

Forming Characters: How Reading Shapes Us

by

Noam Schwartz

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Abstract:

This research project seeks to address a gap in reading research – the experience of the solitary reader. Through a literature review and 10 qualitative interviews with students at Dalhousie University and University of Kings College, in Halifax, Nova Scotia I worked to further understand the deeply personal and often variable experience of reading alone. My research has revealed that experiences of reading greatly inform readers’ everyday lives and social interactions. I claim that reading, even when it is solitary, is deeply relational and social, as readers navigate between the world of books and the real world by “tapping in and out” of the world around them through the three E’s: Empathy, Escape, and Education.

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“Nothing is more commonplace than the reading experience, and yet nothing is more unknown. Reading is such a matter of course that at first glance, it seems there is nothing to say about it.” – Tsetvan Todorov (Boyarin 1993).

Introduction:

My exploratory, qualitative thesis is a literary anthropology project that focuses on a gap in the anthropological study of reading – the experience of the “solitary reader” (Boyarin 1993). Through semi-structured interviews with students in Halifax, Nova Scotia, I explore what reading, especially reading fiction, does for individual readers, and what readers take away from their reading experiences. I also ask how the individual reading experiences scales up to a broader communal or societal level – how do individual experiences with reading change the way people interact with other people, and does this lead to larger societal shifts in normalized behavior and/or attitudes?

The key idea from my literature review is the need for literary anthropology to further investigate the experience of the “solitary reader” (Boyarin 1993). If we want to better understand the role reading has in human life, we must first investigate how reading influences the individual doing it. In addition to literary anthropology, I draw on the literary theory of M.M. Bakhtin, who argues that words exist and accrue meaning through the social context they (and their users) occupy (Rivkin & Ryan 2017). This pairs nicely with Boyarin’s (1993) “solitary

reader” concept because one focuses on individual experience while the other introduces the social context in which individuals are entangled. Additionally, Zunshine (2006) is one of many authors to identify Theory of Mind (ToM) as one of fiction’s most important contributions to readers. Essentially, ToM is the innate (but trainable) human capacity to empathize – to subject yourself to someone else’s experience.

Drawing on these resources, this research aims to better understand how reading shapes us – both individually and as a society. The ultimate aim of this research is to better understand the solitary reading experience of university students in Halifax by answering the following questions: what is the solitary reading experience like for students who self-identify as readers at Dalhousie and Kings? And further, how might this solitary reading experience shape their personal and social lives?

This line of inquiry matters—indeed there is “something to say about it”—because reading is an incredibly commonplace activity. Today, roughly 85% of the global population is literate.¹ If the majority of the world is doing something, it is reasonable to ask what that something is doing to us.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review:

Before diving into the literature review, I want to mention an overarching theme from the readings I have done on literary anthropology. All work done to explain this field of study, immediately becomes subject to that same study. After all, everything we write must be read to be shared and understood.

¹ <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>

Studying Reading as Anthropologists

The first group of articles I reviewed largely addressed the topic of what anthropological studies on reading have thus far consisted of – the areas that have been heavily researched and the gaps that remain (Reed 2018, Leibshon 1994, Boyarin 1993). The main thrust of these articles is that the field of literary anthropology is difficult to define, because, so far, no one has really been able to define it! It is not clear where the borders of literary anthropology are because it often bleeds into other areas of study such as the anthropology of art, linguistics, and semiotics (to name a few).

“Anthropology and/of literature or literary anthropology remains a puzzling subdiscipline. As a field of anthropological studies, it sits uncomfortably in comparison with what one might imagine as being sister fields, such as the anthropology of art. The latter, confidently defined and densely ethnographic in approach, highlights the surprising underdevelopment of the former. Indeed, the question of what the ethnographic project might look like in anthropology and literature remains open to debate; it would not be fair to describe this question as contested because it is often simply elided in the work of authors who claim a literary anthropology approach. Part of the reason for this oversight, I would argue, is due to the perceived problem of what to do with acts of reading.” (Reed 2018, pg. 1)

An area within literary anthropology that has been identified by multiple authors as needing further investigation is the personal experience of reading itself. As Reed asserts, for example, “...ethnography of reading is important. By studying real readers in real contexts the limits of literary theory can be highlighted.” (Reed 2002, 2).

This impetus to investigate the experiences of individual readers and their relationship with the materials they are reading leads us to an important concept. “We still need an ethnography of that ‘solitary reader’ whose stereotyping we decry, but who we spend much of our waking time being” (Boyarin 1993, 8). This study of the “solitary reader” (you are most likely yourself a “solitary reader” right now because you are reading this essay and are probably

doing it alone!) is both a central idea in literary anthropology and a gap in our understanding of the reading experience. Its investigation is the main driver of this research project. Before I continue overviewing literary anthropology, it is necessary to take a step back to provide a theoretical framework for this research project.

Theory

To establish a theoretical framework for my research project I reviewed the work of M.M. Bakhtin and Lisa Zunshine. “According to Bakhtin’s theory, all words exist in dialog with other words. The theory shifts emphasis away from individual literary works and toward the intertextual world in which individual literary works are set” (Rivkin & Ryan 2017, 32). Bakhtin’s theory addresses the social existence and construction of words and language – words exist and accrue meaning through the social context they (and their users) occupy.

One key term that helps elucidate the sociality of language is Bakhtin’s concept of *heteroglossia*. Essentially, *heteroglossia* refers to the idea that any language that is used (spoken, written, etc.) occupies a specific position. This position is associated with the characteristics of the person, the context of their life, and the specific point(s) at which they use language. When it comes to reading, this context always has at least two faces; the author or originator of the language, and the reader or interpreter of the language (narratology 2012). This point about words existing in dialogue with other words, paired with the relationship between author and reader, provides an interesting space for further investigation. How do an authors’ words (written on paper) interact with the words (in the head) of the reader? The reader is obviously reading the same words the author has written but – according to Bakhtin – has an entirely different context and internal order of words with which to understand the author’s writing.

