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WHAT AMERICAN READERS REMEMBER:

A Case Study

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Abstract: This article describes an archive consisting of literary memories obtained via interviews from one hundred contemporary readers of literature, sourced from a college town in the United States. The memories were summarized and studied in order to establish what readers tend to remember as important and/or impressive in their everyday reading of literature. The summaries include both quantitative and qualitative data, which are presented in brief extracts (tables) referring to facts such as recall of textual elements, circumstances of reading, and most remembered texts and authors. Characteristics of non-professional readers and their readings are thus observed according to three distinct sources of information: (a) the type of text they preferred; (b) the context of their reading; (c) the textual elements they found most memorable. All of these are considered in turn, including more specific discussion on topics of attachments to texts; the role of "classics"; and the readers' paracanon. The study concludes with three main findings: (1) the participating American readers are shown to have rich and diverse memories of literary works, (2) which usually consist of coherent mental representations of the texts accompanied by some sort of episodic memory attaching them to their lived experience, (3) and these representations mostly involve unusual and incongruous characters and plot occurrences set against the ground of narrative content, which might imply that literature is used as a form of simulation.

Introduction

The study presented here aims to make the hypothetical construct of the non-professional reader a little less hypothetical by providing empirical data about how real readers remember works of literature. The data was obtained by recording and analyzing individual volunteer readers who shared their memories of literary texts in anonymous, semi-structured interviews. There were three broad premises underpinning the study, which tie in with more general and important recent observations about how problematic it is to concentrate solely on professional readers of literature (see Pettersson 2012, Burke et al. 2016, Sandvoss 2017, Emre 2017, Felski 2011b and 2020b). The first such premise was that little of what is known about contemporary readers has been empirically verified (see Nell 1992, Jacobs 2015, McCarthy 2015, Bell et al. 2021). The second premise was that most of what is known about literature today derives from the authoritative opinions of critics and writers (professional readers), who form a small but very influential minority within the reading (re)public (see Warner 2004, Archer and Jockers 2016, Bourrier and Thelwall 2020). The third and most important premise was that non-professional readers differ from professional ones because they experience literature mostly on the basis of what they remember (and not what they continuously verify and question) about the literary texts which they have read (see Holland 1975, Burke 2008, Kuzmičová and Bálint 2019, Waller 2019).

Groups of readers which have been looked into the most include women (see Radway 1991, Hermes 1995, Long 2003), (post-)colonized people(s) (Benwell 2009), and poorly educated members of capitalist societies (Rose 2002; see Harkin 2005 for a general overview of reader-oriented criticism). However, while maintaining a welcome research focus (of feminist, post-colonial, and cultural studies, as in the examples above), all of these approaches in fact create their very own groups of readers who are elevated to a special status by being singled out according to their sex, nationality, general level of education, or other group-specific criteria. This may facilitate their cultural, political, and economic empowerment, but so far as it concerns literature and literary theory, it also has the detrimental effect of putting real, living readers into brackets according to their cultural identities, which also led Rita Felski to observe that "[o]ne reason for the nonimpact of audience studies on the mainstream of the humanities surely lies in its splicing of these audiences into very specific demographics" (2020: 4).

In order to avoid such "splicing", this study utilizes the all-encompassing non-professional reader, the sort of omnipresent "general" reader mentioned by Felski and described in other similar audience studies (Collinson 2009, Elfenbein 2018, Trower 2020). The relative lack of interest about non-professional readers is due to the fact that it is difficult for literary scholars – trained in working with texts, not people – to gather information about readers in general, especially without focusing on a

(textually identifiable) specific aspect of their identities or readings. For instance, following Bruno Latour, Felski proposes to focus mostly on emotions, perceptual changes, and affective bonds: "What would it mean to do justice to these responses [...]?" (2011a: 585). It is argued here that the best answer to this and similar questions is to be obtained by collecting general responses from a larger group of readers.

Therefore, this study's novel contribution is the de-prioritization of the literary text, which is a consequence of focusing on the readers' memories. As it will be shown, the importance of the text has to be reassessed in light of evidence about how contemporary readers conceptualize literature. So, instead of insisting on the primacy of the text and the canon, the study essentially invited the readers to report about their own notion of literature. The outcome shows 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 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. So in studying individual memories of reading we are not just studying traces left by literature in readers' lives, but also how literature is organized into a coherent whole in the minds of contemporary (American) readers. These remembrances will be described and then examined in turn by focusing on their general and specific aspects (headings IV-IVc). Each

concept will show how the notion of literature itself is organized as a coalescence of memories which the readers retain after the text is long gone, therefore making it a simulacrum of literature itself.

