pragmatics, and community-led inclusion, producing a repertoire where fiction, devotional texts, guidebooks, and periodicals circulate as tools of self-fashioning and world knowledge (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). In this repertoire, slow, shared, and purpose driven reading practices emerge as techniques of urban survival and aspiration—from retirees’ daily newspapers to students’ long evening exam sessions—sustained by library infrastructures that remain, despite constraints, among the city’s most accessible platforms for thought (Sohail and Alvi 2011; Vashishth 2009).

Survey micropatterns flesh out these claims: working users overwhelmingly cite time scarcity, students lean toward information and exam materials, retirees split evenly between information and entertainment, and English preference edges out Hindi across categories while Urdu persists in specific locales, a distribution that mirrors the multilingual, life- course- structure of Delhi’s readerly publics (Sohail and Alvi 2011). Staff mediation appears as “sometimes” rather than “always,” and most users read on site for one to three hours per visit, implying that intuitive shelf organization, visible periodical displays, and clear wayfinding can unlock latent demand without imposing reference bottlenecks (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Taken together, these habits reveal that the smallest infrastructural choices—hours tuned to shift patterns, fresh periodicals at the front desk, children’s corners with graded materials, social education groups keyed to local calendars—convert policy ideals into durable

reading routines (Vashishth 2009). Planning documents continually register the same lesson at scale: modernization succeeds when it is braided with the mundane affordances that keep benches full, language replenishment steady, and multilingual publics returning, because it is through these quotidian frictions that everyday reading remains a shared civic capacity rather than a private privilege (Government of India 1957; 1990; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Policy frameworks and modernization

Across seven decades of committees, working groups, and policy notes, a remarkably stable problem diagnosis recurs: low per-capita spending, fragmented administration, uneven or absent state legislation, staffing shortfalls, and weak coordination among public, academic, and special libraries, alongside recurring priorities—children’s services, disability inclusion, rural/urban outreach, and informatics-led networking (Government of India 1957; 1990). The mid-century Report of the Advisory Committee for Libraries (1957) articulated a four tier architecture (state–central–district–block) with training, social education, and children’s services at its core, while later instruments—NAPLIS (1986) and the Empowered Committee Action Plan (1988)—argued for bringing libraries into a coordinated policy ambit via legislation, apex bodies, state directorates, financing norms, and professional pipelines (Government of India 1986; 1988). This line of policy thinking also anticipated the contemporary emphasis on interoperability (cataloguing standards, union catalogues, and resource sharing), and it linked modernization explicitly to outreach, so that digital discovery would be braided with

access at benches and neighbourhood nodes rather than displace them (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

In Delhi, these national frames illuminate both the metro scale design of DPL and the sequence of its upgrades. On the one hand, DPL operationalized inclusion through a network that runs from a central and zonal core to branches, sub-branches, deposit stations with resident associations, mobile routes, and specialized units (Braille; prisoner services) that embed equity by design (Vashishth 2009). On the other, modernization proceeded incrementally: CDS/ISIS databases under the Delivery of Books Act through the 1990s, language wise reporting of statutory receipts, and subsequent migration to KOHA with participation in networked sharing, even as periodical heavy print use persisted among lay publics (Vashishth 2009). Parliamentary and ministerial updates in the last decade reinforce this pattern: “modernization” is recurrently funded as an ongoing process (digitization, preservation, capital assets), while membership and use fluctuate with shocks (e.g., COVID-19), prompting calls for virtual platforms without abandoning the print anchored routines that still structure everyday reading. Read together, Delhi’s record shows a policy ethos that treats everyday reading as both an end (cultural wellbeing) and a means (human development), with implementation hinging on the ordinary affordances—hours, cooling, seating, multilingual replenishment—that convert discovery into durable practice (Government of India 1957; 1990).

Libraries as infrastructures of everyday culture

Seen at city scale, Delhi's libraries stage everyday reading as a social practice embedded in layered infrastructures: material (buildings, chairs, light, climate), logistical (hours aligned to shift work and commuting, proximity, affordable transport), linguistic (multilingual holdings and signage), and symbolic (membership rules, non-discrimination norms, civic values encoded in open reading rooms). Institutional anchors and specialized repositories provide cultural depth and predictable routines; community projects thicken service in underserved localities with free lending and targeted programming; informal study rooms supply late-hour, climate-controlled "infrastructure of attention" near hostels and rental clusters; and mobile/deposit nodes stitch gaps between them (Vashishth 2009; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Readers move among these nodes across a week—borrowing near home, consulting in town, studying after hours—not because any single site is sufficient, but because each offers distinct affordances that match life course- roles and constraints (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

This plurality is historical as much as spatial. Associational philanthropy and colonial depositories seeded civic reading rooms; UNESCO-era modernism scaled a metropolitan public system; policy cycles from the 1950s through the informatics era layered training, outreach, and interoperability on top of that base; and contemporary community movements and sidewalk libraries common the book when institutions strain (Government of India 1957; 1986; 1988; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Policy frameworks supply the normative scaffold—equity, inclusion, outreach, modernization—but realization is uneven on the ground, which is why para-public partners matter and why small, repeated investments in mundane affordances have outsized effects on habit formation (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). In this field, libraries are not merely service points; they are

cultural infrastructures that stabilize attention, enable language crossing, and ritualize civic time in a city otherwise shaped by churn, commutes, and precarity. The measure of success is therefore not only in catalogues and portals, but in the regularity of benches filled, periodicals replenished, and children's corners humming — conditions under which multilingual publics keep returning and the right to read is enacted as routine (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Conclusion

On an August evening in Rajinder Nagar, a generator thrummed beneath the street's honking, forcing warm air through a basement where fluorescent tubes washed rows of laminated desks in hard light. A hand lettered sign—"No talking"—tilted on a pillar. Aspirants hunched over newspapers and guidebooks; a plastic jug of water sweated on a ledge. When the siren came, it was muffled by concrete. Later, police tape cinched the stairwell. The headline named three lives and an open secret: Delhi's readers have been pushed into the underbelly of the city to buy what should be a public good—time, light, and a safe chair (Newslandry 2024).

This scene crystallizes what the paper has argued. Everyday reading is made and unmade by infrastructures—material, logistical, linguistic, and symbolic—not by texts alone. Where benches, hours, cooling, multilingual replenishment, and predictable proximity exist, newspapers, exam literature, fiction, and devotional texts knit together sociable literacies across life courses; where they do not, para-public workarounds proliferate: commercial rooms monetize attention and aspiration, and protest libraries common the book on

pavements when institutions fall short (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011; Indian Express 2020; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). The incident in Rajinder Nagar was not an aberration but a symptom of policy attention that has too often privileged modernization at the catalogue over continuity at the bench, and of municipal drift that has left heritage anchors and metropolitan systems cash-starved, staff-short, and unevenly provisioned (Government of India 1957; 1986; 1988; 1990; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

A different future begins by treating exam-oriented study as a legitimate public service horizon rather than a private market inevitability. One strand is repair and expansion: stabilize core affordances across the metropolitan network—longer, staggered hours aligned to shift work; climate-secure reading rooms; visible periodical spines; women-only slots; disability-first design; mobile and deposit stations scaled to migrant geographies; and multilingual replenishment that mirrors readerly realities (Vashishth 2009; Government of India 1957; 1990). A second strand is regulation with inclusion: license “quiet study rooms” as a recognized civic category with enforceable safety codes, transparent fee caps, and compliance pathways, so that proximity and late hours do not come at the cost of life. A third strand is partnership and legislation: formalize microgrants and book surplus flows to community libraries; co-locate afterhours study halls in schools and colleges; adopt state level public library legislation that ties financing and accountability to measurable access outcomes; and braid discovery upgrades (OPACs, networking) with neighbourhood metrics (seats, hours, languages, periodical circulation) (PIB 2017; Economic Times Government 2022; Government of India 1986; 1988; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Delhi already holds pieces of this puzzle—deposit stations, mobile routes, children’s corners, social education groups, specialized services, and a living ecology of community and sidewalk libraries (Vashishth 2009; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). The task is to connect them into a network that renders illegal basements redundant: safe, affordable, multilingual, and predictably near (IndiaSpend 2023). The best memorial to the aspirants who never returned to their desks is not a plaque but a city where studying is never a fire hazard; where reading in one’s language of choice is as ordinary as catching a bus; where pavements need not carry the overflow of unmet need; and where public, community, and licensed quiet-rooms together compose a single civic fabric. If policy scaffolds are aligned with the everyday physics of benches, hours, and light, the library will cease to be a last resort and become, again, a common inheritance (Government of India 1957; 1990; Vashishth 2009).

Seen from this angle, the library in Delhi is civic infrastructure: a mesh rather than a monument, a safety-first, policy-aligned network through which readers move without having to buy access to light or security. Its measure lies not in grandeur but in regularity—the persistence of benches, fans, and newspapers that make reading possible across languages and life stages. To invest in these mundane conditions is to practice *informational justice*: the equitable distribution of the material and social means of attention (Jaeger and Burnett 2010). In doing so, the city quietly enacts what Lefebvre (1996) called the *right to the city*—the collective right to shape and inhabit urban space through everyday acts of use, care, and presence. The modest infrastructure of benches and reading rooms

thus becomes an urban commons, where citizens claim the city not through protest or possession, but through the routine dignity of staying, reading, and returning.

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Memoir Reading, Remembering, and Reflecting on Social Media

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Abstract: This article investigates how readers engage with memoir on social media, foregrounding the role of memory in contemporary reading practices. I draw on an original dataset of posts and discussions collected from Goodreads, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, X, and YouTube about four recent memoirs. Combining inductive and deductive coding with semi-distant and close reading, I analyze how readers articulate memories of their own lives in response to authors' life narratives. Findings show that memoirs prompt readers to engage in transmedia discovery, embodied reflection, and personal recollection, producing responses that highlight recognition, nostalgia, and shared vulnerability. Unlike other studies that focus primarily on fiction, my analysis demonstrates that memoir occupies a distinctive space of identification and activism, where readers' digital articulations of memory resist silencing, erasure, and the policing of life stories. By situating memoir at the centre, I argue that readers' memory work in digital spaces constitutes more than private reflection. It is also a collective and multimodal practice of meaning-making through which readers connect their lives to broader cultural conversations.

Keywords: Memoir and Life Writing, Digital Reading Practices, Social

Introduction

Why do readers turn to memoir to understand the world? How do readers present their memoir reading on social media? What role do social media platforms play in shaping readers' presentation of their memoir reading? These are the questions of an interdisciplinary project called *Reading for Our Lives: Readers, Memoir and Social Media* in which we investigate non-professional reading responses to *I'm Glad My Mom Died* by Jennette McCurdy (2023), *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe (2020), *I Want to Die but I also Want to Eat Tteokbokki: A Memoir* by Baek Sehee (2022), and *Making it So: A Memoir* by Patrick Stewart (2023).¹

Social media platforms are spaces where readers discover books, talk about them, and recommend or don't recommend their reading choices (Foesberg 2012; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2019; Thomas 2020). There are studies of reading practices on a single platform, such as Goodreads (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2018), Instagram (Zhan, Tu, and Yu 2018), TikTok (Low, Ehret, and Hagh 2023), Twitter (Gruzd and Rehberg Sedo 2012), Wattpad (Ramdarshan Bold 2016), or YouTube (Tomasena and Scolari 2024), or more wide-ranging studies that connect reading, media ecologies and the literary sphere together (Ren 2024). Our project makes the study of reading *memoir* its specific intention, which is an important advancement to the field of Reading Studies because most of the extant scholarship focuses on readers reading fiction.

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In this paper, I examine how multimodal readers cubed (or MMR³) articulate individual memories of life experiences prompted by reading memoirs, and why we think these memories are important. My long-time research partner, Danielle Fuller, and I came up with the concept of the “multimodal reader cubed.” It refers to readers in a post-digital age who integrate online and offline reading practices—such as finding, selecting, reading, and discussing texts. Multimodal readers³ engage in a range of communicative modes, including gestural, visual, auditory, spatial, and linguistic. They navigate across devices and formats, acting and interacting within a mobile, networked, multimedia environment (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2023, 5–7). Post-digital indicates an era when on-line and off-line practices are considered equally important to one another and can happen simultaneously (Cramer 2014). I use Dane and Weber’s (2021) conceptualization of post digital readers.

While Alessio Antonini, Sam Brooker, and Lovro Škopljanić (2024) attend to the question of remembering specific stories across time and media, I look to better understand *what* memories surface for readers of memoir and *how* those memories are articulated in online reading reception.

Methods

To answer our research questions, we used scraping software and manual collection for two weeks in February and March 2023 and 2024. Our dataset consists of randomized reader posts and conversations for each memoir using GoodReads for every case study (1063 original posts), plus two different social media platforms per book. The platforms are Reddit (236), Instagram (331), TikTok (201), X (370) and YouTube (5). The data were managed using NVivo and

coded using both inductive and deductive means to create coding categories. Analysis includes both semi-distant and close reading of the text, video and sound.

In responding to the conference call and the emphasis of memory work, I searched the dataset for posts and discussions including the word “memory” (Nvivo captures similar words, such as “remember”, “memories”, and “remembering”). These posts and discussions were analysed, along with the codes “Life Like Mine” and “Nostalgia” across all four case study memoirs.

Like Antonini, Brooker and Škopljanač’s interview study with readers, this paper bridges reader reception studies and memory studies. It is informed by life writing studies. As such, it might be considered a postcritical study (Felski, 2020) of non-professional or recreational readers’ memories of memoir. What follows is a glimpse into our readers’ reading, remembering and reflecting, and my explanation of why we think memoir matters.

Findings and Discussion

3a. Reading

How do books come into our hands? How do we discover them? In this section, I do not want to talk about the act of reading but rather focus on the importance of multimodal or transmedia *discovery* of memoir.