The work of Lisa Zunshine introduced the concept, Theory of Mind (ToM) (Zunshine 2006). ToM can be simply understood as the innate but trainable human capacity to empathize – to live someone else’s experience. Zunshine claims that reading – especially reading fiction, where readers identify with made up characters and often experience the story through the eyes of those characters – is a way of training our ToM; a way of training that innate capacity to empathize. Zunshine goes on to identify ToM both as a way that reading impacts (arguably benefitting) us, while also identifying ToM as an explanation for why we read in the first place. “Theory of Mind is a cluster of cognitive adaptations that allows us to navigate our social world and also structures that world. Intensely social species that we are, we thus read fiction because it engages, in a variety of particularly focused ways, our Theory of Mind.” (Zunshine 2006, 25).

The Power of Stories

It is impossible to talk about books without also mentioning stories. Although stories far predate books, and there are other mediums which can serve as vessels for stories, books remain among our most effective story telling devices. Humans love stories – we tell them constantly and they are one of our best tools for making sense of the world (Warren 1986). Stories are not the realm of one group, one social class, one race, or one gender. Rather stories can be created and shared by anyone, anytime. They connect us and give meaning to our traditions, communities, and lives (Richardson 1975).

For Richardson (1975), anthropologists have a special role to play with stories. He argues that it is the anthropologist’s responsibility to be the teller of the human story, because “the ability to symbolize makes us what we are. It accounts for our successes; it is the reason for our failures. Being human is an impossible task, but it is our task. The anthropologist’s job is to tell of that task, to glorify man by composing and reciting with skill and passion the human myth”

(Richardson 1975, 8). Not only does this excerpt stress the importance of symbolism – and by extension stories – but it additionally situates the anthropologist as responsible for the human story, our story. Stories are one of the most effective tools for creating symbolism, and books are one of the most effective mediums for creating and preserving stories. Richardson (1975) stresses the importance of stories in human personal and social life while at the same time providing a reflexive analysis of the role the anthropologist plays as an active storyteller – of my role in this very research.

Reading Practices

Reading practices have changed over time, specifically in the last couple of decades. There is a lot of research and speculation on the impact of the digital revolution on reading practices – the way we read as well as the amount (Crain 2018). The simple question “Why do we read?” can actually tell us a lot about reading practices and how they have changed over time. In my research I have identified three key reasons for why people read: (1) to learn more about topics of interest (2) to learn to do things we would like to be able to do (3) to escape from everyday cares and responsibilities (Cunningham 1983). Importantly, all three of these reasons can be seen as falling under one umbrella – they are all voluntary acts. Reading, unless it is assigned or required by work, school, etc., is done of the readers own volition (Boyarin 1983). Although this may seem a trivial point, it is important to recognize that one of the main reasons people read is because they want to – this becomes especially important when analyzing how reading rates have changed over time. According to Crain (2018), “between 2003 and 2016, the amount of time that the average American devoted to reading for personal interest on a daily basis dropped from 0.36 hours to 0.29 hours. It would seem that reading in America has declined even further in the past decade.”

Reading Fiction

The last topic I will address in this literature review is reading fiction. Although this area of study is not exactly a gap, it is a useful area of research as there is plenty that is still unknown (Reed 2002). Additionally, earlier I identified research on the “solitary reader” as a place where there are still significant gaps in our understanding – conveniently, fiction is often read by “solitary readers”, making a study of the “solitary fiction reader” ripe for further investigation. One approach to studying the “solitary fiction reader” could be to identify what entices people to read fiction in the first place. “But whatever interests may be appealed to by fiction, the special interest is always our interest in a story.” (Warren 1986, 1). We read fiction for many of the reasons I have already listed – we like good stories or want an escape from our everyday lives – but there is much more to be said about what fiction actually does for the reader. For example, reading fiction forces the reader to subject themselves to the ideas and sensations of someone else (Reed 2002). It creates a feeling of empathy in the reader as they identify with the experience of the character(s) in the novel. Whether the character(s) are real, or imaginary makes no significant difference – as Mark Twain once said, “The only difference between reality and fiction is that fiction needs to be credible”.

A further point of interest regarding fiction reading is the challenge it faces from new forms of media, especially movies and TV. As Crain (2018) explains:

“Television, rather than the Internet, likely remains the primary force distracting Americans from books. The proportion of the American population that watches TV must have hit a ceiling some time ago; in the years studied by the American Time Use Survey, it’s very stable, at a plateau of about eighty per cent—roughly four times greater than the proportion of Americans who read. But America’s average TV time is still rising, because TV watchers are, incredibly, watching more and more of it, the quantity rising from 3.28 hours in 2003 to 3.45 hours in 2016.”

New mediums for story-telling, such as TV, force consumers to choose how they want their story to be packaged – a choice that seems to increasingly leave books out in the cold. This relationship between new mediums of entertainment and books, is fertile ground for further research.

The foregoing literature helped to focus this thesis on the experience of fiction readers specifically, and additionally incorporate recent technological developments into the solitary reading experience. In what follows, I ask: what is the solitary reading experience like for students who self-identify as fiction readers at Dalhousie and Kings? And further, how might this solitary reading experience shape their personal and social lives in the modern, technologically advanced, world?

Methods:

As articulated earlier in this paper, the experience of the “solitary reader” is in need of further investigation by anthropology. This gap in our knowledge is in part explained by the difficulty of accessing the experience of a “solitary reader” for research purposes. It is not an especially observable phenomenon, as “solitary reading” is performed by a single individual, often secluded from outside interruption, and the actual content of the reading experience occurs exclusively in the head or imagination of the person doing the reading. This poses a challenge to many traditional forms of data collection.

To chip away at the difficulty of accumulating data on the “solitary reader”, I conducted 8 online qualitative interviews via Microsoft Teams and 2 additional in-person interviews using the same format and questions. This method of research allowed me to probe the personal experiences of readers in a way that allowed them to share their observations, insights, and perspective on reading and what it does for them (Alsaawi, 2014).