Outline

The study's design consisted of semi-structured interviews with volunteer non-professional readers of literature in the United States. Its main aim was to identify what they remembered about the literary texts which they regarded as particularly memorable and important. For the purpose of the study, "non-professional readers" were defined as individuals who at the time of the interview were not employed in a profession that mandates reading literary texts. This group of readers may of course involve those whose previous or current training or profession enabled them to read critically and professionally in various ways (e.g., proofreading, teaching, or writing literature). But that does not change the fact that non-professional readership amounts to no less than 99% of the total number of readers in any given country today, and that their perception of literature – captured in their memories – should be of particular interest to the professional minority who aims to survey the totality of literature.

The design of the study and its key term may of course invite criticism, which should be acknowledged and addressed at the outset. Three potential problems which are easy enough to identify would relate to the sampling of the data, the issue of memory

vs. reality, and the subjective definition of professional readers(hip). These problems have been discussed by the author before the American study was even started (Škopljanac 2012), and the interested reader is invited to look into that discussion. Furthermore, breaking new conceptual ground is not feasible within the scope of a single paper as the study of literary memories itself involves a host of other methodological and theoretical issues which might be addressed first, stemming from literary phenomenology or the "different modes of encounter with fiction" (Carney and Robertson 2022). But most importantly, a broader critical overview will not be included here because it would detract from the main goal of this paper, which is to present the most pertinent data and the conclusions to be drawn from the underlying general study.

Data collection was conducted by the paper's author between 9/28/2016 and 11/23/2016 as part of a research project funded by the Fulbright Scholar Program. It aimed for one hundred interviews because a previous study conducted in Croatia with a similar number of subjects (N=90; Škopljanac 2014) showed that this was a safe threshold for ensuring "saturation": the recurrence of similar, mostly predictable answers to questions eliciting qualitative responses (Alasuutari 1995: 59). Although the readers' answers displayed a sufficient level of saturation (bordering on repetitiveness), the study does not in any way claim to produce a representative sample of the reading population of the USA. It was therefore possible to gather the data locally and circumstantially, within the town of State

College, Pennsylvania. The town is home to the main campus of The Pennsylvania State University, which hosted the research, and consequently a large number of respondents were students, representing specific groups in terms of social class, age, and education. But to reiterate, although a large presence of a certain social group within the relatively small sample means that it is not representative of all American readers, this cohesive group actually helps to demonstrate the main thrust of the study: non-professional readers' memories are quite variable. This seems to hold true despite the similarities in education, which are more reflected in the choice of texts, and not so much in the actual memories about them. Or to put it differently, no definitive notion of a text or its author may be maintained among non-professional readers any more than it might be maintained among the professional ones (which is, of course, the *differentia specifica* of literary works).

Potential subjects were recruited by the study's author at various public locations with pertinent connections to reading literature, such as bookstores and libraries. After reading the Institutional Review Board form and giving their consent, they were asked the following five sets of open-ended questions:

I – Preparation: "Can you choose some works of literature (3-5 texts) that you remember well and that may have impressed you?"

II – Questions about the meaning and/or content of the texts: "What is the text about?"; "What was most memorable in the text for

you? ["Maybe it was a scene, a character, or a quote?"] ["Where in the text is this memorable part located?"] ["What, if anything, did you find most impressive?"] ["What is the genre of the text?"]

III – Questions on facts about the text and paratext: "Is there any part of the text that you could quote or paraphrase?"; "What do you know about the author?" ["Where in the text is this memorized part located?"] ["Have you watched the movie/play/etc. based on the book?"]

IV – Questions about the circumstances of reading: "When and where did you first read the book?"; "How many times did you read the book?"; "Where or from whom did you get the book?"; "What did the book look like?" ["Could you describe the room where you were reading?"] ["Do you remember what the person recommending the book told you at the time?"]

V – Conclusion: "Do you agree that all of your memories involve X, and if you do, why do you think that is so?" ["Do you think that the books you discussed have anything in common?"]

The interview was designed to resemble a conversation about books so the subjects would not feel like they were being tested. Question sets I and V always opened and closed the interview and were used only once per interview, whereas the others were used once per every text discussed. The questions in square brackets were posed if and when convenient, typically when there was

indication about additional details pertinent to the memories. All of the questions were designed to involve minimal interference by the interviewer, with the exception of the final set, where the "X" refers to a pattern of similar thoughts and ideas about all the books remembered by the same subject. Interestingly enough, the subjects almost invariably presented such a pattern in their answers, for instance about certain topics or motifs (such as overcoming hardship), or about being moved by the characters.