Transmedia memories, as Antonini, Brooker and Škopljanač forward are evident in our readers’ posts about discovering memoir. In the first instance, McCurdy is a famous US actor, filmmaker, singer and podcaster. She was a child actor from 2007-2012 on Nickelodeon TV teen sitcom series *iCarly*. Celebrity memoirists have an established

audience base (Moran 2000; Rak 2013), and many of our readers refer to watching McCurdy growing up and coming to the book that way. Some even come to the genre of memoir in this way. For example, one Goodreads reader wrote,

So, I am not the biggest memoir reader. I've probably read less than five in my entire thirty-two years and over 1,000 books (per Goodreads). This freaking title though....how can you resist? Slight disclaimer - I knew who Jennette McCurdy was going into this, my little sisters used to watch iCarly, but I hadn't particularly followed her career. I probably will now though, because HOLY SHIT this woman writes a damn engaging story. (GR Manual Scrape 02Mar2023 #118)

Many others refer specifically to the title as this reader did, and refer to it as titillating. Some find it troubling. Other readers refer to the hype the book garnered, and others reference a podcast, memes or her music.

Let's turn to our case study #2. In March 2023, the author, book influencer, and activist Sim Kern used their platform and more than 500,000 followers to create *The Trans Rights Readathon*. The week-long reading event was in response to the growing wave of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ legislation in the United States, and encouraged readers to engage with books by trans, genderqueer, or nonbinary authors—or works featuring trans, genderqueer, or nonbinary characters—and to share their reading experiences online. One of the books highlighted during the Readathon was *Gender Queer: A Memoir*. The event amplified the memoir's visibility, leading to increased social media discussions on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. As of this writing, more than 75 thousand readers have rated the book on the social networking site Goodreads (average of 4.27/5 stars); more than

10,600 readers have posted reviews.

This book is not available in Croatia, to the best of my knowledge.

Gender Queer: A Memoir was named the most “challenged book” by the American Library Association for three years in a row: 2022-2024 (Italie 2024). The controversy surrounding the graphic YA memoir was amplified through social media and was the cause to pick up the book for many readers in our data set. See, for example, one reader who posted on Instagram:

If you’ve followed my page for a minute, you probably know that memoirs are typically not the genre I am most drawn to. However, when every conservative in the county is throwing themselves a proper tantrum and demanding a book be banned, it becomes my mission in life to consume that book as fast as possible. (MK_I_M_Mar23 #26)

Here, we see an indication that the banning of books has the opposite effect of what the protesters intend. In these posts, and there were many, we see hope of readers finding the books they need.

Case study #3 is interesting for many reasons, not the least that it is a result of transmedia processes. Sehee’s publication is a mix between self-help and memoir in that she publishes transcripts between herself and her therapist that first appeared on her blog. While the author is not a celebrity, her popularity as a blogger led to the publishing of the book. In this way, Sehee exemplifies what Fuller and Norrick-Rühl (2025) identify as “memoirification.” That is, “the (often sophisticated) performance of the self that, while it contributes to the celebrity’s existing ‘brand,’ becomes an extension of the life (or

'bios') narrated in the print memoir." (388) In addition, Sehee's book was a "bestseller in the original Korean (2018) but also in many Asian and European languages ..." (Fuller and Norrick-Rühl 2025, 404).²

Finally, the uptake of Patrick Stewart's *Making it So* is exemplary of transmedia influence in contemporary publishing. Stewart is a famous theatre, film and movie actor. Like McCurdy, he has a ready-made book audience with his fans but arguably many, many more because of his age and years in the business.

As mentioned above, in some cases, the celebrity is the reason that readers come to the genre of memoir. As illustration, consider what one reader posted on Instagram:

You may not know this about me, but I love me some Captain Jean-Luc Picard. In the almost eight years since I've been with my partner, I've seen every episode of Star Trek original series, Next Generation, Deep Space Nine, and all of the movies. So, as one could guess I've grown a bit attached to the one and only Sir Patrick Stewart in the process.

I don't read a lot of mens-oirs (men's memoirs as coined by [@chelseadevantez](#)), but I knew I had to grab this one. (IG Posts with Translations #32)

This Bookstagrammer goes on to read other memoir through the year and posts about them at the end, but what is telling about the post is its articulation of memoir readers' expectations. She writes further that, "I was surprised by how open Patrick was about his childhood (CW for domestic abuse) and growing up in poverty in post WWII

² Baek Se-hee died on October 16, 2025. Reactions from readers can be found on Reddit, and other social media platforms.

England. The self awareness and vulnerability coming from an 80 something year old white British man was at times shocking and so pure.” The characteristics the reader describes illustrate a reader’s expectations. They reflect what life writing theorist Philippe Lejeune calls “the autobiographical pact,” which is an implicit agreement between author and reader, signaled through paratextual cues (Lejeune 1989, 44). Readers of memoir expect authors to approach their own lives with genuine seriousness and sincerity. In the next section, I will present my ideas about the moments when an author’s memories intersect with those of the reader.

3b. *Remembering*

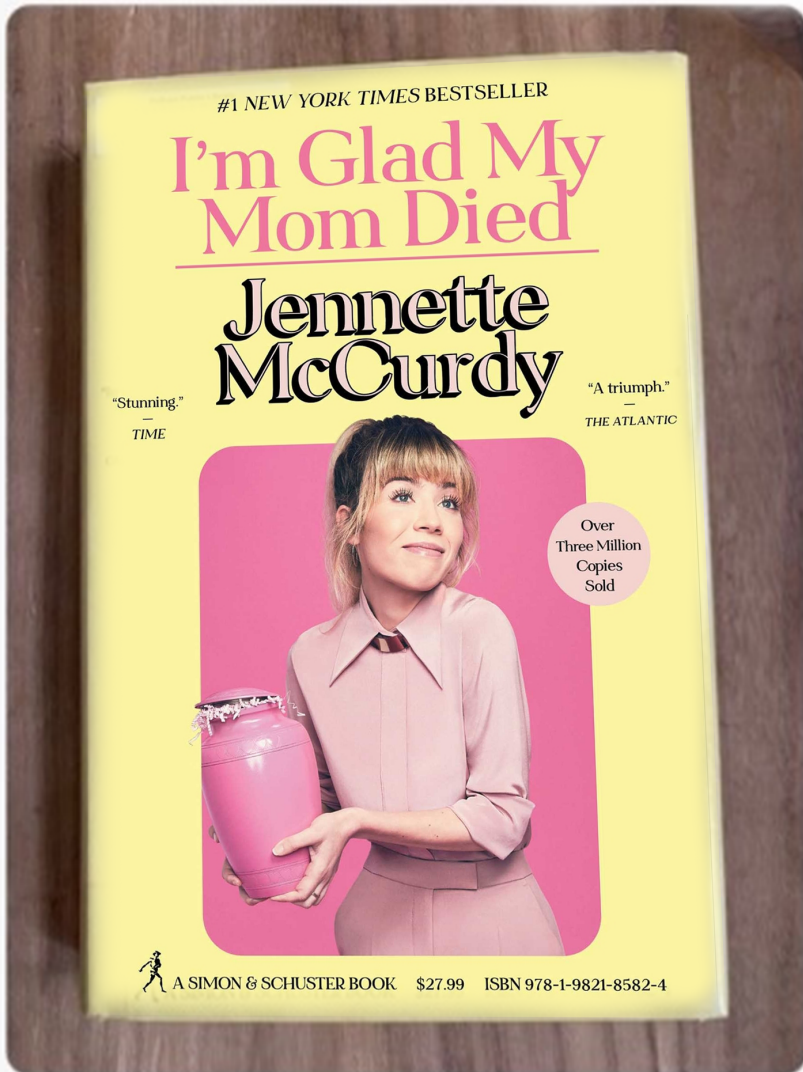
Consider the post in Illustration 1.

Feb 12

I just finished Jennette McCurdy's memoir. Wow.

I found the way she wrote each chapter through her feelings at the time she was recalling was a powerful way to take in her story.

It was also way more relatable than I was expecting. I may need a hug.



Aso, I didn't know who she was when I picked it up at the library! I just knew people were saying this was a good book. My wife was like "do you know who that is and what it's about?" And I was like "nah, just looked interesting." I'm a weirdo.

Illustration 1: Twitter Post (JM_T_N_Feb 23 #156)

How is remembering different from reflecting? How is reflecting different from recall? I am pondering these questions because this reader uses “recall” to talk about JM’s “powerful way to take in her story.” Memoirs are mediated and narrated collections; they are curated collections of memories. Life writing theorists Smith and Watson (2010; 2020) identify inter-related concepts of memory, experience, identity, spatiality, embodiment, and agency to complicate what they call the autobiographical act. Although there are many variations, the actions differentiate memoir from novels. But what happens when the author’s memories or recollections are like those of the reader? A connection is created between reader and author.

I think it is important to think about investigative methods here. I think social media accounts of readers’ responses offer more immediate articulated memories than what might be available in reader interviews. Our findings are different from those of Shelley Trower, for example, who interviewed readers as part of an oral history project and found that “Readers tend more readily to remember experiences of reading novels, in other words, than the content of the novels themselves” (Trower 2020, 271). The readers in our study whose responses were coded into “Life like Mine” or “Nostalgia” remember specific content. Consider, for example, an Instagram reader who wrote: “Reading this book was a lot like when I read “Fun Home” for the first time. A recognition of myself in another’s experience, a feeling that finally, someone had put into words what I can not” (MK_I_M_Mar23 #20). There were many readers

in our data set who remembered feeling as Maia Kobabe did growing up, and not all identified 2SLGBTQIA+. The readers identified with universal childhood processes of identity formation and questioning, with relationship creation and maintenance, and with feeling love.

McKoon and Ratcliff's (1992, cited in Gerrig and Mumper) theory of memory-based processing tells us that information from the early parts of a book are usually readily available to most readers, which means that interpretation of those parts tends to be quite similar. However, the overall takeaways, the reader responses, often vary. It is the knowledge and experience that individuals bring to the texts that make interpretations unique. We now know that "[readers'] accumulated memories have a substantial impact on their narrative experiences" (Gerrig and Mumper 2017, 240), and that "[Knowledge] will differ as a product of [our own] accumulations of memories" (252). This includes lived memories, and memories of narrative worlds. These are often unconscious, but not always.

In his case study *What American Readers Remember*, Lovro Škopljanač (2023) concludes that "... readers build up such a notion around those texts and their respective parts which were best remembered, for whatever textual or personal reasons." This is important [he writes] "because it may be argued that the readers' own memories of the texts, however imperfect and minute compared to the actual textual volume, *are* literature for them personally" (46). I agree and think this conclusion fits with what we have seen in our memoir reading data. Consider the response to *Gender Queer: A Memoir* in Illustration 2:



Illustration 2 (MK_I_M_Mar23, #87)

We see here that not only is the reader remembering similar life experiences about reading books but also layering life stories upon one another, in a way that is only possible in a multimodal era. To see the post visually allows for my discussion to turn to “the body”, not only through the now-common picture of a reader holding their book, but also through the process of reflecting.

3c. Reflecting

Former distinguished professor of Psychology, Raymond W Gibbs, Jr (2016) writes of embodied dynamics in reading experiences. He argued that “... reading, of all sorts, involves our imaginative, embodied engagement with texts, and that this engagement does not just constitute our reactions to literature, but shapes the very

process by which linguistic meanings are interpreted" (222). This is especially important in thinking about how readers reflect on their own bodies under attack, by themselves or by others. Allow me to illustrate with two examples from our dataset. First, consider the trigger warnings from one reader to their followers in response to *I'm Glad My Mom Died*:

Let's start with a trigger warning list:

Abuse (Child, Physical, and Emotional), Manipulation, Anorexia, Bulimia, Eating disorders, Vomit, Mental Illness, Substance Abuse (drugs & alcohol), Death, Grief, Cancer, Undiagnosed Narcissism, Grooming (JM_Goodreads_ManualScrape02Mar2023Oldest #67)

These warnings are wide-ranging and illustrate the readers' interpretation of physical, emotional and mental well-being. If Gibbs' claim that "... almost all people imaginatively project themselves into texts as a fundamental part of any act of linguistic understanding" (2016, 222), then this reader and others who also offer warnings are articulating memories. We need to remember, however, that as Gibbs also writes:

At the same time, the precise nature of these 'embodied simulations' may differ, sometimes in very subtle ways, depending on the background and experiences of the reader. This perspective asserts that there are important commonalities between recreational and critical understandings of literature, but that the ultimate products of embodied simulation processes can vary considerably given variations in the texts read, the people doing the reading, and their interpretive goals and motivations (ibid.)

This is especially important as we reconsider the banning of *Gender Queer*.

One Bookstagrammer wrote:

With a level of vulnerability and candor while tackling the difficulties of puberty and growth, Maia will have a home on my bookshelf next to other favorites such as *Fun Home*. E addresses eir earliest

childhood memories of gender through present day questions that remain and answers that are continuously evolving. Whether you are confident in your gender and sexuality, hesitant to come out of the closet, or still trying to figure out who you are and how you feel in your body, you can find a home in Maia's words. E acknowledges this was a work e did not initially plan on sharing with the world, but eir courage is so heartwarming and uplifting that I hope this won't be eir last work. (MK_I_M_Mar23 #65)

As Douglas and Tully (2014) have argued, reading, considering and bearing witness to narratives of trauma and violence are ethical acts. When authors are presenting painful memories and experiences, our ethical imperative is to take them seriously. Listening to the voices of these readers is also imperative.

Conclusions

My work demonstrates that readers' engagements with memoir on social media are both multimodal and memory-rich, shaped by transmedia discovery, embodied reflection, and personal recollection. By attending to readers' posts across Goodreads, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and X, I show how the genre of memoir elicits connections between authorial life-writing and readers' own lived experiences. These articulations of recognition, nostalgia, and embodied memory illustrate the ways in which memoir reading operates as a site of meaning-making. Our findings highlight how memories surface in digital response spaces, revealing memoir's capacity to foster identification, resistance, and critical reflection.