The population of interest for this study was any/all students at Dalhousie University or Kings University who self-identify as readers. I am interested in this population primarily because students make up a significant reading demographic – both readers who do so for pleasure (of their own volition) and those who do it only if it is required (for school or work). Additionally, reading practices have changed and developed over time and different generations often display different reading habits (Crain, 2018). By focusing on one age group (broadly university age young adults) my findings will become more descriptive of the experiences of this one group of readers. That being said, my interviews did include two discussions with mature students (age 40+), and there were some discrepancies in the answers of these two older participants that will be discussed in the analysis section. This narrowing of focus is important, especially when collecting qualitative research data which is difficult to generalize to a larger population because of its case specific nature (Alsaawi, 2014). There was no exclusion, or min./max. requirement for race, gender, religion or any other such social identifiers, as the impact of these variables on reading is not the main interest of my study. However, I did include a basic demographic questionnaire along with my interview guide in case it became relevant for data sampling purposes.

Recruitment was done through Dalhousie Universities English and SOSA departments. I contacted the administrators of these two departments and asked them to pass my recruitment poster to professors in these departments who in turn posted the recruitment letter to their class webpages on Brightspace, making students aware of the interview opportunity (Appendix A). All students who responded to this posting were considered for selection based on a first-come first-serve basis. Two additional participants joined the study after hearing about it from a friend who

had already participated and reached out to me in hopes of being included. This word-of-mouth advertising was something I encouraged my participants to do but was obviously not obligatory.

As stated above, demographic information was not used in the interview participant selection process and it did not significantly inform the analysis of my interviews, besides the previously mentioned discrepancy between younger (18-25) and mature (40+) students. This research was exploratory in nature, and I was therefore primarily interested in the individual responses to my interview questions and their relevancy to reviewed literature. For example, did the interview results support the claims of ToM – namely, that reading trains our ability to empathize – or contradict them (Zunshine, 2006)?

My qualitative interview was split into two sections (Appendix C). The first asked the participant questions about their personal experience as a reader. Focusing on themes such as their introduction to reading, the kind of books they read, and what they feel during and after reading. After this first round of questions was completed, we proceeded to the second section which included questions relating to reading and its social context. Here, themes include questions on perceptions of other readers, changes in reading practice over time, and experiences with book groups. Around the seventh interview I added one question to this second section – asking participants what they thought the correlation between independent reading and engagement as a student might be, if anything. The interviews usually lasted about 40 minutes, and concluded with the brief demographic questionnaire, thanking the participant for their participation, and allowing for the participant to ask me questions about my research and own reading experience.

To note some limitations to this study, only 10 interviews were conducted and participants did not come from a broad cross-section of society. Additionally, practically all my

participants were studying in the arts (history, SOSA, English, etc.) except for two who were in neuroscience. As a result, I cannot claim these findings to be representative of all reading experiences. To further this point, the solitary reading experience is notoriously localized, it is all about the specific experience of the reader in question (as mentioned previously).

I analyzed my collected data by transcribing all interviews into readable documents. From there I compared the accumulated qualitative data to each other and the literature I reviewed. My research posed minimal risks to participants. As such, there are no significant ethical concerns that need to be outlined here.

Analyses:

Solitary Reader

The main gap identified in my literature review was the lack of insight literary anthropologists and other concerned parties have into the experience of the solitary fiction reader (Boyarin 1993). In my interviews and analysis, I attempt to address this gap by probing into the experiences of individual readers through questions such as the following: what is the experience of reading fiction like for you? What about non-fiction? How are characters, depicted in the books you read? Where do you read? What do you feel you gain from reading, if anything?

These questions were designed to lead the participant to reflect on the deeply personal experience of reading. I quickly discovered that accessing the recesses of the human psyche is no easy task – that this is a gap for a reason – as it is difficult to quantify or communicate something as intangible as an internal mental state. However, a social anthropological approach is not meant to empirically reveal, in an unmediated way, the workings of a person’s brain. Instead, the social anthropologist’s task is to find out “what the devil they think they are up to” (Geertz, 1974).

Approached in this way, my interviews and literature review point to significant correlates

between the reported solitary reading experiences of the ten participants and their everyday experiences in society. I claim that reading allows those who do it to both “tap in” and “tap out” of the world through what I call the Three E’s: Empathy, Escape, and Education.

Heteroglossia

The concept of heteroglossia, already discussed, refers to the idea that any language that is used (spoken, written, etc.) occupies a particular position – a particular context. The words written by an author, for example, represent a position unique to the experiences of that author, the time of their writing, and the author's intent. This idea becomes important when we consider a second actor – the receiver of these words, the reader – who represents a new context as a distinct individual and who therefore brings their distinct personal context into dialogue with the context of the author (Rivkin & Ryan 2017). This concept was brought up in an interesting way in one of my interviews:

“What do I get out of reading? It's funny I didn't start thinking about this until I was much more mature, but I'm looking more not at the surface of the book like the characters in the story, and I'm looking at the deeper context of it. When the author was writing the book right, they always, authors always have something to say. Authors always have something to say, so what is it that they're trying to say about the society that they live in? And I mean we can go back to 1984, right. What were they trying to say? And at the time it was written, do you know what I mean? So, I get more invested in that part of trying to examine what the author was thinking. So it's more of, I get more of the ability to critically analyze the text and the meaning and inference of the meaning. I could be completely off base, but it doesn't matter because my mind is thinking about it, which it hadn't before when I was reading originally like in my, like early in my tween years, right. Like I didn't care what he was trying to say. I'm wondering, and I think that that is important, I don't know if it's part of your question, I don't know if it's gonna be part of your end research. I do feel that that's important. Reading, you know, reading 1984 when I was 16 and reading 1984 now – vastly, vastly different experience.” (Transcript #7)