It should be clear that the questions were constructed to zero in on one's knowledge about a literary text when one is not in direct contact with it. This is arguably how literature *exists* in its everyday and private form, as opposed to it being refracted through the lenses of various institutions – such as the education system and the academia – or mediating practices such as book criticism and advertising. This model of inquiry was also used to safeguard the project from ending up as another reductive model, in which literary scholars create what Wolfgang Iser (1978) would call "ideal readers": hypothetical instances of readers who are an amalgamation of a group, within which no single reader's voice may be heard. However, this does not mean that all traces of institutional and group influence were absent from the memories, and anyone wanting to tease them out would do well to start with the overall choice of the books, which forms the touchstone of the study's results.

Results

A general remark about the results is that checking against the texts showed that the subjects' memories and comments were accurate about 90% of the time (the predictable exception were quotations, which really amounted to close paraphrases). This also shows that the subjects truly did talk about texts that they remembered well, or at least those parts of them that they could recall clearly. The data consists of about 40 hours of audio recordings, which means that the average interview was about 25 minutes long. That amounts to a very large number of data points, which will be reduced and presented here in selected snippets (Tables 1-10). The data points were chosen according to their potential to inform others about the study, but also to inform a potential subsequent discussion. The subjects were coded as "R[random number] (sex, age)," for instance R21 (F, 29). Their distribution by sex was roughly equal – 47 females and 53 males – while their average age was 42, and their median age 34. About a third of the sample was made up of college students, which means the whole sample was skewed towards younger readers, as table 1 attests. The average age at which the subjects first read the discussed books was 23, and this ranged from four years of age to 77. On average, the discussed books were read 18 years prior to the interview, while books that were first read within the previous year were discussed only 36 times. The latter texts may be considered to derive their memorableness in part from being so recent, but this recency effect was not much in evidence due to the phrasing of the initial question, which asked readers to name books well remembered *and* impressive (see Copeland et al. 2009 on the recency effect). Most respondents in fact demonstrated that their memories had positive emotional overtones, consistent with feeling impressed. In such cases, interviewees tended to freely mention other texts (especially by the same author) and authors in passing. Those instances were counted separately as "mentioned," and not "discussed," as shown in the following two tables, which also indicate whether they were counted once ("unique") or every time they appeared in the study ("non-unique"; this is also why the numbers in Table 2 do not add up exactly, as some texts and authors were mentioned multiple times):

Table 2: Unique texts and authors

	Texts	Authors
Discussed (unique)	250	212
Mentioned (unique)	32	36
Total	278	233

Table 1: Study participants

	19-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	Total
Female	21	9	2	7	5	3	0	47
Male	18	9	3	6	10	5	2	53
Total	39	18	5	13	15	8	2	100

Table 3: Repeated texts and authors

	Texts	Authors
Discussed (non-unique)	309	309
Mentioned (non-unique)	32	39
Total	341	348

remembered texts were novels written since 1951: Therefore, the typical text remembered in the study would be a novel written in English by a male author (American or British) during the last two hundred years or so. This is reflected in the lists of most remembered texts and authors, defined here as those that were discussed at least three times (numbers in brackets refer only to "mentions"):

All further mention of the number of texts and authors will refer only to the total of those discussed, which was 309 for both texts and authors. This text sample was predominately written originally in English (a little over four fifths), and their authors were mostly men (about three quarters). When it comes to genre, most of the

Table 4: Period of writing

Textual origin	Count	Percentage
Up to 1800	8	3
1801-1900	40	13
1901-1950	63	20
1951-2000	138	45
2001-	53	17
N/A	7	2

Table 5: Type of Text

Textual genre	Count	Percentage
Epic poem	4	1
Novel	243	78
Other	24	8
Play	6	2
Poem (collection)	6	2
Short story (collection)	21	7
N/A	5	2

Table 6: Most remembered texts

Harry Potter	6 (+1)	*A Tale of Two Cities*	3
1984	4	*Alice in Wonderland*	3
Moby Dick	4	*The Catcher in the Rye*	3
Slaughterhouse-Five	4	*The Grapes of Wrath*	3
The Great Gatsby	4	*The Picture of Dorian Gray*	3
The Lord of the Rings	4 (+1)	*To Kill a Mockingbird*	3