Our project contributes to Reading Studies by advancing memoir as a central, rather than peripheral, focus for understanding contemporary reading practices. Whereas much existing scholarship privileges fiction, our attention to memoir underscores how readers

mobilize life narratives to make sense of their own identities, histories, and social worlds in a post-digital era. In demonstrating that the multimodal reader cubed navigates across channels, platforms, devices, and formats to remember and reflect, I argue that memoir reading response on social media is not only an act of remembering but also a potential practice of resistance, where readers collectively contest silencing, erasure, and the policing of stories. In this sense, memoir reading in digital spaces is more than private reflection—it is a form of activism that challenges whose lives and memories are deemed important.

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Engaging with Political Violence in Fiction: readers, readings, and responses

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Abstract: Traditional approaches to literary studies mostly rely on the perspective of a singular academic reading authority. Whilst scholars are highly skilled readers, they are hardly representative of a more generalised reading public. Thus, in order to explore more widely the contributions that literary representations can bring, a broader overview which adds everyday readers' experiences to the discussion is required. Considering my own literary-analytical response to novels alongside responses from everyday readers connects academic and everyday reading experiences. This offers new insights into how literature expands our understanding of the world and ourselves in general, and regarding my research, trauma and violence in particular. The current paper provides examples from interview data, explores the advantages of working with everyday readers, and challenges the dichotomy between intellect and affect, professional and non-academic readers.

Keywords: Literature, trauma, readership, literary analysis, human experience.

1. Introduction

Placing responses from non-academic readers in conversation with my own scholarly analyses allows an exploration of what Hanna Meretoja calls the “transformative potential” (2018, 4) of literature, and what Ann Rigney in her work on cultural memory defines as “aesthetic agency” (2021, 8). Furthermore, it aligns with Rita Felski’s notion of “an aesthetic that is premised on relation rather than separation, on attachment rather than autonomy” (2020, viii). This paper begins with an outline of my research project¹ as a whole, then uses interview data from the reading of one novel as a case study. This allows a detailed look at working with everyday readers and the rich material it provides. For the case study I introduce the novel, look at readers’ initial impressions of the book, and then focus upon two short extracts with reader responses - one from the beginning, and one from the middle narrative. I conclude with readers’ reflections upon the impact of the novel more widely and then summarise how working with everyday readers has benefitted my research. The qualitative dimension of my study confirms and expands on the notion that “Engaging with the dark moments of history can develop our narrative imagination in ethically valuable ways that might teach us something about ourselves that we might not otherwise be able to see” (Meretoja 2018, 302). Similarly, interviews with readers demonstrate how literature offers an “experiential’ mode of access to historical events” (Erll 2008; Rigney 2019, 368), and that “[s]tudying what happens in the intimacy of reading and viewing is as crucial to analysis as larger-scale social and cultural developments” (Rigney 2021, 12). As I will evidence, readers in this project make intellectually and theoretically smart responses which challenge the often cited dichotomies of “skilled” professional reader and “naïve” lay reader.

¹ This is part of my PhD project: *“Sharpening the Moral Imagination”: Political Violence and the Ethics of Reading*.

Whilst professional and non-academic readers may have different motivations for reading, the inclusion of everyday readers broadens the readership base and documents a more nuanced literary response.

2. Study scope and methods

My research examines three contemporary novels that tell difficult stories and challenge readers on a number of levels: *Human Acts* by Han Kang (2014) translated from Korean into English by Deborah Smith in 2016 - is based upon the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea; *The City Always Wins* by Omar Robert Hamilton (2017) documents the Egyptian Revolution beginning in 2011, captured mainly through the eyes of young activists in a media collective; *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie (2017) is set very much in the present, and deals with Islamophobia, counter-terrorism measures, and the radicalisation of a young British Muslim man in London recruited to work for ISIS in Syria. The texts are fictional reworkings of real-life events and demonstrate how political violence in its many forms is, or becomes, interwoven in the everyday lives of characters. The research is conducted on two levels: through close readings informed by existing theories of ethical reading, hermeneutics, and cultural memory, and through analyses involving reading groups and individual readers. The latter generates primary qualitative research data on readers' perspectives to combine with my own close readings. I ask: how do the novels represent political violence? How do readers respond? What can this tell us about the ethical processes involved/activated in reading about political violence? How violence is portrayed and how it is processed by the reader automatically invokes

ethical issues. The fact these novels are based upon historical events provides an added dimension of responsibility.

2.1 The Readers

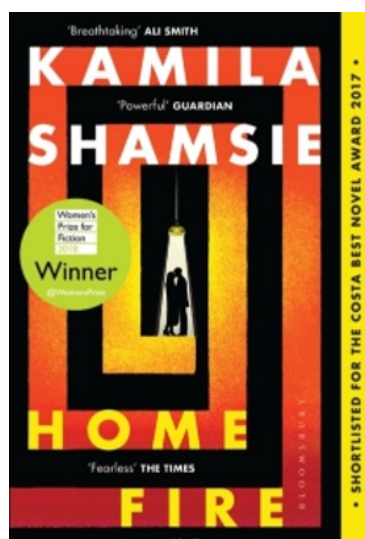
The readers involved in the project were contacted via book club networks. Invitations were sent out to ask for volunteers and the only instructions were to read the novel and be available for interview. I interviewed seventeen participants on each novel (fifty-one in total) in a range of groups, pairs, and individuals. I had a set of questions, but the interviews were conversational in style and readers in groups/pairs often led the discussion with questions to each other. Interviews took place in person and online (zoom) in a home environment. As regards the demographics, I did not go out to find representative groups on age, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. I just wanted volunteers who liked reading, and if they were in groups/pairs, people who felt comfortable with each other. Like most book clubs, the majority of readers in this study are female, white, and in the 50+ age range (see Long 2003, xiii; Hartley 2002, 25). There are six males, and the overall age of readers ranges from 20s-80s in years.

Multicultural/intercultural nuances also complicate the picture. Whilst the majority of participants are British, readers include heritage to India, Russia, Germany, Ireland, Georgia, Poland, Italy, Chechnya, New Zealand. Some participants are in intercultural marriages/relationships - and if they have children, there is an added intercultural dimension. Some readers have dual citizenship. Most but not all readers are educated to degree level and a wide range of professions/backgrounds is represented (education, law, admin, medical, third sector (charity, NGOs), social work, finance, art,

museums, tourism). A third of readers are retired (60+). All describe themselves as avid readers – by this they mean that reading is a part of their lives, and they regularly discuss books with friends, relatives, and wider acquaintances. Literature is part of their social interaction.

3. Case Study: *Home Fire* (2017) by the Pakistani/British writer Kamila Shamsie

Published in 2017, *Home Fire* depicts two families of British Pakistani Muslim backgrounds in the contemporary political landscape that is post-9/11 and post-7/7. Political policy and rhetoric stoke fear and division rather than discussion and the violence this promotes is insidious. It is often unseen by those whom it does not affect and the first half of the novel works to make visible the structural and cultural violence that some of the characters face on a daily basis – the indignities, humiliation, racism, and suspicion fuelled by counter-terrorism measures, right-wing media and politics. Shamsie highlights how this leads to more direct violence such as being spat on, bricks through the window, torture, beheadings videos, a decomposing body and the anticipated violence in the finale of the novel as a suicide vest is strapped to one of the characters. As the epigraph suggests (see figure 1 below), it is a modern reworking of the Greek tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles.



The ones we love ... Are enemies of the state.

- Antigone, Sophocles

(translated by Seamus Heaney)

- Isma (Pasha)
- Eamonn (Lone)
- Parvaiz (Pasha)
- Aneeka (Pasha)
- Karamat (Lone)

Figure 1 Front cover, epigraph, and narrative structure

The two families are the Pashas and the Lones. Isma, Parvaiz, and Aneeka Pasha are orphaned siblings who live in the Preston Road working class neighbourhood of North London. They are the children of a “jihadi” father who is mostly absent from their lives and who dies on his way to Guantánamo from Bagram. However, his presence is felt in the visits to the family home from MI5 (U.K. Security Service) who refuse to share any details about his situation with the family, and the surveillance of the Muslim community more widely by state authorities. This surveillance, known in academic terms as “suspectification” (see Abbas 2019, 1460), is a form of structural violence that promotes a sense of fear - this invades both community and family relations and sows distrust. The history of the father is a forbidden topic and the children are taught to repeat “I never knew my father” as a defensive measure. The violence operates additionally in the way that the children are deprived of who their mother really is: “the orphaned twins who had never really known their mother before

bitterness and stress ate away the laughing, affectionate woman she'd once been" (Shamsie 2017, 39). The stress causes the early death of the mother when the twins Aneeka and Parvaiz are twelve years old. Isma has just finished university so assumes the parenting role; the novel begins as Isma leaves for the U.S. to resume her own life and pursue a PhD now the twins are nearly nineteen. In the meantime, Parvaiz travels unbeknown to his sisters to Syria, where he soon regrets his decision and wants to come home. Eamonn Lone, who has taken a break from his job "to live life beyond office walls" (Shamsie 2017, 18) and exists upon an allowance provided by his mother, falls in love with Aneeka. Aneeka hopes her relationship with Eamonn can influence his father to help her brother come home. Eamonn is the son of Karamat Lone, a Conservative politician who distances himself from his Muslim heritage to promote his career. Married to an Irish/American wife, Karamat is successful and subsequently becomes Home Secretary in the conservative government. The Lones live in the Holland Park area of Kensington, often referred to as "Millionaires Row".

There is an obvious class and wealth divide between the two families. Politically and religiously, they also stand apart: Karamat is a representative of the State whose responsibilities cover the law, national security and immigration; the Pashas carry a history of "terrorism" in relation to their father, and later to the brother Parvaiz who is recruited to the media wing of ISIS; Karamat disassociates himself from his Muslim roots and his son Eamonn grows up with little knowledge of his father's cultural background; the Pashas are practising Muslims. The novel is divided into five sections, each representing a different character perspective as the situation unfolds. These are narrated in third person rather than first person so

other voices can be heard across the text and a sense of competing voices is established. Whilst there are clear divisions in lifestyle, social status, and authority, the order in which the sections are structured (see figure 1 above) emphasises an intertwining of lives. The characters of Isma and Karamat who open and close the novel with their narratives, are also the only characters out of the five who are alive by the end of the novel. It evolves very much into a shared story.

3.1 Connecting with readers; initial responses

Scholars emphasise how Shamsie uses a particular “brand of realism” as a technique to engage readers. In her article, “The political novel in our still-evolving reality: Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* and the Shamima Begum² case” (2022), Urzula Rutkowska argues for “a rethinking of the relationship between literature and politics” (2022, 873). She states:

The contemporary novel is a form of imaginative discourse that is already engaging with the world as we see it today, staging debates and helping us to resolve them by projecting us into a future shaped by the repercussions of the present ... *Home Fire* provides a distinct form of ‘living contact’, requiring the reader to build a relationship with each constructed character in a political reality based on their own. (Rutkowska 2022, 873)

This “living contact” with a “political reality” based on the reader’s own is an idea that Birgit Breidenbach also promotes: “Shamsie’s literary

² Shamima Begum is probably the most high profile case documented in the media regarding the radicalisation of British Muslim youth and the stripping of British citizenship thereafter. Readers in the project referenced Shamima Begum frequently in discussion of the novel.

works are thus rooted in historical actuality, and her brand of realism relies on the use of clearly recognisable historical events as a backdrop and crucial context for her fictional characters' lives" (2024, 412). A look at readers' initial responses to the book (figure 2 below), identifies relating to character as the first aspect named by readers.

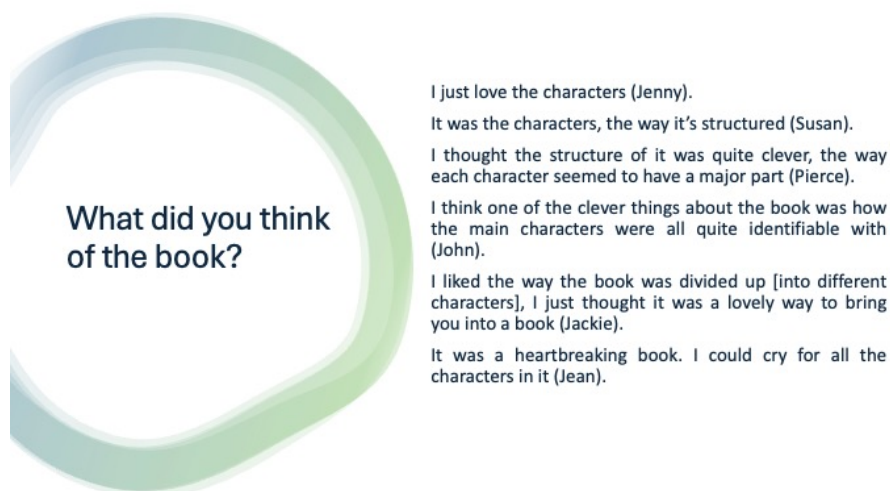


Figure 2 Opening question and reader responses

I think this is really interesting. Literary Studies has traditionally used responses to 'character' as a way to evidence the "specialism" of academic readers as distinct from the "naivety" of everyday readers. Everyday readers are allegedly naive because they form emotional attachments and treat characters as persons whereas academic readers maintain a professional distance. In *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (2019), Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi express frustration with this way of thinking and call for "a form of literary studies that engages, explicates, and builds on ordinary response" (2019, 12). In this way, both a richer account of "how fiction

connects to ordinary life" (2019, 2) and the ways in which character operates in literature can be achieved.