In this excerpt, we see the acknowledgment that both author and reader bring meaning to the text or story. First, my participant noted that authors have intention in their writing – they are writing

from a particular context, for a particular reason. My participant then identified their own attempts to interpret the author's intention as one of their favorite parts of reading stories – analyzing the narrative in light of the possible motivation(s) of the author and thus bringing the two actors, author, and reader, into dialogue. Lastly, my participant brought things back exclusively to her own context with her claim that she interpreted the same text in different ways at different times in her life. Although the words themselves were the same in both readings, and the actors the same (author and reader), the experience was to my participant, “vastly, vastly different”. This provides I think a prime example of this concept, heteroglossia. Nothing about the book itself changed between my participants first and subsequent encounters with it. All that had changed, was the context of the reader and their lived experience between readings. This concept of heteroglossia came up in another interview as well:

“P: I guess I like the lack of rules in the sense that there, it didn't have to have happened. The author, if you find someone who's mind you really like and how they think, then they're going to create that world or that story that is exactly what you want it to be, or what you are looking for.

I: Yeah, I really like that actually. It's I mean, it's the mind of the author – that's what we're reading, really. It kinda reminds me of one experience I had a while ago, it was kind of like a revolutionary experience for me with reading. I read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. I don't know if you...?

P: (chuckles) Yeah, I know it.

I: Right. So, it's just like it's this, you know, crazy, everything, anything could possibly happen. I was reading and I was kind of going – Oh my God, this could be what writing is. It's just whatever you know, it's up to the will of the author to create whatever they want, and I'm along for the ride.

P: Especially in that book.

I: (laughs) Especially in that book. Yeah, it's a wild one, right? The highway through Earth or whatever, it's crazy, but I think that's a really interesting point, actually.

P: Yeah, that's a great example of that.” (Transcript #3)

Although not explicitly heteroglossia – we did not discuss the differences in meaning and interpretation between author and reader – this excerpt clearly identifies the written words of a book as deeply entwined with the context, the mind, of the author. According to my participant, when we are reading, what we are really doing is identifying the mind of someone whose thoughts we hopefully appreciate. This experience riding along with the mind of someone else, the mind of the author, is a great way to think about the process of “tapping in/out”. When we are reading, we are to some extent leaving our own world, and our own words, behind for the world and words of the author. We “tap out” of our own context when picking up a book and “tap in” to the context of the author, story, character, or world they have created. However, like a good sociology student, I know that I can never completely leave my own context behind - “tapping out” is only temporary. Nonetheless, “tapping out” of their own context and “in” to the authors allows readers to access new perspectives, ideas, and contexts to consider in their own lives. In this way, “tapping out” of your own life to “tap in” to the world of the author allows for a unique dialogue between author and reader that leaves the reader with a novel and nuanced perspective – a new way to “tap in” to their own lives when the book is returned to the shelf.

Empathy & ToM

Theory of Mind claims that humans have an innate but trainable ability to empathize. One of the best ways to develop this natural ability is to read (Zunshine 2006), something every participant I interviewed acknowledged to varying degrees.

“Uh, for one learning big words. Definitely good for expanding your vocabulary. Also, it's interesting to read from a character’s perspective and see how they view the world and how they would try to overcome the challenges they are faced with. And you read

everyone's different perspective and then you find bits of yourself in other characters or bits of people that you know in other characters... which is awesome." (Transcript #2)

Not only was the necessity of understanding another person's experience – a character's experience – acknowledged by all participants in their reading, but this forced, or simulated empathy was identified by many participants as one of the most impactful aspects of reading. As another participant described it,

"If I didn't read so much, I think my speech patterns would be very different. I think my way of thinking about things would be very different. I think how I perceive and process things would be very different. Because I'm one of those people who like, I'm a bit of an amalgamation of all of the characters I've ever read that I thought were cool. I just have picked up various things from various characters I've read over the years, so obviously I would be very different had I not read about those characters." (Transcript #6)

To this participant, empathizing with characters went a step further than just acknowledging another person's experience or trying to understand their perspective. Rather, empathizing with characters actually influenced their own personal development. By affording characters in a story the same empathy shown to real people, my participant was able to analyze the actions of the characters as they made them – judging and applying the characters' lessons to their own lives and even internalizing select traits and ideas from these characters in the process. These experiences are not left behind with the book when it is returned to the shelf but stay with the reader, informing decisions big and small. In this way, reading can be understood as a kind of simulated reality that allows the reader to "tap into" the world around them by expanding their appreciation and understanding of others. A place to investigate, experience, and analyze situations and relationships without yourself being subject to raging seas, dragon fire, Big Brother, or an overbearing mother. By empathizing with the characters in their reading, my

participants grew in their own lives by “tapping into” the novel perspectives and experiences of others and then applying these new insights to their own, very real, world.

Stories and Escapism

People are constantly creating, sharing, and revising stories, every day. Stories do many things for us; they teach us about the natural world, instill moral precepts, enforce societal/hierarchical norms, and even narrate the creation of our world. Stories order and explain our universe. They create meaningful and easily accessible narratives about the human experience. They are how we understand ourselves (Richardson 1975). They are also incredibly important when it comes to books, among the most fertile forms of story creation and dissemination (Warren 1986). In my interviews, the importance of stories came up routinely, and although the importance of stories was itself rarely the main thrust of my questions, participants often emphasized this importance on their own. As one interviewee responded:

“That is a very broad question. Why do I read? Well, mainly because that's the primary way to go about storytelling. You know, I feel like there's three or four pillars when it comes to storytelling. Theater, reading, film, and music. So, I partake in reading because I have a genuine interest in, you know making people, or having myself, have to turn pages in order to keep the story going. It's just, there's something special about it, which I like. You know, having words transcribe into pictures in your head is to me, it's magical and I share that by doing my own kind of writing.” (Transcript #8).