Table 7: Most remembered authors

Kurt Vonnegut	9	Hermann Hesse	4
John Steinbeck	7 (+3)	Oscar Wilde	4
J. K. Rowling	6 (+1)	Albert Camus	3
J. R. R. Tolkien	6 (+1)	Ayn Rand	3 (+1)
George Orwell	5	Harper Lee	3
Stephen King	5	Isaac Asimov	3 (+1)
Charles Dickens	4 (+1)	J. D. Salinger	3
Ernest Hemingway	4	Lewis Carroll	3
F. Scott Fitzgerald	4	Mark Twain	3
Herman Melville	4	Robert A. Heinlein	3

Next, the two following tables offer a very brief illustration of the circumstances of reading. The first one (Table 8) shows that the remembered texts had usually been read only once by the time the interview took place (the total count is 307 because of two omissions). The second one (Table 9) shows that subjects were usually able to recall where they had

read the discussed books (for the first time, if there were multiple readings), and that their answers can be summarized into seven categories:

Table 8: Number of readings of a text

	Count	Percentage
Read once	192	63
Read between once and twice	49	16
Read between twice and thrice	28	9
Read more than thrice	38	12

Table 9: Reading locations

Home	Library	Multiple	N/A	Other	School	Work
154	14	21	53	32	28	7

The data presented so far was extracted from question sets I and IV, which dealt with the paratext and the context of reading, and it was relatively straightforward to obtain. On the other hand, making sense of answers to question set II would require a more idiographic approach, which cannot be employed here due to textual constraints. Just as an example of what was left out, answers to the question which usually opened the discussion about a specific title ("What is the book/text about?") were broadly categorized into three descriptive categories – content, topic and impression – which could then be further parsed according to specific answers (for instance, content of a short story plot, or impression about the writing style of a poem). Instead of delving into that, the last snippet of data presented here concerns textual specifics, or more precisely the six categories of textual data most often discernible in the readers' answers:

Table 10: Recall of textual elements

	Count	Percentage
Episode	136	44
Quotation	46	15
Description	44	14
Writing style	33	11
Character	27	9
Historical information	7	2

A few brief notes prior to discussion: The "quotation" category refers to self-attributed quotes, including falsely attributed or significantly inaccurate ones. "Descriptions" include subjects' memories of objects, localities, settings – anything observable – as described in the texts. It does not include character descriptions, however, as in practice it turned out that such descriptions were always tightly connected to one's recollection of a specific character's actions, thoughts, behavior, history, etc. These recollections were classified under a separate "character" heading, although they often overlapped with "episodes" and "descriptions," and sometimes also with "quotations" when a quote was attributable to one of the characters. Such overlap between the categories underlines that the figures in Table 10 are to be taken more as interpretive estimates, unlike the precise indicators supplied by Tables 1-9.

Furthermore, "writing style" in most cases seemed to be a shorthand for a subject to express vague and general appreciation, along the lines of "I love[d] the style of the writing" of Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, as stated by R43 (F, 47). An example of a more complex and nuanced response to a writer's style came from R49 (F, 25), who was discussing Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* and noted that the text was written in a "stream of consciousness style," and then made an elaborate comment on how the physical loss of the protagonist was mirrored in the novel's structure. This goes to show how, regardless of profession, similar reading styles based on thoughtful analysis may occur within professional and non-professional readings alike. But this is a minor point, as only about 1 in 10 of the answers mentioned style, with most readers focusing on the episodes of narrative texts, which clearly dominated their memories in a way similar to how they dominated contemporary literary production.

Discussion (general, kernels)

Due to lack of textual space, it is not possible to do justice to the readers' voices in the presentation of the most substantial results of the research. Nonetheless, the following discussion and conclusion will try to focus on the most robust and interesting findings stemming from their memories. The main takeaway from this data snapshot is that literary texts undergo the same fate as most other types of texts and textoids in the memories of non-professional readers. That is, readers forget the vast majority of what exactly they had read in a work of literature ("the surface form"), and what they retain in the long term is the textbase ("a mental representation of the ideas conveyed by the text, independent of the precise wording used and the situation model") and the situation model ("a memory representation for the situation described by a text apart from memories of the text itself"; see Radvansky 2008: 229-230). In the case of this study, the surface form refers to the recollection of "quotations" and "writing style." The textbase refers to the rest of the textual elements, dominated by "episodes" and "content" more broadly. The briefly mentioned "topic" category refers both to the textbase and to the situation model, which

would include "impressions" and all the other extra-textual elements being remembered by the readers. So, although most of the literary text is easily forgotten, there seems to remain a rather clear and coherent kernel of memory which is readily accessible to recall, and it involves mostly narrative episodes, quotations, and descriptions.