The connection between readers and characters expressed in figure 2 above is not automatic – it was not a feature identified by readers within the other two novels studied in this project. Yet, what the readers express here is what Felski in "Identifying With Characters" refers to as "the felt vitality of fictional beings" (2019, 87). This captures the dual nature of the status of characters; as literary devices on the one hand, and to quote Felski as "worldly actors haloed with affective and existential force" (2019, 87) on the other. Felski elaborates further on the aesthetic form of characters:

It is their fictional qualities that make characters real ... figures in novels and films are vivid, memorable, charismatic, arresting, alive, not despite their aesthetic qualities, but because of them. They possess a kind of reality that we should cherish and respect; that they are made up does not mean that they do not matter. (Felski 2019, 85)

The reader comments attest to this: they capture a recognition of artifice in references to "structure", "characters", "divided up"; authorial intention "way to bring you into a book", "one of the clever things", "quite clever"; alongside a real emotional connection "love"; "identifiable"; "heartbreaking". Readers are not naïve and impressionistic. They are keenly aware that characters are fictional constructs whilst able to respond to them as if they are real.

The following discussion between Jenny and Rebecca illustrates this further:

Rebecca: the characters, you become, they're very real, you become really involved with them, that connection, human connection draws you in and just challenges you.

Jenny: It's very engaging, isn't it? You're very immersed in it.

Rebecca: When you read you know it's fiction, but at the same time you know those things are really happening and because you've engaged on a personal level, it just tips you over somehow.

Jenny: Well, they feel real don't they? They feel like a real brother and sister. You think, ok, it's terrible to go and join ISIS, but you do think, oh God, he's just 19. He's just someone's brother.

Rebecca: Absolutely.

It is clear that the wider context in which the action plays out leans on the "clearly recognisable historical events" (Breidenbach) and the "living contact with political reality"³ (Rutkowska) that readers are invited to make in relation to the characters' lives.

Readers also identify "multiple perspective" as a structural device to "hook" them into the narrative in their opening remarks:

It gave them their own identity and it deepened the empathy you had with each character 'cos you only get a very superficial glimpse or a mention from characters about them, but by giving them their own bit of life-story, it worked. (Pierce)

I kept getting swayed to different points of view ... it was good because I'm not pushed to think about stuff like this very often. (Jenny)

³ Whilst the political reality in *Home Fire* is U.K. based, readers recognised this most definitely as a European and global situation.

It was intriguing because the story was unravelling as you got the detail from each person's perspective. It hooked you in. You wanted to read more. (Rebecca)

It brings a sort of human characteristic to the character, not just showing it from another person's point of view, because from Aneeka, Eamonn, or even Isma, you might see Karamat as a ruthless man in the way he's trying to hide his identity being Muslim, but when you see it from his point of view he's doing it for the good of his family, to protect people. (Monica)

These comments reflect what Anderson, Felski, and Moi refer to as "the experience of thinking with characters" (2019, 1). It complicates responses and widens understanding. This actively engages readers to think about the structures of storytelling, differing perspectives, the process of interpretation, and how their own perspectives are shaped more widely. Rehana Ahmed points out: "By scrutinising modes of viewing others, the novel directs the reader's attention towards their own readerly gaze, encouraging a more self-conscious way of reading" (2021, 4). As reader comments will demonstrate, this extends beyond characters and their situations in the novel. It applies to the structure of the novel overall – and readers' own position in regards to the world events the novel references.

3.2: Extract 1: Isma

Shamsie dedicates four pages to the opening scene which takes place at Heathrow airport. Isma is flying to the U.S. to begin her PhD. The first line states very clearly that she will miss her flight as she is taken aside for interrogation. That this is a definitive outcome of the interrogation process establishes it as common practice. It acts out Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act (ACT). No suspicion is required to

detain a person, and like the “stop and search” policies carried out on the streets, is considered controversial for its “racial and religious profiling”. Isma has already had her carefully packed belongings searched through, “jumbled” in a heap, and is then left alone to wait. When an official returns with her laptop and phone, her flight is boarding and she dares to hope. However, what follows is a two-hour interrogation (see figure 3 below).

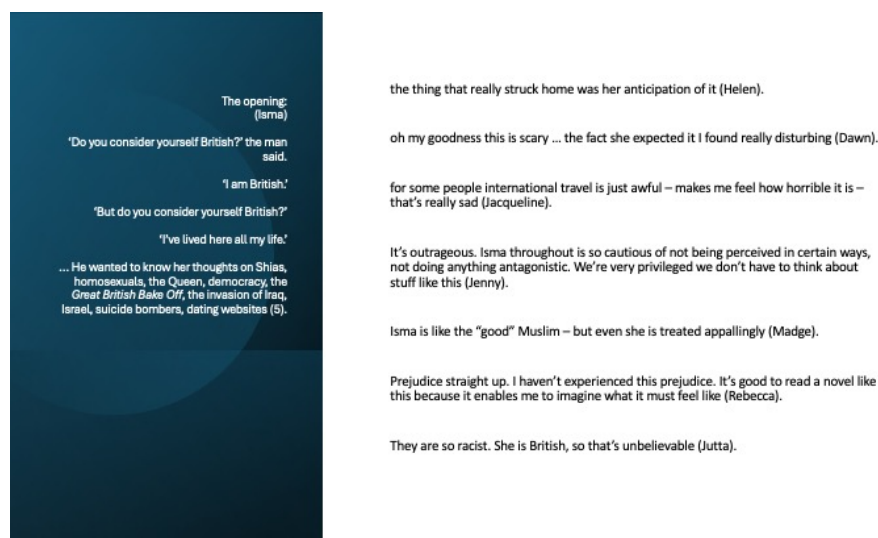


Figure 3 Extract from *Home Fire* and reader responses

Not only is the list relentless, but the combination of topics on which the test of “Britishness” is based is rather absurd. As the extract on the left of figure 3 shows, Isma is well prepared. A look at reader comments here (figure 3 above), reveals feelings such as “scary”, “sad”, “disturbing”, “awful”, “horrible”, “outrageous”, which emphasise an emotional, bodily connection. Yet, these emotional responses are not ‘simply’ emotional. They are a signal of what readers care about, their moral commitments. As Martha Nussbaum states: “emotions

are composites of belief and feelings shaped by developing thought and highly discriminating in their reactions" (1990, 78). Similarly, Felski argues that: "acts of identifying, while they can be emotional, even passionate, are also *reflective*: they are informed by beliefs, ideals, and values. It is a matter not just of feeling but of thinking" (2019, 98). They are evidence of affect and intellect working side by side in readers' interpretations.

In addition to the charges of prejudice and racism identified by Rebecca and Jutta (figure 3), elsewhere readers such as Pierce see a subtle violence in the process: "it wasn't a physical assault as such, it's more of a psychological thing, she felt absolutely helpless, no control, that's what's scary for her". Similarly, Helen comments: "it's not violent or brutal to her in any physical way, it's just that knowledge you are going to be picked out. You are going to be treated differently because of who you are". Reader comments thus evidence that "ethical as well as political judgements are in play" (Felski 2019, 95). Whilst readers in this study demonstrate awareness of their own privilege and distance from such incidents, they also note how situated they feel within the events in the novel: "Reading it as a novel, you're in there, aren't you, with the character, you're actually part of their world and you can really feel the tensions" (Dawn); "as it's all third person, you are not switching narrative perspectives, rather stepping into their worlds" (Susan); "it makes you feel definitely uneasy about her situation, somebody's just gone through all your belongings and something as intimate as your underwear" (Monica); "you are vulnerable in that situation" (Diane). Use of the second person pronouns "you" and "your" here can be read as rhetorical devices utilised in everyday conversation. However, they evidence an "experiential mode of access" (see Erll 2008; Rigney 2019) to the

events taking place. Additionally, the sheer amount of fictional dialogue in the novel offers the reader: “the sensation of being in the midst of an event, a performance, where boundaries of all kinds are eroded and outcomes uncertain” (Thomas 2012, 1). Readers are invited to actively participate in this interplay by interpreting and evaluating characters’ reactions to the events as they unfold. In order to do this, readers automatically reflect upon their own responses and potential reactions to being in such a situation.

3.3: Extract 2: Parvaiz

Readers in the study cite this narrative section as very powerful but uncomfortable. Not only does it contain the most direct violence in the novel, but it raises “ethical issues in perspective-taking” (Meretoja 2018, 219) as readers are encouraged to emotionally engage with a young “terrorist”. Parvaiz’s rhetorical question “Who am I?” melds with readers’ questions of “Who is he?” as preconceived notions of identity are explored and challenged. Despite his father’s history, Parvaiz has a good family, is loved, and is popular in the community – not only as an individual but as someone who contributes to community cohesion – raising funds for the local library. Thus, one of the big questions the novel explores, is how does such a promising young man end up as a “terrorist”? In interviews, Shamsie argues for a need to understand the sophisticated and targeted methods that ISIS use and why they are so appealing to the young people who go to join them. However, she states it is not talked about in public debate because:

there is a sense that if you are talking about it then you are empathising, then you are justifying, that’s a very scary line that if you dare to look too closely and say actually this is complex, then

you're saying it's fine ... so there has been a real shortfall in the conversation round how did they get people to come across.
(Shamsie, Shakespeare and Company Paris 2017, audio 33:00)

Making the central narrative of the novel about a young British Pakistani male who is recruited to ISIS thus works to open up this conversation and challenge assumptions.

In the novel, Parvaiz is mugged and his phone is stolen. The following day the enigmatic Farooq returns his phone with an apology that the muggers did not realise who he was. This prompts Parvaiz to question "Who am I?" to which Farooq provides the answer: he is the son of "the great warrior Abu Parvaiz" (Shamsie 2017, 125). The physical absence of a father figure and the narrative absence surrounding the man himself (due to the "instrumentalisation of fear" by state authorities via the 'suspectification' of the Muslim community), directly impacts upon his sense of identity. It leaves a space to be filled and Farooq capitalises upon this in his recruitment of Parvaiz. Parvaiz secretly meets Farooq every day, where: "Parvaiz would listen to those stories of his father for which he'd always yearned – not a footloose boy or feckless husband, but a man of courage who fought injustice" (Shamsie 2017, 128). As Parvaiz knows relatively little of his father, there is no opportunity afforded to refute Farooq's lies. The immersion in the dialogue that takes place between Farooq and Parvaiz allows the reader to appreciate how convincing the narrative is to someone in Parvaiz's situation: "the way he was radicalised is captured in an accessible way, the absent father and the hero image that was created – Farooq came along and filled that gap in a very manipulative way. Parvaiz is just a kid" (Pierce); "You definitely felt sorry for him. It was awful. He had all the reasons to believe him and

be swayed" (Rebecca); "You could see that Parvaiz was being groomed. He was vulnerable, open to manipulation, had a fantasy idea of who the father was" (Diane). Readers recognise how the preconditions expose him to being taken advantage of.

Once trust has been established, Parvaiz is ambushed at Farooq's flat. He is first chained in a squatting position so that "the chains cut into his flesh ... He was screaming in pain, had been screaming in pain, for a very long time" (Shamsie 2017, 136/7). Then he is waterboarded. Afterwards it is explained that this is what the authorities did to his father and the subject of Bagram and Guantánamo are brought into focus. Thus, Shamsie deftly parallels narratives of ISIS alongside narratives of Guantánamo and Bagram with which readers are already familiar, but they re-read them again through the eyes of the young Parvaiz: "stories of dogs raping prisoners at Bagram, pictures of tortured bodies" (Shamsie 2017, 148). The role of MI5 in this is emphasised. Indeed, Parvaiz initially assumes Farooq belongs to the authorities: "Who was this man - MI5? Special Branch? They, too had seemed so friendly that time they'd come to the house in his childhood" (Shamsie 2017, 124); "MI5 officers were present at Bagram, Farooq told him, and showed him all the evidence to corroborate that" (Shamsie 2017, 148). Hence, the focus is not just upon how Parvaiz becomes radicalised through the actions of ISIS, but how the response to radicalisation by the British state contributes to this process.

The violence justified by the rhetoric of the "War on Terror" by democratic governments in the west, is effectively used as a recruitment tool to ISIS. As John says: "We tend to tut about Guantánamo and the American reactions and tend to brush the U.K.'s

involvement of all that under the carpet. I remain really angry with Tony Blair for taking us into the Iraq war. We tend to underestimate our part in that whole response". Roberta adds: "The West has created terrorism and continues to create it by what it does and what it's perpetrated here, there and everywhere in the world. The tortures in Bagram are just absolutely awful". The novel thus draws readers' attention to "intersecting histories of violence" (Meretoja 2018, 149) as government actions (both U.S. and U.K.) and ISIS propaganda are placed side by side. The novel does not compare legitimate governments and a proscribed terrorist organisation on a like-for-like basis; what it achieves, however, is to raise questions in readers' minds about "individual and collective responsibility". As Judith Butler argues: "Those who commit acts of violence are surely responsible for them ... On the other hand, these individuals are formed ... What social conditions help to form the very ways that choice and deliberation proceed?" (2004, 15/16). Butler emphasises responsibility does not lie solely in one place: "[it] is not to say that the conditions are at fault rather than the individual. It is rather to rethink the relation between conditions and acts" (2004, 16). The responses from readers below evidence how the novel invites them to do precisely this.

Horrific as his torture is, Parvaiz feels "*I am you, for the first time*" (Shamsie 2017, 140) in relation to his father. Farooq narrates a body to be proud of, and Parvaiz literally inhabits/embodies it: "'Tie me again. I want to feel my father's pain.' 'My brave warrior,' Farooq said, as Parvaiz knelt down and waited for the agony to resume" (Shamsie 2017, 141). As readers point out, religion is not the motivating factor behind the recruitment of Parvaiz. Rather than an Islamic fundamentalist as counter-terrorism measures would define him,

Parvaiz is revealed as a boy in search of a connection to his father. The sensitivity to how different narrative perspectives shape readers' own responses becomes particularly acute here. Readers note Shamsie's own narrative structure at this stage of the novel (see figure 4 below). Madge emphasises the design of the novel as a whole, and how it positions her to notice how her view of him changes. Dawn and Jackie's comments reveal that by placing the narrative in the centre of the novel they are already invested in the story and feel impelled to continue. Clare's statement that: "it made me kind of shiver" precisely because "it was so believable" documents a visceral connection to the events described.