To this participant, the main draw of reading is not anything so fantastic about the act of reading itself, rather it is the ability to engage with a story that makes reading so appealing. Stories entertain and educate us, and reading is among the most effective means we have of fulfilling

this basic need (Cunningham 1983). In my interviews and literature review, I noticed an additional dimension of stories that reading opens the door to – escapism. As one of my participants claimed,

“I think the biggest reason I read now is because it's an outlet. I find it very refreshing to open up something, a bit of a life of somebody who's nowhere near me and just kind of move away from everything else that's present. But I think I got into reading because both my parents are very avid readers and they always talked about how important it was to develop a healthy relationship with reading. So, I think originally, I got into it for more of like the more academic reasons, and now I kind of do it as an outlet.” (Transcript #4)

Although this participant uses outlet here rather than escape, the meaning is essentially the same. Reading provides a means to leave one's own world behind to experience a new one. It provides an opportunity for readers to “tap out” of their own world to get lost in another, creating a space for what one of my participants called a “safe sense of adventure” (Transcript #1). Although, all my participants noted a connection between reading and escapism, there was some disagreement on what this escapism actually stems from. To explain this distinction, I have provided two quotes that serve as something of a definition for each form of escapism. The first, I have decided to call “dissatisfied escapism”.

“They are someone who wants to escape whatever world or place they're in and wants to fall into another one. And I believe that they are someone who isn't satisfied with what their life is bringing them. So, they go to another one.” (Transcript #2).

The second iteration of escapism I identified as “qualified escapism”, here it is described by another participant,

“Not so much anymore, but definitely as a kid, I used it as escapism, but I don't think that everybody does. I think it's also just kind of like why people go on vacation. Like it's not escapism from your life, but you're just like, I want to experience more, like I want to experience not just being in one place. I want to experience what it's like to be in Hawaii. I like my life here, but I also want to experience what it's like to visit Greece. I like my life here, but I also would like to see what it's like to visit... Middle Earth...” (Transcript #6)

Both participants have here identified escapism as a legitimate motivation for reading.

However, the nature of this escapism varies considerably. “Dissatisfied escapism” as described by the first participant, rests upon the notion that the reason the reader wishes to escape into a book is that they are in some significant way unhappy with their life and the society around them. To cope with this, “dissatisfied escapists” purposefully leave one world behind to lose themselves in a new one where they are not stuck in the same rut. They use reading to “tap out” of a life they would rather not be in for the time being.

“Qualified escapism” on the other hand, shares all the same characteristics as “dissatisfied escapism” besides the first major assumption – that what is being escaped from is really so awful. “Qualified escapism” argues that what really defines escapism is the will to explore new worlds, not the drive to flee old ones. In this way, I find the vacation analogy provided by my “qualified escapist” participant, very useful. Vacations are temporary, you must always come back home. Books (or any story medium for that matter) are also only temporary, they have endings, and you cannot eat the words written within. At some point, you must always return home, to reality. You can only “tap out” for so long before the real world comes rushing back in.

Education in a Simulated Reality

In this analysis, I have explained two of the main reasons for reading that frequented my literature review and interviews – escapism and empathy – “tapping in and tapping out”. The final reason for reading I have identified, is education (Cunningham 1983). Every participant I interviewed identified reading as a great way to learn, both in and out of school or work.

“Yeah, 100%. I think it's good for the brain, it keeps me smart. I usually learn something, whether it's non-fiction or fiction, I usually learn something. I learn a perspective, a writing perspective, a different writing style. I learn about different perspectives of a character that might be representing a culture or gender or sexuality or whatever, that I wouldn't know and so like, oh, that's an interesting view from the perspective of that character.” (Transcript #3)

It is widely accepted that reading expands knowledge and the ability to critically think (Gallagher 2003). However, the thing I want to focus on from this quote is the way my participant describes the knowledge they gain from reading. Rather than rote memorization, formula learning, or some other such standardizing approach, my participant identified the power of reading to make us think from outside of ourselves as the main way they learn while reading.

This is a very interesting claim that can be incorporated into similar claims made earlier about reading for escapism and/or empathy. In both these cases - escapism and empathy - reading transports the reader into another context, another world where they can critically engage their minds. Instead of being Joe Schmoe from New York City, reading offers the opportunity to be anybody else, from anywhere else. It does this not by changing anything about the reader, but by providing the reader with a new context in which to think. An opportunity to “tap out” out of their own perspective and “into” another.

Let me use myself to demonstrate an example from my interviews that expands on this idea. I am not of royal blood, and additionally, I live at a time where having royal blood is not nearly as important as it once was. However, in my own personal reading, I have many times

read from the perspective of a king or queen, or at least been introduced to one as a supporting character. These experiences reading the stories of royalty (fictional and historical), have informed my understanding of one of history's most prolific hierarchies and given me insight into how the elite decision-makers of society relate to each other and the people they attempt to rule. The following quote from my interviews may help further drive home this point.

“But it's almost like reading, when you're in a book, it allows you to get an experience of living another life. A simulation of a life kind of where you're actually, you're going in and you are analyzing the relationships that are in it, you're saying oh, what would I do if I was in this situation? What do I even think of this situation? You know, would I start a rebellion now or would I just roll over and do what my dad tells me? Or whatever.” (Transcript #9)

Of course, reading the story of a Prince is not the same as being one – reading does not allow us to shed our skin in reality to assume another. However, reading fiction does provide us with a simulated version of another life, and often an incredibly believable and subsuming one at that. Although I have not actually had to think about disagreeing with my father, the King, over some grand policy. By reading a story about such an occasion, I submit myself to many of the ideas, difficulties, and emotions the experience exposes. I am not myself on the hook for the decisions of the characters, but I am veritably observing and assessing the same situations the character is. I am “tapping out” of my own life to “tap into” the characters, before eventually “tapping back in” to my own. All this “tapping” exposes me to situations, and if I am wise enough, lessons I would never otherwise be privy to in my wholly un-royal life.