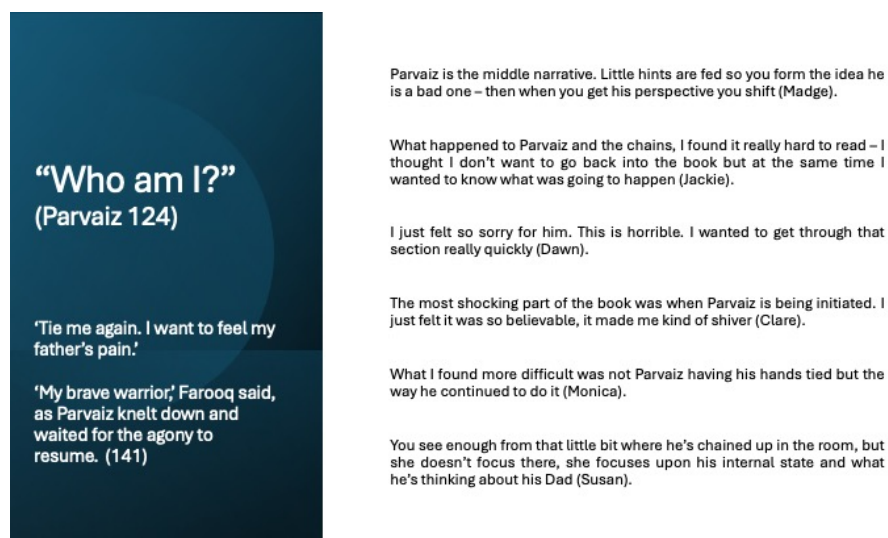


Figure 4 Extract from *Home Fire* and reader responses

In *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History and the Possible* (2018), Hanna Meretoja states that "literature cultivates our ability to perceive the world from multiple perspectives": she calls this "*perspective-awareness* and *perspective-sensitivity*" (2018, 4). In this

way, literary and historical narratives invite readers to “imagine other possible ways of living, feeling and thinking” (2018, 91), which then feed back into the ways we understand ourselves in the world. She further argues: “A sense of the possible – a sense of how things could be otherwise – is integral to moral agency and to the ethical imagination of individuals and communities. It has transformative potential” (2018, 4). This is demonstrated in the way every reader managed to empathise with Parvaiz on some level. They did not excuse his actions but expressed understanding that he was young, vulnerable, and longed for a father figure.

Reader comments covered a wide range of feeling: “I just felt so sorry for him” (Dawn); “it’s an attempt for the reader to understand how that can happen, really helpful, really interesting. It forced me to see how he was brainwashed and groomed” (Jackie); “the grooming, it gave a very human picture of what seemed like political events because you got close to the characters” (Madge); “the narrative of Parvaiz was really powerful, more eye-opening” (Monica). Yet, at the same time as readers relate to what happens to Parvaiz, they also express conflicting feelings. Monica becomes exasperated: “As a reader I struggle to understand how he can continue to do it. It made me sometimes frustrated at his character – he’s had an education, a sister so intelligent and studying law, he’s loved – how can he fall into this trap and be misled like this?”. Jean states: “I couldn’t understand Parvaiz for not seeing through him [Farooq], but that’s being a young lad. He was only 19 – a child really, never knew his father, quite a sheltered boy”. Roberta felt: “I wasn’t completely convinced about why he would be recruited so easily, but the organisation of that group is just phenomenal – the way they process people, recruit, induct and make it impossible to leave – it’s professional”. Shamsie

creates a space for readers to “think through” the ethical complexities of the position Parvaiz finds himself in without condoning his actions. Readers are taken beyond “perspective-awareness and perspective sensitivity” as Parvaiz is recruited, and situated in the actual construction of a narrative to experience the power of narratives to shape a sense of self and an understanding of the world. In “Thinking With Character” (2019), Anderson emphasises that “understanding character within the larger context of a life and over time is of supreme importance ... such understanding simultaneously involves social, psychological, and moral assessment” (2019, 129). Readers are invited to make not only a “social, psychological, and moral assessment” of the decisions and actions the individual characters take, but of the situation itself in which the characters have to operate, and who creates it.

3.4 Impact of the novel: Transformative Potential? Aesthetic Agency?

At the end of the interviews, readers were asked if they had gained anything from reading the novel. Here are a sample of responses:

I feel like I’m in a bit of a bubble, these things don’t actually affect my daily life. (Jenny)

It made me feel a bit uncomfortable, it’s so topical and relevant, this is all about the world which I ought to know a lot about but I only know a little about – it stirs stuff up. It got me quite deep in my tummy. (Rebecca)

It was an eye-opener ... It sort of immediately put you into a place where you wouldn’t normally be and a whole world I’d never thought

about existing, I mean obviously I knew that kind of world exists, but I hadn't seen it from that perspective before, really gripping. (Dawn)

It was very shocking. It was just a very eye-opening book. This book is something that will stay with me. It really made me empathise with people who go through something like this. Media and social media will portray something a certain way. I will not take it on face value anymore. (Monica)

It's made me think that there's so much else going on ... that I don't know about. (Jean)

Reading this book has made me think that actually it's all been much cruder, much less focused and intelligence-based than they would have us believe – a lot of it is about prejudice and assumptions. (John)

It's made me think about my life as a white, middleclass, English woman, it made me stop in my tracks, it's really awakened stuff in me. (Jackie)

The comments evidence that the novel confronts readers; it leads readers to focus a more critical gaze upon themselves and how cosseted they are in their own lives. When Dawn states it is "a whole world I'd never thought about existing, I mean obviously I knew that kind of world exists", she acknowledges that she knows these scenarios occur, but admits to never actually thinking about them – until she reads this novel. The closeness of events in the novel to what is happening in the real world also invites readers to (re)see their world. John's reflections point to this. Significantly, other reactions use metaphors of sight which emphasise new ways of seeing: "a very eye-opening book" (Monica); "It was an eye-opener, immediately an eye-opener" (Dawn). Many comments capture the lasting impressions

of the novel which continue beyond the process of reading itself. The novel thus raises questions of responsibility regarding readers' knowledge of what is taking place in the world and promotes a deeper understanding of and connection to contemporary issues that are generally divisive in public debate.

The repetition of the phrase "[it] made me" in reader responses emphasises the "aesthetic agency" of the text. Rigney clarifies the importance of recognising: "the 'agency' of cultural carriers, a term that is deliberately chosen here to challenge the notion that the arts are merely passive transmitters of the stories in people's heads" (2021, 14). The multi-vocality and immersion in fictional dialogue within the shifting narrative perspectives of different characters, positions readers to address their own assumptions, to consider how identities become fixed through the mediation of stories, and in turn to question where these stories come from in the first place. In this way they are invited to be more attentive readers; to pay attention to the agendas behind stories and more widely recognise that they offer only a partial picture. The narrative strategies of multi-vocality that Shamsie utilises create democratic spaces in which opposing views can counter each other. No perspective is given precedence. Readers are thus encouraged to actively participate in the debate the novel engenders and add their own contributions. In this way, fiction creates a space for readers to think through ethical dilemmas and complexities rather than directing judgement to particular standpoints.

4. Concluding remarks: working with everyday readers

My work with everyday readers initially was to provide a sounding board in which to test out my own findings. However, as the research

continued, everyday reader responses became the heart of the project and indeed its driving force. Examining how readers respond feeds into my wider research questions concerning literary style and narrative agency, and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the process, responsibility, and ethics involved in reading literature about political violence. Working with non-academic readers opens up differing trajectories to follow and maps a wider area of analysis than I could achieve on my own. The interview data provides empirical evidence to support and challenge literary claims and additionally offers new ways of thinking. Whilst the limited space of this article allows only a small sample of my work to be shared, readers demonstrate sophisticated understanding, clear identification of stylistic features, and expressions of attachment to works of fiction in a variety of ways. Everyday readers display intellect and affect working effectively side by side and prove themselves to be incredibly astute. The tracing of connections established between writer, reader, and text provides valuable material on “how fiction connects to ordinary life” (Anderson, Felski, and Moi 2019, 2) and explores how writers and readers both bear the weight of engaging with such difficult subject matter. My findings argue that qualitative reader response interviewing has much unused and rich potential for the future of contemporary literary studies.

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Comparing Human and AI Literary Summaries: Insights from Lapitch

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Abstract: Literary summaries, both in their formal and informal uses within educational contexts, play a notable role in students' learning, yet little is known about how AI-generated summaries compare to the human-authored versions students use daily. From an Information & Communication Sciences (ICS) and Digital Humanities (DH) perspective, this paper addresses that gap through a quantitative analysis. We compare three human-written summaries of the Croatian children's novel *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* with three ChatGPT summaries generated via distinct prompting strategies: Single-Pass (SP), Incremental Updating (IU), and Hierarchical Merging (HM). Our analysis of structural, lexical, and content features reveals that AI-generated summaries form a distinct linguistic register. Despite high topical alignment (Cosine similarity), AI summaries exhibit greater lexical density and diversity, and significantly lower vocabulary overlap (Jaccard similarity) with their human counterparts. Prompting strategy proves to be a critical variable: SP produces verbose text, HM creates short, dense sentences, while IU most closely approximates human sentence length but remains stylistically different (e.g. more noun-heavy). We conclude that AI summaries are not direct replacements for human study guides but a parallel genre that may increase cognitive load. Consequently, the

prompting strategy is a key determinant of an AI summary's readability and utility for educational purposes.

Keywords: computational text analysis; computational stylistics; lexical diversity; readability; large language models

1. Introduction

When it comes to school required reading, everyday literary engagement by non-professional audiences (notably pupils and parents), often happens through *summaries*: short, purpose-built texts that scaffold recall, support homework, or partially substitute for the full work when time is scarce. From an Information & Communication Sciences (ICS) and Digital Humanities (DH) perspective, this practice is an ideal lens on how people encounter literature outside professional settings. Here, we use natural language processing (NLP) techniques to examine summary writing as an everyday reading activity and to compare human-authored summaries with those produced by a contemporary large language model (LLM) (Jurafsky and Martin 2023).

Recent work in NLP and DH has pushed long-form literary processing forward, including book-length summarisation and analysis of narrative structure and character information (Chang et al. 2024; Jang and Jung 2024; Kim et al. 2024; Yu, Liu, and Xiong 2024; Yuan et al. 2024; Zhao, Wang, and Wang 2024). These studies primarily benchmark models or propose datasets; fewer ask how AI-generated outputs compare to the human summaries that circulate in everyday educational use. Addressing that gap, we study Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić's *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* (The Brave Adventures of

Lapitch), a canonical Croatian children’s novel widely encountered via school-oriented websites. We contrast three human-authored summaries (found on websites [lektira.hr](https://www.lektira.hr/)¹, [lektire.hr](https://www.lektire.hr/)², s Jedi5.com³) with three ChatGPT summaries generated under distinct prompting strategies. To control for temporal variation in model behaviour, all AI outputs were produced on 31 August 2025.

Our analysis targets measures that capture structure, vocabulary, and content overlap using well-established NLP/IR (information retrieval) tools. We report average sentence length (a proxy for syntactic packaging/readability) and average word length (a coarse indicator of lexical sophistication); lexical density as the proportion of content words, a common readability and information-load signal (McNamara et al. 2014); and lexical diversity via Type–Token Ratio (TTR) and its length-robust counterpart Mean Segmental TTR (MSTTR) and Root TTR (RTTR) (Johnson 1944; Jurafsky and Martin 2023; McNamara et al. 2014). To profile stylistic emphasis, we examine part-of-speech (POS) distributions in line with register-analytic practice (Biber 1995). For pairwise text similarity, we use Jaccard similarity over lemma sets to capture vocabulary overlap between summaries, and Cosine similarity computed on term frequency–inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) vectors to capture their topical alignment, both standard vector-space methods in information retrieval (Jurafsky and Martin 2023; Manning, Raghavan, and Schütze 2008; Salton and Buckley 1988).

¹ <https://www.lektira.hr/>

² <https://www.lektire.hr/>

³ <http://s Jedi5.com> (As of 7 September 2025, the site is down. However, some content of the site can be found on the Wayback Machine by Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/>.)

Because prompting conditions content selection in LLMs, we compare three summarisation strategies in ChatGPT: Single-Pass (SP) over the full text; Incremental Updating (IU), which iteratively revises a single evolving summary as new chunks arrive; and Hierarchical Merging (HM), which summarises parts first and then merges those summaries into a final whole. Operational details are specified in Section 3, where we implement both IU and HM with a four-chunk workflow tailored to the Croatian source text.

Our study addresses three research questions (RQs) central to understanding everyday reading in the age of generative AI:

RQ1. How do ChatGPT-generated literary summaries compare to human-authored summaries on structural and lexical measures?

RQ2. Do SP, IU, and HM strategies yield distinct stylistic and content profiles in the resulting summaries?

RQ3. What do these differences imply about how AI “reads” and packages narrative for lay audiences who rely on summaries in informal learning contexts?

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 situates the study within ICS, DH, and NLP, connecting prior work on long-form summarisation. Section 3 details the corpus, human sources, and three ChatGPT strategies (SP, IU, HM), implements a four-chunk workflow, and defines all measures. Section 4 reports results i.e. tables of structural/lexical metrics and similarity. Section 5 provides a discussion of the results, while Section 6 outlines limitations. Section 7 concludes and sketches future work. Appendices provide text of prompts for possible reproducibility of the experiment.