According to my participants, these simulated reading experiences greatly inform much of their day-to-day life, as well as the day-to-day life of the readers they know. This sentiment was expressed by many participants, for example:

“I think a lot of what it has to do with is the way that people interpret situations. Like I think you can tell if someone is a reader if they interpret situations based on things that they've read. You know, like if I enter into any conversation with one of my family members almost immediately within their reaction, they will make reference to something they read.” (Transcript #4)

Readers are constantly referring back to the books they've read and the ideas they have come across in them – they are constantly “tapping” into one world and out of another. Even something as seemingly irrelevant as the relationship between a King and his heir, can bring up themes relevant to a reader's real life, such as living with a powerful father, or the challenges of living within a faulty hierarchy.

Above all else, reading functions as a simulated reality for the reader, allowing readers to “tap out” of one world and “in” to another, transporting lessons and ideas from the simulated reality of books and stories to the real world we live in. It provides us with a route of escape from our everyday lives to a world filled with stories, ideas, and characters that often closely resemble our own experiences and thus illicit from us empathy and understanding for new perspectives and situations otherwise unknowable to us. If this combination of empathy and escapism – of “tapping in and out” of the world – is done carefully and considerately, we might just learn a little bit about our own lives in the process.

Technology

An additional point of interest in this study was the impact of recent technological advances on reading practice. When I asked my participants about changes in reading practices, every single one pointed to advances in technology and the myriad forms reading - and

entertainment more generally - are now packaged in. In today's world, reading no longer automatically refers to ancient moth-bitten scrolls or well-loved soft covers with spines held together by hastily applied masking tape. Rather, today we have access to more reading material than previously imaginable, all housed on the little electronic rectangles in our pockets.

“I more and more look at our – funny 'cause I'm gonna reference a book – society as like the Brave New World walking around with Soma pills which is our cell phones and I think the long-term effects of a society of immediate gratification, what that's gonna have on our attention spans and our brains in general is scary to me. And I don't think it's a good thing bombarding ourselves with just stimuli from every direction and not being able to focus on any one thing and actually think something out and sit with it. Uh, which obviously can have lots of... ramifications maybe, lots of applications into the real world. If you're not able to sit there and digest and process and also get maybe more thought-out perspectives from a writer versus getting a million different perspectives from people walking around with their phones – capturing and editing and misinformation and all that other crap.” (Transcript #3)

According to this participant, not only are phones and technology transforming how and what we read, but they are transforming it drastically for the worse. This negative view of technological encroachment on reading was not shared by all my participants. However, I did notice that the two students I interviewed who were over 40 years old, were the most vehemently opposed to the technological changes all participants identified. The above quote was from an interview with one of these older participants, while the one below is from a student in their early twenties who I asked about the amount of reading done today in comparison with before.

“P: I think, I don't know. Uhm, because I know now as a society there's so many more different forms of reading. There's reading on apps and phones and Kindles as opposed to just reading a paper like a paperbound book. Yeah, I would say it's, I wouldn't say that it's less, certainly with all the different forms of getting information. Ah, and I don't know if I would say it's more because I wouldn't know enough about that. But I certainly wouldn't say it's less. Probably at least the same.

I: Gotcha. At least the same but all different ways of reading.

P: Exactly different ways of reading things.

I: So, do you think that at least the change in how we're reading – maybe not necessarily the amount – but do you think that change matters in the way we're reading?

P: I think it does because that change, it means that there's more access for everyone because even if you don't have access to a library, chances are you probably have access to some way of reading. Whether it's through a phone or whether it's an article on a computer, or whether it's a newspaper. There's just, it's changed the way people get access to the information and to all these different sources and materials and books.” (Transcript #5)

Unlike the first quote, this second excerpt takes a more positive, though relatively neutral, stance on technology and reading in our modern era. My participant claims that the new forms of reading now available have created a diversity of reading forms that has led to greatly increased accessibility for readers everywhere. Modern technology has altered the way we read by providing us with new mediums and unprecedented networks of dissemination.

Besides technology's transformation of reading forms, there was one other theme that all my participants except one identified as an outgrowth of the technological revolution in reading – the supremacy of short-forms.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think maybe people read the same amount, but if they do, I don't think it's quite long pieces, if that makes sense. Like I think a lot of what we read now is articles and stuff that we see online or little bits of information, but it's not necessarily whole books. But I think, I don't know, I feel it's likely that kind of evens out a little bit.” (Transcript #4)

According to this participant, one of the key changes in reading practice is the length of the content we are reading. Although they do not identify this as necessarily positive or negative, they clearly see a shift occurring. The quote from my next participant further supports the proliferation of short forms.

“P: I like to say that there's been quite a diminishment and like there's some, there's certainly less reading than there was before. Because of how technology works nowadays, everything is today, everything is instant gratification. It's right there in the palm of your hand, you can just press a button and then you'll have a movie playing for you, you know. Nobody really has the time today to sit down and read a book. Like read a chapter book page by page and finish it in one night. Just because they don't have the time, they're either too tired or they're going to work. Or they can just do something else that's more like, that makes your brain chemicals go, wheeee, you know.

I: (laughs) Right. So, kind of, we're reading less and when we are reading, we're reading shorter form kind of things.

P: Yes, yes for sure. (Transcript #8)

Both participants agree that short forms have come to dominate more traditional long-form books. However, unlike the first excerpt which does not see this change making much of a difference in the grand scheme of things, the second participant identifies a much more significant and lasting shift away from long-form reading for the simple reason that “nobody really has the time today to sit down and read a book”. In relation to the concept of “tapping in/out” identified throughout this study, this participant's idea that people are less and less willing to sit down with a long-form book poses a threat to any reader's ability to “tap in or out” of the world. The less time people spend reading fully fledged stories, the more limited their opportunities to escape and “tap out” of the world become, and the less profound and subsuming their empathetic experiences “tapping in” to the experiences of others, can be. And the less opportunity readers have to educate themselves through the wonderful world of books.