2. Related Work

This study approaches everyday literary reading through the prism of ICS and NLP, treating summaries as information artefacts that mediate access to narrative for non-professional audiences. Our perspective is explicitly quantitative: we operationalise stylistic and structural properties of summaries with reproducible NLP measures and compare three human-authored and three AI-generated summaries of a single novel as a focused case study (Jurafsky and Martin 2023).

Methodologically, we rely on well-established text analytics. Lexical diversity is estimated with TTR and its length-robust variant MSTTR, and RTTR, while lexical density indexes information load via the proportion of content words (Johnson 1944; Jurafsky and Martin 2023; McNamara et al. 2014). Part-of-speech distributions profile register and stylistic emphasis (e.g. action orientation (verbs) versus description (adjectives)) in line with quantitative register analysis (Biber 1995). For content overlap, we use Jaccard similarity over lemma sets (set-based overlap) and Cosine similarity on TF-IDF vectors (vector-space proximity), following core IR practice (Jurafsky and Martin 2023; Manning, Raghavan, and Schütze 2008; Salton and Buckley 1988).

Within NLP, long-form literary processing has accelerated, with work on book-length summarisation, evaluation, and literary understanding. Research surveys and benchmarks examine chunking and control strategies, including hierarchical merging and incremental updating, and how these influence coherence and content selection in extended contexts (Chang et al. 2024). Evaluation

frameworks emphasise faithfulness and content selection for long texts (Kim et al. 2024), while new datasets target deep literary engagement via QA (Yu, Liu, and Xiong 2024). Beyond summary quality, studies probe whether models capture character attributes and relations (Jang and Jung 2024; Yuan et al. 2024) and comprehension and analysis of ancient poetry (Zhao, Wang, and Wang 2024).

Against this backdrop, we focus on a concrete, audience-specific setting: Croatian school-oriented summaries of *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* (*The Brave Adventures of Lapitch*). While prior work chiefly compares models to models or evaluates against curated references (Chang et al. 2024; Kim et al. 2024; Yu, Liu, and Xiong 2024), far less is known about how an LLM’s outputs diverge from or align with the human summaries that circulate in everyday educational use. Our contribution is to supply a controlled comparison between the three human-authored summaries from popular educational websites and the three ChatGPT summaries produced via Single-Pass, Incremental Updating, and Hierarchical Merging prompting (operationalised in Section 3), with all AI experiments dated 31 August 2025 for temporal control.

Prior work primarily benchmarks LLMs against curated references; there is little of it that addresses alignment with human-authored school summaries circulating online. We target that gap by comparing three Croatian school-site summaries (lektira.hr, lektire.hr, sjedi5.com) with three ChatGPT summaries (SP, IU, HM) under a matched Croatian NLP pipeline⁴ and a shared metric suite.

⁴ CLASSLA-Stanza pipeline (<https://github.com/clarinsi/classla>)

In sum, we integrate ICS concerns with information access in informal learning and NLP's quantitative toolset to study how summaries package narrative for lay readers. We intentionally foreground quantitative metrics and leave qualitative discourse/stylistic analysis (e.g. rhetorical moves, error typologies, reader reception) to future work.

3. Methodology

Our analysis focuses on three human-authored summaries (from [lektira.hr](#), [lektire.hr](#), and [sjedi5.com](#)) and three AI-generated summaries. The AI summaries were created in Croatian on 31 August 2025 using ChatGPT 5 Thinking model, with each employing a distinct strategy: Single-Pass (SP), Hierarchical Merging (HM), and Incremental Updating (IU).

3.1. Corpus and Materials

Source text. Our case study is Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić's *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* (*The Brave Adventures of Lapitch*), a canonical text in the Croatian primary school curriculum. Using a consistent Croatian NLP pipeline for tokenisation, lemmatisation, POS-tagging, and sentence splitting, we calculated the baseline profile of the novel, which can be found in Table 1.

Human-authored summaries. The human-authored benchmark consists of three Croatian-language summaries collected from widely used educational websites ([lektira.hr](#), [lektire.hr](#), and [sjedi5.com](#))

whose primary audience is primary school pupils and teachers. Source texts were copied as plain UTF-8 files. No translation was performed; all analysis remained in Croatian. To ensure like-for-like comparability with the AI outputs, these files were processed through the same Croatian NLP pipeline described above.

AI summaries (ChatGPT). We generated three summaries with ChatGPT (ChatGPT 5 Thinking model) using a consistent header that set the persona to an “expert Croatian children’s literature teacher” and specified audience, tone, and output length (see Appendices for prompt content). Each strategy below produced one final summary. Access to the model required a paid ChatGPT Plus subscription; at the time of prompting (31 August 2025) the subscription cost was €23 per month.

3.2. Summarisation Strategies

Each prompt started with a standardised header that fixed: (i) language (Croatian), (ii) a persona of a patient, experienced children’s-literature teacher for third-grade pupils, (iii) style (simple wording, short sentences, age-appropriate vocabulary), (iv) tone (warm, encouraging, non-technical), and (v) the expected role (produce pupil-oriented summaries and brief analyses). This header was followed by the task for the LLM, which supplied the strategy-specific instructions for Single-Pass, Hierarchical Merging, or Incremental Updating (see Appendix for full prompts; cf. strategy design in Chang et al. 2024; Kim et al. 2024).

3.2.1. Single-Pass Summarisation (SP)

We provided the entire novel to ChatGPT in one turn and requested a classroom-appropriate summary targeted to third-grade readers. This probes unassisted long-context summarisation in a single generative act. Full text prompt for SP is available in Appendix A.

3.2.2. Hierarchical Merging Summarisation

We divided the novel into four chunks by word count to preserve processing load for LLMs and fed the chunks in order of appearance to preserve narrative continuity: chunk A contains 6,207 words, chunk B 6,048 words, chunk C 6,269 words, and chunk D 6,346 words.

The procedure was as follows:

1. Chunk-level summaries: Prompt ChatGPT to summarise each chunk separately for the same audience (S_A , S_B , S_C , S_D).
2. Pair merges: Merge S_A and S_B into summary S_{AB} and S_C and S_D into S_{CD} , with instructions to resolve redundancies and maintain narrative flow (without access to the raw chunks; only S_A – S_D texts available during merging).
3. Final merge: Merge S_{AB} and S_{CD} into the final HM summary with word limit for the final summary.

Full text prompts for HM are available in Appendix B.

3.2.3. Incremental Updating Summarisation

We simulated sequential reading with rolling revision:

1. Initialise with chunk A → produce a first summary.

2. Update the same summary with chunk B (keep key earlier content unless superseded). Each update replaced the previous summary with a full rewritten synthesis.
3. Update with chunk C (keep key earlier content unless superseded). Each update replaced the previous summary with a full rewritten synthesis.
4. Update with chunk D to produce the final IU summary (single output that reflects all four chunks) with an additional instruction for the word limit. Each update replaced the previous summary with a full rewritten synthesis.

3.3. Computational Analysis

All human and ChatGPT summaries were processed with the same Croatian NLP pipeline to ensure comparable units (tokens, lemmas, sentences, POS).

Structural measures.

- Average sentence length (tokens/sentence) approximates syntactic packaging/readability.
- Average word length (characters/word) is a coarse proxy for lexical sophistication.

Lexical diversity and repetition.

- $TTR = \text{types} / \text{tokens}$; sensitive to length (Jurafsky and Martin 2023).
- MSTTR averages TTR over fixed-length segments (100 tokens) to stabilise length effects (Johnson 1944).

- Root TTR (RTTR) = $\text{types} / \sqrt{\text{tokens}}$ (Jurafsky and Martin 2023) that roughly cancels length effect.
- Hapax and dis legomena (types occurring once/twice) index vocabulary dispersion.

Lexical density and content focus.

- Lexical density = *content words* (NOUN, PROPN, VERB, ADJ, ADV) / *all tokens excluding punctuation*; higher values indicate greater information load (McNamara et al. 2014).
- Verb-to-word ratio profiles action orientation; for this measure we count main verbs without auxiliaries (Biber 1995).

Part-of-speech profile.

- POS distributions (e.g. NOUN/VERB/ADJ/ADV/PROPN) serve as quantitative register/style indicators (Biber 1995), highlighting whether summaries are more action-driven (verbs) or description-heavy (adjectives/nouns).

Text similarity.

- Jaccard over lemma sets captures unique-vocabulary overlap.
- Cosine similarity over TF-IDF vectors captures topical proximity in a vector space (Salton and Buckley 1988; Manning, Raghavan, and Schütze 2008; Jurafsky and Martin 2023).
 - TF-IDF weights emphasise terms distinctive to a document within the comparison set (Salton and Buckley 1988).

Baseline reference. We use the novel’s profile (values listed in Table 1) as a contextual anchor when interpreting summary metrics (e.g. expected compression of average sentence length, shifts in POS ratios). Because all measures are pipeline-dependent, comparisons are within-pipeline and like-for-like across human and AI summaries.

4. Results

This section reports quantitative findings for six summaries: three human-authored (lektira.hr, lektire.hr, sjedi5.com) and three ChatGPT summaries generated via Single-Pass (SP), Incremental Updating (IU), and Hierarchical Merging (HM), as well as metrics for the book the summaries were based on. All AI outputs were produced on 31 August 2025. IU and HM followed the four-chunk workflow (6,207 / 6,048 / 6,269 / 6,346 words). We interpret results from an Information & Communication Sciences and Digital Humanities perspective, focusing on measures explained earlier: structural packaging (average sentence/word length), lexical diversity (TTR, MSTTR, RTTR, hapax/dis), information load (lexical density), action orientation (verb-to-word ratio), and content overlap (Jaccard over lemmas; Cosine over TF-IDF).

Table 1. Structural and Lexical Metrics for the Source Novel (*Lapitch*), Three Human-Authored Summaries, and Three ChatGPT-Generated Summaries.

Metric	Sjedi5.com	Lektir a.hr	Lektir e.hr	ChatGPT SP	ChatGPT IU	ChatGPT HM	Lapitch
Tokens	2126	2080	1741	2972	2557	2289	29886
Types	619	609	533	817	851	695	2221
Average Word Length (chars)	4.19	4.15	4.28	<u>3.95</u>	4.34	4.10	3.67
Average Sentence Length (tokens)	16.76	15.18	17.95	12.08	17.51	<u>9.30</u>	14.35
Hapax Legomena	372	372	<u>326</u>	464	528	399	900
Dis Legomena	104	97	<u>87</u>	138	146	116	347
Verb-to-Word Ratio	0.140	0.147	0.153	0.133	<u>0.102</u>	0.142	0.13
Type-Token Ratio (TTR)	0.286	0.293	0.306	<u>0.275</u>	0.333	0.304	0.074
Mean Segmental TTR (MSTTR)	0.649	<u>0.640</u>	0.657	0.679	0.745	0.699	0.59
Root TTR (RTTR)	13.425	13.353	<u>12.774</u>	14.99	16.829	14.527	12.847
Lexical Density	0.522	<u>0.503</u>	0.515	0.519	0.576	0.568	0.461

Key patterns. Human summaries are shorter overall; ChatGPT-SP is the most verbose. Sentence packaging diverges by strategy: IU produces long, human-like sentences (17.51 tokens; comparable to human 15–18 and close to the novel’s 14.35 baseline), whereas HM

yields very short sentences (9.30), consistent with information condensed through multi-stage merging. In vocabulary, IU shows the highest diversity (TTR 0.333; MSTTR 0.745) and the highest counts of hapax/dis legomena, consistent with more varied phrasing; we cannot attribute cause without further analysis. Lexical density is highest for IU (0.576) and HM (0.568), indicating a greater proportion of content words and thus a denser information load than the human summaries. The verb-to-word ratio is lowest for IU (0.102), implying a comparatively noun/adjective-heavy style, while HM (0.142) sits closer to human ratios (~0.14–0.15), despite its shorter sentences.

Table 2. Pairwise Text Similarity Scores (Jaccard and Cosine) Across Human and AI Summaries.

Summary Pair	Jaccard Similarity	Cosine Similarity
Sjedi5 + Lektire.hr	0.408	0.925
Sjedi5 + Lektira.hr	0.410	0.923
Lektire.hr + Lektira.hr	0.606	0.982
Sjedi5 + ChatGPT SP	0.280	0.845
Sjedi5 + ChatGPT IU	0.256	0.746
Sjedi5 + ChatGPT HM	0.327	0.796
Lektire.hr + ChatGPT SP	0.244	0.796
Lektire.hr + ChatGPT IU	<u>0.214</u>	0.666
Lektire.hr + ChatGPT HM	0.293	0.693
Lektira.hr + ChatGPT SP	0.273	0.801
Lektira.hr + ChatGPT IU	0.224	<u>0.657</u>
Lektira.hr + ChatGPT HM	0.309	0.684
ChatGPT SP + ChatGPT IU	0.257	0.743
ChatGPT SP + ChatGPT HM	0.327	0.818
ChatGPT IU + ChatGPT HM	0.351	0.834

Interpretation. Human-to-human pairs show high overlap: Cosine values ≥ 0.92 (shared topical space under TF-IDF weighting) and Jaccard ≥ 0.41 (substantial unique-lemma overlap). Human-to-ChatGPT pairs are consistently lower on both metrics (all Jaccard < 0.33 ; Cosine mostly 0.66–0.85), indicating that while themes align (Cosine), the lexicons diverge (Jaccard). Among ChatGPT strategies, HM and IU are most similar to each other (Jaccard 0.351; Cosine 0.834), suggesting that multi-pass workflows converge towards a common content selection even as their surface styles differ (short, dense HM vs. longer, diverse IU). From an ICS/DH perspective, these contrasts imply that AI summaries constitute a distinct register relative to the human study-guide style used by pupils and teachers, with strategy choice exerting measurable influence on readability and information packaging.

5. Discussion

From an ICS/DH vantage, our results indicate a consistent separation between human-authored and ChatGPT summaries across multiple quantitative lenses. Human-human pairs exhibit high topical proximity (Cosine on TF-IDF) and substantial lexical overlap (Jaccard over lemmas). In contrast, human-ChatGPT pairs are consistently lower on both measures. This suggests the model's outputs constitute a distinct register rather than a mimicry of school-oriented study guides (Manning, Raghavan, and Schütze 2008; Salton and Buckley 1988).

Human vs. ChatGPT: where the differences lie. Two families of measures help explain the divergence. First, overlap metrics reveal key differences. A lower Jaccard similarity in human-ChatGPT pairs indicates the model selects a different vocabulary, even when Cosine similarity suggests broadly similar topics. This reflects alternative content packaging and weighting under TF-IDF (Manning, Raghavan, and Schütze 2008). Second, the texts differ in form and density. ChatGPT outputs, especially IU and HM, show higher lexical density and diversity (TTR/MSTTR). In contrast, the human texts tend to use more formulaic, pedagogy-friendly phrasing. This aligns with evidence that instruction-tuned LLMs use more nominalisations and adopt a more informationally dense, noun-heavy style than human writing (Reinhart et al. 2025).

Anchoring these contrasts to the source novel reveals additional patterning. All summaries compress *Lapitch* to 6–10 % of its length yet increase lexical density from 0.461 to 0.503–0.576 and average word length from 3.67 to 3.95–4.34. Human sentences are longer than the novel (≈ 15 –18 vs. 14.35 tokens), SP shorter (12.08), and HM shortest (9.3). POS profiles also show a shift: the summaries feature noun inflation and a contraction of verbs, pronouns, and adverbs. For instance, the IU summary has the lowest verb-to-word ratio (0.102 vs. the novel's 0.13), indicating more nominalised packaging. ChatGPT's summaries also show a sharp drop in auxiliaries and subordinators. This, combined with higher punctuation rates, yields a flatter clause structure. See Appendix D for full POS frequency distributions.

What prompting strategy changes. Strategy choice leaves a measurable stylistic fingerprint:

- SP is most verbose and least human-like in aggregate similarity, consistent with unconstrained one-shot compression of a long narrative.
- HM yields short, choppy sentences and high density, a hallmark of multi-stage condensation where local compressions accumulate during merges. The result is compact but less narratively fluid.
- IU produces human-like sentence lengths and the highest diversity (TTR/MSTTR). However, it also has a lower verb-to-word ratio, indicating a tilt towards nominal description over event progression. This stylistic difference has potential consequences for readability and plot salience.

Implications for everyday reading. For everyday school use, human summaries appear optimised for accessibility. They feature moderate sentence lengths, stable lexical choices, and a higher action salience (verb ratio) that foregrounds who-does-what. While information-rich, ChatGPT summaries may impose a higher cognitive load due to their greater lexical density and diversity. Depending on the strategy, they can also either over-condense the narrative (HM) or over-elaborate on it (SP). The IU strategy comes closest to human packaging but still diverges lexically and in rhetorical balance. From an ICS standpoint, these findings position AI summaries as a parallel informational genre that coexists with, rather than replaces, human study guides.

Methodological takeaways. The metric bundle used here (sentence/word length, lexical density, TTR/MSTTR/RTTR, verb-to-word ratio, and Jaccard/Cosine) offers a replicable scaffold for comparing human and model outputs at scale (Jurafsky and Martin 2023; McNamara et al. 2014).

Bottom line: ChatGPT can summarise effectively, but not in the same register as human classroom guides. The choice of strategy (SP vs. IU vs. HM) systematically shifts readability and information packaging. This underlines that how we prompt an AI is just as consequential as what we ask it to summarise.

6. Limitations

Our findings are bounded by several constraints relevant to Information & Communication Sciences and Digital Humanities:

- **Corpus Scope:** The analysis is based on a single Croatian novel and its school-oriented summaries, which limits the generalisability of our findings across different genres, age groups, and languages.
- **Model Scope:** The paper compares only three ChatGPT summaries to three human summaries. The results may not transfer to other models.
- **Temporal Specificity:** All AI outputs were generated on a single day (31 August 2025). While this mitigates some variability, it does not eliminate the potential effects of model-update drift over time.
- **Chunking Design:** The specific four-chunk design used for the Incremental Updating (IU) and Hierarchical Merging (HM) strategies may have shaped the outcomes. Different chunking methods could yield different stylistic results.
- **Methodological Dependence:** The results depend on a single Croatian NLP pipeline and a specific set of quantitative metrics (e.g. TTR/MSTTR, lexical density, Jaccard/Cosine).

- **Content Analysis:** No analysis of faithfulness or plot accuracy was performed on the AI-generated summaries.
- **Non-Deterministic Outputs:** We did not control for stochasticity in decoding; repeating prompts may yield variance in wording and metrics.

7. Conclusion and Future Work

From an Information & Communication Sciences and Digital Humanities perspective, we compared three human summaries with three ChatGPT summaries generated using Single-Pass, Incremental Updating, and Hierarchical Merging strategies. The results show that the AI outputs, generated on 31 August 2025, form a distinct register rather than simply reproducing the style of school-oriented study guides. Quantitatively, ChatGPT differs in lexical diversity (TTR/MSTTR), lexical density, sentence packaging, and vocabulary overlap (Jaccard/Cosine). IU comes closest to human stylistics but still diverges; SP tends towards verbosity; HM compresses aggressively into short, dense sentences. For IU/HM, the four-chunk workflow likely shaped stylistic outcomes.

Answers to RQs. RQ1: Compared with the three human summaries, ChatGPT outputs show higher lexical density (0.568–0.576 vs. 0.503–0.522), greater lexical diversity (MSTTR 0.699–0.745 vs. 0.640–0.657), strategy-dependent sentence packaging, and markedly lower lemma overlap with humans (all human–ChatGPT Jaccard < 0.33; cosine mostly 0.66–0.85). RQ2: Strategy matters: SP is most verbose and least aligned with human summaries, HM yields the shortest, densest sentences, and IU is closest on sentence length and diversity yet

remains noun-heavy (lowest verb-to-word ratio = 0.102). RQ3: For lay readers who rely on summaries, these differences indicate that AI outputs constitute a parallel register that may raise cognitive load; IU appears the most promising starting point but still benefits from editorial adaptation for classroom use.

Practical implication: For teacher-facing materials, IU-based summaries are the closest stylistic match to human guides but remain lexically denser; add light scaffolding (shorter sentences, more verb-forward phrasing, brief vocabulary glosses) before distributing to pupils.

Looking ahead, we will: (1) broaden the corpus (genres, grade levels, languages) and compare additional models; (2) vary chunking granularity and prompting (few-shot, Chain-of-Thought) to test robustness; (3) extend metrics to discourse coherence, faithfulness, and coverage; (4) incorporate human evaluation with teachers and pupils (readability/comprehension); and (5) conduct a planned qualitative analysis (rhetorical moves, error typologies, reception). Together, these steps will clarify when and how AI summaries can complement everyday reading.

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10. Appendices

10.1. Appendix A: ChatGPT Single-Pass (SP) Summarisation Prompt

Croatian	English (translation)
Jezik: hrvatski	Language: Croatian
Osobnost: Ti si strpljiv i iskusan učitelj književnosti, specijaliziran za dječju lektiru za učenike trećeg razreda osnovne škole. Tvoja je glavna zadaća pomoći djeci u razumijevanju i analizi obvezne lektire.	Personality: You are a patient and experienced literature teacher, specialized in children's assigned reading for third-grade elementary school students. Your main task is to help children understand and analyze the compulsory reading.
Stil: Koristi jednostavan i jasan jezik, s kratkim rečenicama i rječnikom primjerenim za djecu od devet godina.	Style: Use simple and clear language, with short sentences and a vocabulary suitable for nine-year-old children.
Ton: Tvoj ton mora biti topao, poticajan i ohrabrujuć, kao da razgovaraš s djetetom koje uči. Nikad ne koristi složene ili stručne	Tone: Your tone must be warm, encouraging, and supportive, as if you are talking to a child who is learning. Never use complex or

izraze. Uvijek budi podrška.	technical terms. Always be supportive.
Očekivana uloga: Od tebe se očekuje da pišeš sažetke i analize lektira, prilagođene djeci trećih razreda osnovne škole.	Expected role: You are expected to write summaries and analyses of reading assignments, tailored to third-grade elementary school children.
Zadatak: Na temelju priloženog teksta, generiraj opsežan sažetak i analizu djela koji će pomoći učeniku da ispuni svoj dnevnik čitanja.	Task: Based on the attached text, generate a comprehensive summary and analysis of the work that will help the student complete their reading journal.
Upute za sadržaj: Tekst treba biti dugačak između 1500 i 1900 riječi. Tekst treba sadržavati sljedeće dijelove, jasno označene naslovima: 1. Kratak sadržaj: Napiši jasan i detaljan sažetak radnje. 2. Analiza likova: Odaberi i analiziraj glavne i sporedne likove koji su ključni za radnju, objašnjavajući njihove uloge i osobine. 3. Podaci o djelu: Na kraju teksta, u posebnom odjeljku, navedi sljedeće informacije o djelu: * Književni rod	Content guidelines: The text should be between 1,500 and 1,900 words. The text should contain the following parts, clearly labeled with headings: 1. Short summary: Write a clear and detailed summary of the plot. 2. Character analysis: Choose and analyze the main and supporting characters who are key to the plot, explaining their roles and traits. 3. Information about the work: At the end of the text, in a separate section, list the following information about the work: * Literary category

* Književna vrsta * Mjesto radnje * Vrijeme radnje * Glavni lik * Sporedni likovi * Pouka djela	* Literary genre * Setting (place) * Time of the story * Main character * Supporting characters * Moral/lesson of the work
Generiraj kompletan tekst u jednom odgovoru. Ne postavlja dodatna pitanja.	Generate the complete text in a single response. Do not ask additional questions.
Slijedi tekst književnog djela: [CIJELI IZVORNI TEKST IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of the literary work: [FULL SOURCE TEXT GOES HERE]

10.2. Appendix B: ChatGPT Hierarchical Merging (HM) Summarisation Prompts

10.2.1. ChatGPT Hierarchical Merging (HM) — Chunk Summarisation Prompts

Croatian	English (translation)
[Identično zaglavlje kao i kod SP: Jezik, Osobnost, Stil, Ton, Očekivana uloga]	[Identical header as for SP: Language, Personality, Style, Tone, Expected role]
Zadatak: Na temelju priloženog teksta koji je isječak iz književnog djela, generiraj opsežan sažetak i analizu isječka iz djela koji će	Task: Based on the attached text, which is an excerpt from a literary work, generate a comprehensive summary and analysis of the

pomoći učeniku da ispuni svoj dnevnik čitanja.	excerpt that will help the student complete their reading journal.
Upute za sadržaj: Tekst treba sadržavati sljedeće dijelove, jasno označene naslovima: 1. Kratak sadržaj: Napiši jasan i detaljan sažetak radnje. 2. Analiza likova: Odaberi i analiziraj glavne i sporedne likove koji su ključni za radnju, objašnjavajući njihove uloge i osobine. 3. Podaci o djelu: Na kraju teksta, u posebnom odjeljku, navedi sljedeće informacije o djelu: * Književni rod * Književna vrsta * Mjesto radnje * Vrijeme radnje * Glavni lik * Sporedni likovi * Pouka djela	Content guidelines: The text should contain the following parts, clearly labeled with headings: 1. Short summary: Write a clear and detailed summary of the plot. 2. Character analysis: Choose and analyze the main and supporting characters who are key to the plot, explaining their roles and traits. 3. Information about the work: At the end of the text, in a separate section, list the following information about the work: * Literary category * Literary genre * Setting (place) * Time of the story * Main character * Supporting characters * Moral/lesson of the work
Generiraj kompletan tekst u jednom odgovoru. Ne postavlja dodatna pitanja.	Generate the complete text in a single response. Do not ask additional questions.
Slijedi tekst isječka iz književnog djela: [DIO IZVORNOG TEKSTA IDE	The following is the text of the excerpt from the literary work: [CHUNK OF SOURCE TEXT GOES

OVDJE]	HERE]
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10.2.2. ChatGPT Hierarchical Merging (HM) — Pairwise Merge Prompts

Croatian	English (translation)
[Identično zaglavlje kao i kod SP: Jezik, Osobnost, Stil, Ton, Očekivana uloga]	[Identical header as for SP: Language, Personality, Style, Tone, Expected role]
Zadatak: Na temelju priloženih sažetaka konzekutivnih isječaka iz književnog djela, generiraj sjedinjeni opsežan sažetak i analizu isječaka iz djela koji će pomoći učeniku da ispuni svoj dnevnik čitanja.	Task: Based on the attached summaries of consecutive excerpts from a literary work, generate a unified comprehensive summary and analysis of the excerpts that will help the student complete their reading journal.
Upute za sadržaj: Tekst treba sadržavati sljedeće dijelove, jasno označene naslovima: 1. Kratak sadržaj: Napiši jasan i detaljan sažetak radnje. 2. Analiza likova: Odaberi i analiziraj glavne i sporedne likove koji su ključni za radnju, objašnjavajući njihove uloge i osobine. 3. Podaci o djelu: Na kraju teksta,	Content guidelines: The text should contain the following parts, clearly labeled with headings: 1. Short summary: Write a clear and detailed summary of the plot. 2. Character analysis: Choose and analyze the main and supporting characters who are key to the plot, explaining their roles and traits. 3. Information about the work: At the end of the text, in a separate

u posebnom odjeljku, navedi sljedeće informacije o djelu: * Književni rod * Književna vrsta * Mjesto radnje * Vrijeme radnje * Glavni lik * Sporedni likovi * Pouka djela	section, list the following information about the work: * Literary category * Literary genre * Setting (place) * Time of the story * Main character * Supporting characters * Moral/lesson of the work
Generiraj kompletan tekst u jednom odgovoru. Ne postavlja dodatna pitanja.	Generate the complete text in a single response. Do not ask additional questions.
Slijedi tekst jednog sažetka isječka iz književnog djela: [SAŽETAK DIJELA IZVORNOG TEKSTA IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of one summary of an excerpt from the literary work: [SUMMARY OF CHUNK OF SOURCE TEXT GOES HERE]
Slijedi tekst drugog sažetka isječka iz književnog djela: [SAŽETAK DIJELA IZVORNOG TEKSTA IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of the second summary of an excerpt from the literary work: [SUMMARY OF CHUNK OF SOURCE TEXT GOES HERE]