Conclusion:

In this paper I have argued that the solitary fiction reading experience greatly influences the everyday life and engagement with society of readers. Reading allows those who do it to “tap in and out” of the world around them through the three E's: Empathy, Escapism, and Education. Additionally, I have discussed the power of different interpretations to inform these experiences

“tapping in/out” of the world and the importance of recent technological developments which change our access to and experience with reading and the “tapping” process.

I feel that my findings have for the most part answered my initial research questions and addressed the main gap identified in this research – the experience of the solitary reader. However, my research project was limited in scope, and like all qualitative research is difficult to generalize to a larger population. Therefore, although I think my findings are interesting and representative of the population I interviewed, I cannot claim they are definitive.

This research confirms that reading is an important phenomenon to study. It’s ubiquity throughout the world and historical significance make it’s effects relevant to large swathes of the global population and therefore warrants further investigation.

There are many directions reading research can go in the future, not the least of which is investigating the continued impact of technology on reading practice. However, there is great potential for social and physical scientists to work together to conduct reading research. Linguists and literary scholars have been doing this research for generations. However, as the hard sciences gain greater and greater insight into the nature of the world, the body, and maybe most difficult of all, the mind – their ability to supplement more traditional research on reading with brain scans and neurological insight can greatly increase our understanding of readings impact on us. It is crucial to gain insight from the perspectives of others, just like readers do when they read.

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Appendix A – Recruitment Poster: text

Are you a university student? Do you enjoy reading on your own time? If you answered yes to both these questions, you are welcome to participate in my research project!

I am studying why people read and what effects reading has on us. Specifically, I will be focusing on reading fiction, so if you like dragons, space odysseys, utopian dystopias, alternate universes, reimagined histories, or anything in between - this is perfect for you! Participation would involve one interview, with me, that should take less than an hour.

If you're interested, or have any questions, please contact me at nm249382@dal.ca. I'm excited to hear all about the cool books you've been reading and why/if you think they matter!

Appendix B: CONSENT FORM

[Template #1: Traditional with Signature Page]

Project title: Why We Read

Lead researcher: Noam Schwartz, Dalhousie University, nm249382@dal.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Martha Radice, Dalhousie University, martha.radice@dal.ca

Introduction

I invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by me, Noam Schwartz, a fourth-year Social Anthropology honours student at Dalhousie University. Choosing whether or not to take part in this research is entirely your choice. The information below tells you about what is involved in the research, what you will be asked to do and about any benefit, risk, inconvenience or discomfort that you might experience.

You should discuss any questions you have about this study with Noam Schwartz by contacting him at the email address listed above. Please ask as many questions as you like.

Purpose and Outline of the Research Study

In this study, I will be investigating the impact that reading has on individual readers as well as

society as a whole. Specifically, I want to understand how reading fiction may alter the way we understand the world and relate to those around us. To this end, I will interview any student who self-identifies as reading for pleasure to better understand both their motivation for reading and what they think reading does for/to them.

Who Can Take Part in the Research Study

You may participate in this study if you are

- a. Currently a university student and
- b. Self-identify as reading for pleasure.

What You Will Be Asked to Do

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete one interview that will take about an hour. These interviews can be in person or via the video-conferencing platform, Teams. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions which you may answer at your own discretion.

Possible Benefits, Risks and Discomforts

Participating in the study might not benefit you, but you will get to talk about books!

The risks associated with this study are minimal; there are no known risks for participating in this research beyond being bored or fatigued. You are welcome to take a break during the interview if this happens.

Compensation / Reimbursement

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

How your information will be protected:

Your participation in this research will not be shared outside of the research team (me – Noam Schwartz, and my supervisor, Dr. Martha Radice). If you choose to share my study with others for recruitment purposes, you may choose to disclose or not disclose your personal involvement – I will not share that information.

I will audio record the interview on my password-protected laptop and phone. If we conduct the interview by Teams, I will also record the interview using the platform's internal recording feature. During the live Teams meeting, audio and video content is routed through the United States, and therefore may be subject to monitoring without notice, under the provisions of the US Patriot Act, while the meeting is in progress. The risk associated with using Teams recording for this research is no greater than using Teams recording for any other purpose. After the meeting is complete, meeting recordings are securely stored in Canada and are inaccessible to US authorities.

After the interview, I will transcribe it and then delete the audio files. I will change all names to pseudonyms and alter or leave out identifying information.

In my thesis, I will use direct quotes from your interview to illustrate themes. Quotes will have identifying information removed or altered to protect your privacy.

I will keep anonymized data from the study on my password-protected computer and back up files to OneDrive, which is password-protected cloud storage on Canadian servers approved by Dalhousie University.

If You Decide to Stop Participating

You are free to stop participating in this study any time until March 1st, 2022. After March 1st, it will be impossible to withdraw you from the study because I will already have incorporated your information into my overall analysis. You may withdraw before, during, or after the interview up until that point.

How to Obtain Results

If you wish, I can email you a copy of your interview transcript and/or the final thesis when it is completed. You can request this by emailing me or telling me during your interview.

Questions

I am happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about participating in this study. You are welcome to contact myself, Noam Schwartz, at nm249382@dal.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Martha Radice, at martha.radice@dal.ca any time.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-3423, or email: ethics@dal.ca (and reference REB file # 20XX-XXXX).

Signature Page

Project Title: Why We Read

Lead Researcher: Noam Schwartz, Dalhousie University, nm249382@dal.ca

I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I have been asked to take part in one interview of roughly one hour that will occur at a time and location acceptable to me, and that that interview will be audio-recorded. I understand direct quotes of things I say may be used without identifying me. I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time until March 1st, 2022.