10.2.3. ChatGPT Hierarchical Merging (HM) — Final Merge Prompt

Croatian	English (translation)
[Identično zaglavlje kao i kod SP: Jezik, Osobnost, Stil, Ton,	[Identical header as for SP: Language, Personality, Style,

Očekivana uloga]	Tone, Expected role]
Zadatak: Na temelju priloženih sjedinjenih sažetaka konzekutivnih isječaka iz književnog djela, generiraj jedinstven opsežan sažetak i analizu cjelokupnog djela koji će pomoći učeniku da ispuni svoj dnevnik čitanja.	Task: Based on the attached unified summaries of consecutive excerpts from a literary work, generate a single comprehensive summary and analysis of the entire work that will help the student complete their reading journal.
Upute za sadržaj: Tekst treba biti dugačak između 1500 i 1900 riječi. Tekst treba sadržavati sljedeće dijelove, jasno označene naslovima: 1. Kratak sadržaj: Napiši jasan i detaljan sažetak radnje. 2. Analiza likova: Odaberi i analiziraj glavne i sporedne likove koji su ključni za radnju, objašnjavajući njihove uloge i osobine. 3. Podaci o djelu: Na kraju teksta, u posebnom odjeljku, navedi sljedeće informacije o djelu: * Književni rod * Književna vrsta * Mjesto radnje * Vrijeme radnje	Content guidelines: The text should be between 1,500 and 1,900 words. The text should contain the following parts, clearly labeled with headings: 1. Short summary: Write a clear and detailed summary of the plot. 2. Character analysis: Choose and analyze the main and supporting characters who are key to the plot, explaining their roles and traits. 3. Information about the work: At the end of the text, in a separate section, list the following information about the work: * Literary category * Literary genre * Setting (place) * Time of the story

* Glavni lik * Sporedni likovi * Pouka djela	* Main character * Supporting characters * Moral/lesson of the work
Generiraj kompletan tekst u jednom odgovoru. Ne postavlja dodatna pitanja.	Generate the complete text in a single response. Do not ask additional questions.
Slijedi tekst prvog sjedinjenog sažetka isječaka iz književnog djela: [SAŽETAK SAŽETAKA IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of the first unified summary of excerpts from the literary work: [SUMMARY OF SUMMARIES GOES HERE]
Slijedi tekst drugog sjedinjenog sažetka isječaka iz književnog djela: [SAŽETAK SAŽETAKA IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of the second unified summary of excerpts from the literary work: [SUMMARY OF SUMMARIES GOES HERE]

10.3. Appendix C: ChatGPT Incremental Updating (IU) Summarisation Prompts

10.3.1. ChatGPT Incremental Updating (IU) — Initial Prompt

Croatian	English (translation)
[Identično zaglavlje kao i kod SP: Jezik, Osobnost, Stil, Ton,	[Identical header as for SP: Language, Personality, Style,

Očekivana uloga]	Tone, Expected role]
Zadatak: Na temelju priloženog isječka iz književnog djela, generiraj opsežan sažetak i analizu isječka iz djela koji će pomoći učeniku da ispuni svoj dnevnik čitanja.	Task: Based on the attached text, which is an excerpt from a literary work, generate a comprehensive summary and analysis of the excerpt that will help the student complete their reading journal.
Upute za sadržaj: Tekst treba sadržavati sljedeće dijelove, jasno označene naslovima: 1. Kratak sadržaj: Napiši jasan i detaljan sažetak radnje. 2. Analiza likova: Odaberi i analiziraj glavne i sporedne likove koji su ključni za radnju, objašnjavajući njihove uloge i osobine. 3. Podaci o djelu: Na kraju teksta, u posebnom odjeljku, navedi sljedeće informacije o djelu: * Književni rod * Književna vrsta * Mjesto radnje * Vrijeme radnje * Glavni lik * Sporedni likovi * Pouka djela	Content guidelines: The text should contain the following parts, clearly labeled with headings: 1. Short summary: Write a clear and detailed summary of the plot. 2. Character analysis: Choose and analyze the main and supporting characters who are key to the plot, explaining their roles and traits. 3. Information about the work: At the end of the text, in a separate section, list the following information about the work: * Literary category * Literary genre * Setting (place) * Time of the story * Main character * Supporting characters * Moral/lesson of the work
Generiraj kompletan tekst u	Generate the complete text in a

jednom odgovoru. Ne postavljaj dodatna pitanja.	single response. Do not ask additional questions.
Slijedi tekst isječka iz književnog djela: [PRVI DIO IZVORNOG TEKSTA IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of the excerpt from the literary work: [FIRST CHUNK OF SOURCE TEXT GOES HERE]

10.3.2. ChatGPT Incremental Updating (IU) — Iterative Summary-Update Prompt

Croatian	English (translation)
Zadatak: Ažuriraj postojeći sažetak književnog djela na temelju nastavka dijela priče. Sačuvaj važne ranije događaje, ali prepravi ili proširi sažetak kako bi odražavao cijeli dosadašnji tijek radnje. Generiraj sjedinjeni opsežan sažetak i analizu isječaka iz djela koji će pomoći učeniku da ispuni svoj dnevnik čitanja.	Task: Update the existing summary of the literary work based on the continuation of the story. Preserve the important earlier events, but revise or expand the summary so that it reflects the entire plot so far. Generate a unified comprehensive summary and analysis of the excerpts that will help the student complete their reading journal.
Upute za sadržaj: Tekst treba sadržavati sljedeće dijelove, jasno označene naslovima:	Content guidelines: The text should contain the following parts, clearly labeled with headings:

1. Kratak sadržaj: Napiši jasan i detaljan sažetak radnje. 2. Analiza likova: Odaberi i analiziraj glavne i sporedne likove koji su ključni za radnju, objašnjavajući njihove uloge i osobine. 3. Podaci o djelu: Na kraju teksta, u posebnom odjeljku, navedi sljedeće informacije o djelu: * Književni rod * Književna vrsta * Mjesto radnje * Vrijeme radnje * Glavni lik * Sporedni likovi * Pouka djela	1. Short summary: Write a clear and detailed summary of the plot. 2. Character analysis: Choose and analyze the main and supporting characters who are key to the plot, explaining their roles and traits. 3. Information about the work: At the end of the text, in a separate section, list the following information about the work: * Literary category * Literary genre * Setting (place) * Time of the story * Main character * Supporting characters * Moral/lesson of the work
Generiraj kompletan tekst u jednom odgovoru. Ne postavlja dodatna pitanja.	Generate the complete text in a single response. Do not ask additional questions.
Slijedi tekst postojećeg sažetka: [SAŽETAK PRETHODNOG DIJELA IZVORNOG TEKSTA IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of the existing summary: [SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHUNK OF SOURCE TEXT GOES HERE]
Slijedi tekst isječka iz književnog djela: [SLJEDEĆI DIO IZVORNOG TEKSTA IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of the excerpt from the literary work: [NEXT CHUNK OF SOURCE TEXT GOES HERE]

10.3.3. ChatGPT Incremental Updating (IU) — Iterative Summary-Update Prompt

Croatian	English (translation)
Zadatak: Ažuriraj postojeći sažetak književnog djela na temelju nastavka dijela priče. Sačuvaj važne ranije događaje, ali prepravi ili proširi sažetak kako bi odražavao cijeli dosadašnji tijek radnje. Generiraj sjedinjeni opsežan sažetak i analizu isječaka iz djela koji će pomoći učeniku da ispuni svoj dnevnik čitanja.	Task: Update the existing summary of the literary work based on the continuation of the story. Preserve the important earlier events, but revise or expand the summary so that it reflects the entire plot so far. Generate a unified comprehensive summary and analysis of the excerpts that will help the student complete their reading journal.
Upute za sadržaj: Tekst treba biti dugačak između 1500 i 1900 riječi. Tekst treba sadržavati sljedeće dijelove, jasno označene naslovima: 1. Kratak sadržaj: Napiši jasan i detaljan sažetak radnje. 2. Analiza likova: Odaberi i analiziraj glavne i sporedne likove koji su ključni za radnju, objašnjavajući njihove uloge i	Content guidelines: The text should be between 1,500 and 1,900 words. The text should contain the following parts, clearly labeled with headings: 1. Short summary: Write a clear and detailed summary of the plot. 2. Character analysis: Choose and analyze the main and supporting characters who are key to the plot,

osobine. 3. Podaci o djelu: Na kraju teksta, u posebnom odjeljku, navedi sljedeće informacije o djelu:	explaining their roles and traits. 3. Information about the work: At the end of the text, in a separate section, list the following information about the work:
* Književni rod * Književna vrsta * Mjesto radnje * Vrijeme radnje * Glavni lik * Sporedni likovi * Pouka djela	* Literary category * Literary genre * Setting (place) * Time of the story * Main character * Supporting characters * Moral/lesson of the work
Generiraj kompletan tekst u jednom odgovoru. Ne postavlja dodatna pitanja.	Generate the complete text in a single response. Do not ask additional questions.
Slijedi tekst postojećeg sažetka: [SAŽETAK PRETHODNOG DIJELA IZVORNOG TEKSTA IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of the existing summary: [SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHUNK OF SOURCE TEXT GOES HERE]
Slijedi tekst konačnog isječka iz književnog djela: [SLJEDEĆI DIO IZVORNOG TEKSTA IDE OVDJE]	The following is the text of the final excerpt from the literary work: [NEXT CHUNK OF SOURCE TEXT GOES HERE]

10.4. Appendix D: POS frequency distributions of *The Brave Adventures of Lapitch*, three human-authored summaries, and three ChatGPT-authored summaries

Universal Dependencies POS tags⁵

ADJ: adjective; ADP: adposition; ADV: adverb; AUX: auxiliary; CCONJ: coordinating conjunction; DET: determiner; INTJ: interjection; NOUN: noun; NUM: numeral; PART: particle; PRON: pronoun; PROPN: proper noun; PUNCT: punctuation; SCONJ: subordinating conjunction; SYM: symbol; VERB: verb; X: other.

	Lapitch	Sjedi5.c om	Lektira. hr	Lektire. hr	ChatGP T SP	ChatGP T IU	ChatGP T HM
ADJ	1803 (6.03 %)	150 (6.94 %)	162 (7.79 %)	116 (6.66 %)	305 (10.26 %)	281 (10.99 %)	246 (10.75 %)
ADP	1872 (6.26 %)	162 (7.49 %)	165 (7.93 %)	133 (7.64 %)	198 (6.66 %)	182 (7.12 %)	144 (6.29 %)
ADV	2519 (8.43 %)	95 (4.39 %)	108 (5.19 %)	100 (5.74 %)	102 (3.43 %)	75 (2.93 %)	77 (3.36 %)
AUX	2905 (9.72 %)	169 (7.82 %)	267 (12.84 %)	211 (12.12 %)	124 (4.17 %)	55 (2.15 %)	64 (2.80 %)
CCONJ	1714 (5.74 %)	116 (5.37 %)	115 (5.53 %)	99 (5.69 %)	191 (6.43 %)	159 (6.22 %)	151 (6.60 %)
DET	1046 (3.50 %)	82 (3.79 %)	68 (3.27 %)	53 (3.04 %)	61 (2.05 %)	57 (2.23 %)	43 (1.88 %)
INTJ	40 (0.13 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)
NOUN	4201	431	391	340	661	738	546

⁵ https://universaldependencies.org/treebanks/hr_set/index.html

	(14.06 %)	(19.94 %)	(18.80 %)	(19.53 %)	(22.24 %)	(28.86 %)	(23.85 %)
NUM	225 (0.75 %)	25 (1.16 %)	13 (0.63 %)	13 (0.75 %)	14 (0.47 %)	9 (0.35 %)	8 (0.35 %)
PART	467 (1.56 %)	20 (0.93 %)	23 (1.11 %)	18 (1.03 %)	39 (1.31 %)	20 (0.78 %)	20 (0.87 %)
PRON	1739 (5.82 %)	127 (5.87 %)	108 (5.19 %)	84 (4.82 %)	154 (5.18 %)	74 (2.89 %)	108 (4.72 %)
PROPON	1383 (4.63 %)	131 (6.06 %)	81 (3.89 %)	74 (4.25 %)	77 (2.59 %)	118 (4.61 %)	107 (4.67 %)
PUNCT	5018 (16.79 %)	282 (13.04 %)	212 (10.19 %)	155 (8.90 %)	590 (19.85 %)	508 (19.87 %)	412 (18.00 %)
SCONJ	1073 (3.59 %)	69 (3.19 %)	62 (2.98 %)	78 (4.48 %)	57 (1.92 %)	18 (0.70 %)	38 (1.66 %)
SYM	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	3 (0.10 %)	3 (0.12 %)	0 (0.00 %)
VERB	3875 (12.97 %)	303 (14.01 %)	305 (14.66 %)	267 (15.34 %)	396 (13.32 %)	260 (10.17 %)	325 (14.20 %)
X	6 (0.02 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)	0 (0.00 %)
Σ	29886	2162	2080	1741	2972	2557	2289