Name

Signature

Date

Please provide an email address below if you would like to be sent a copy of (check all that apply)

- your interview transcript
- my final thesis

Email address: _____

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Individual Reader Questions:

- 1) Why do you read? Or, tell me how you got into reading.
- 2) What kinds of things do you read? Have you always read those genres, or has it changed over time? What do you get out of it?
- 3) Do you read more for pleasure or because it's required (school, work, etc.)?
- 4) Do you read particular kinds of books for particular purposes?
- 5) is reading common in your family?
 - If yes* – do you think that is part of why you read?
 - If no* – how did you start reading? Has your reading led to your family reading more?
- 6) do you think reading is a good way to “spend” time? What do you feel you gain when you read, if anything? Is it different depending on the book or consistent?
- 7) where do you read? Where is your favorite place or what's your favorite kind of place for reading?
- 8) What is your favorite book and why? Favorite author?
 - If fiction* – how are the characters depicted? First person? What do you think about this style of writing?
- 9) is reading fiction a different experience than reading not-fiction? How so? Do you prefer one to the other?

Reading in Society Questions:

- 1) Why do you think most people read?
- 2) do you think we as a society read more, less, or about the same as we used to?
 - If change* – do you think this change matters? Why?
- 3) do you think reading has changed how you interact with others? Reading fiction specifically?
 - If yes* – How has it changed your interactions?
- 4) Do you think there are certain types of people who read mostly fiction? How would you describe them? How about non-fiction types? Do you think differently about readers and non-readers?
- 5) Do you use reading as a criterion for friendship?
- 6) do you read in public? What do you think, people think of you, when you are reading in

public? What do you think of other people who you see reading?

7) How do you find the books you read?

8) Have you ever read a full book out loud (had one read to you, books on tape)?

9) have you ever been in a book group?

If yes – Why did you join? What was it like? What were the people like? What was your relationship with them? Did it increase your enjoyment of the book? Decrease it?

If no – would you want to join one? Why/why not?

10) Correlation between independent reading and engagement as student? (Only asked in last three interviews)

11) Do you have anything you would like to share that hasn't come up already?

Demographic questions

If you don't mind, I have a few questions so I can describe the people I've been talking with accurately. I'll only use them in very general terms.

What university degree are you studying for? What is your program (discipline(s), major/minor)?

How old are you?

What are your living circumstances (e.g. live alone, with roommates / family / a partner)?

What are your preferred pronouns?

Do you have a social identity (e.g., ethnic, religious, subcultural) that you think is significant in relation to your experiences of reading?

Thank them, reiterate opportunity to withdraw up until March 1.

Appendix D



ANNUAL/FINAL REPORT

Annual report to the Research Ethics Board for the continuing ethical review of research involving humans / Final report to conclude REB oversight

A. ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

This report is (<i>select one</i>):					<input type="checkbox"/> An annual report	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A final report
REB file number:						
Study title:	Forming Characters: How Reading Shapes Us					
Lead researcher (named on REB submission)	Name	Noam Schwartz				
	Email	nm249382@dal.ca	Phone	(845)943-9573		
Current status of lead researcher (at Dalhousie University):						
<input type="checkbox"/> Employee/Academic Appointment <input type="checkbox"/> Former student <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Current student <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain):						
Supervisor (if lead researcher is/was a student/resident/postdoc)	Name	Karen Foster				
	Email	Karen.Foster@dal.ca				
Contact person for this report (if not lead researcher)	Name					
	Email		Phone			

B. RECRUITMENT & DATA COLLECTION STATUS

<p>Instructions: Complete ALL sections relevant to this study</p> <p>Study involves/involved recruiting participants: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, complete section B1.</i></p> <p>Study involves/involved secondary use of data: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, complete section B2.</i></p> <p>Study involves/involved use of human biological materials: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, complete section B2.</i></p>

B1. Recruitment of participants	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
B1.1 How many participants did the researcher intend to recruit? (provide number approved in the most recent REB application/amendment)	8-10
B1.2 How many participants have been recruited? (if applicable, identify by participant group/method e.g. interviews: 10, focus groups: 25)	
a) In total, since the beginning of the study: 10	
b) Since the last annual report: 10	

B1.3 Recruitment for this study is:

- complete; or
 on-going

B1.4 Data collection from participants for this study is:

- complete; or
 on-going

B2. Use of secondary data and/or biological materials

Not Applicable

B2.1 How many individual records/biological materials did the researcher intend to access?

(provide number approved in the most recent REB application/amendment)

B2.2 How many individual participant records/biological materials have been accessed?

a) In total, since the beginning of the study:

b) Since the last annual report:

C. PROJECT HISTORY

Since your last annual report (or since initial submission if this is your first annual report):

C1. Have there been any variations to the original research project that have NOT been approved with an amendment request? This includes changes to the research methods, recruitment material, consent documents, study instruments or research team.

- Yes No

If yes, list the variation here:

(You will be notified if a formal amendment is required)

C2. Have you experienced any challenges or delays recruiting or retaining participants or accessing records or biological materials?

- Yes No

If yes, please explain:

C3. Have you experienced any problems in carrying out this project?

- Yes No

If yes, please explain:

C4. Have any participants experienced any harm as a result of their participation in this study?

- Yes No

If yes, please explain:

C5. Has any study participant expressed complaints, or experienced any difficulties in relation to their participation in the study?

Yes No

If yes, please explain:

C6. Since the original approval, have there been any new reports in the literature that would suggest a change in the nature or likelihood of risks or benefits resulting from participation in this study?

Yes No

If yes, please explain:

D. APPLYING FOR STUDY CLOSURE

Complete this section only if this is a FINAL report as indicated in section A

D1. For studies involving recruitment of participants, a closure may be submitted when:

all research-related interventions or interactions with participants have been completed

N/A (this study did not involve recruitment of participants)

D2. For studies involving secondary use of data and/or human biological materials, a closure may be submitted when:

all data acquisition is complete, there will be no further access to participant records or collection of biological materials

N/A (this study did not involve secondary use of data and/or human biological materials)

D3. Closure Request

I am applying for study closure

E. ATTESTATION (both boxes *must* be checked for the report to be accepted by the REB)

I agree that the information provided in this report accurately portrays the status of this project and describes to the Research Ethics Board any new developments related to the study since initial approval or the latest report.

I attest this project was, or will continue to be, completed in accordance with the approved REB application (or most recent approved amendment) and in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2).