Another observation is that the recalled textual parts almost always made up a coherent whole in the subjects' memories. This means that the memories consisted of one or more aspects of the text which were closely related to each other, instead of being just randomly scattered pieces of information. The existence of this dense kernel of literary memory shows that non-professional readers are quite successful at making connections among textual elements and retaining them in memory. Andrew Elfenbein's book *The Gist of Reading* makes a similar claim in its very title, which can be invoked as the expanded version of the kernel which has just been identified: the gist of what has been read grows around the kernel of what has been remembered. Or, if you prefer a computer metaphor instead of a biological one: the kernel is always active in the memory, and therefore it enables the gist of reading to operate.

The way in which this kernel is formed may be corroborated by Elfenbein's claim that "[t]he more strongly readers can integrate what they read, moment by moment, with what they have already read in the same work and what they already know, the better chance they have of remembering and understanding

it. One of the most immediately apparent distinctions between skilled and less skilled readers is that skilled readers make such connections and less skilled do not" (2018, unpaginated). While the current study corroborates that distinction, it goes a step further to demonstrate that the "less skilled readers" are also proficient at retaining not just the general gist, but also a more specific kernel of what they found to be most memorable in a work. In fact, we we can reasonably expect almost everybody to be able to recall such memories when asked. This in turn allows us to qualify another conclusion that Elfenbein made when studying written literary memories of British nineteenth-century readers: "Readers remember either a generalized gist containing few specifics, or an event, character, setting, or quotation that, for personal reasons, has acquired an outsized importance" (2018, unpaginated). As Elfenbein's study also aimed to establish general conclusions about literary reading, the "readers" in both of his sentences seem to denote both his research subjects and readers in general. The twenty-first-century American reader from this study would fit well into Elfenbein's conclusion if we rephrase it: Readers tend to remember a kernel of information about a literary text which contains some of its specifics, mostly referring to the episodes, quotations, and descriptions (often involving characters) contained within it.

Discussion (reading circumstances and attachments)

As for the "personal reasons" – which Elfenbein claims led his readers to remember some textual elements better than others – this study accessed them indirectly in several ways, one of which were answers concerning the circumstances of reading. These included the time and place of the initial reading, as well as the circumstances in which the text was originally obtained, and they were generally remembered quite well. The time of reading was mostly expressed in year-long terms ("during college," "six or seven years ago"). The place of (first) reading was recalled in about 90% of cases as one of the categories presented in Table 9, where "N/A" refers to 31 instance in which subjects could not remember the location, as well as to some transient locations ("walking the dog"). The relation between the physical reading environment and the effect it might have on literary reading has not been researched in detail, but this study's results indicate that the grounds for such exploration are very solid because such memories are often intertwined (encoded) with the memory of the text itself. Interview analysis indicates that the reading environment tends to be a "locus of pleasure," most often as one's own room or a vacation, such as R15 (M, 58) recalling reading *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in a hammock. The place of reading is less often remembered as an "imagery prop," like in the case of R26 (M, 59) reading Tolstoy *War and Peace* while stationed in barracks in Germany, and almost never as a "distractor," which makes sense because remembering such distracted reading is unlikely to occur (see Kuzmičová 2016 for an overview of the topic and the terms used to describe reading environments).

The readers were thus adept at remembering not just a coherent sense of the text, but also at least some of the context in which they encountered it. Again, Elfenbein offers a useful summary: "While all readers construct a mental representation, not all readers comprehend because some mental representations are more successful than others. Psychologists use the concepts of 'coherence' and 'usability' to define this success. 'Coherence' means that the different elements of a mental representation fit together meaningfully. (…) [On 'usability':] Reading is a moment in a chain of purposive action that begins before the moment of reading and ends after it is finished. The self-sufficient bubble of reading often assumed by literary scholars is a useful scholarly fantasy, but not one that describes everyday reading practices." (Elfenbein 2020: 250-251) Another pinprick of personal resonance bursting the metaphorical bubble was detectable in the answers concerning the source(s) of the books. As it turned out, two-thirds of the sample (or 66 respondents during 108 recollections) could remember the relevant place and/or person where or from whom they obtained their copy of the book. They remembered the person more often than the location, and it was usually one close to the interviewee, such as a family member, romantic partner, or a teacher. This finding was reinforced by the conversations

they remembered with the person recommending the book, and also sometimes about discussing it before or after reading. Here is an example from R22 (F, 53): "It was a recommendation by my, my mom. (...) I got it at a used book sale. I happened to find it. But yeah, my mom had, had read it and said, 'If you're going to read any of my [V. S.] Naipaul books, you should read that one first. That's the best one.'"

Such responses show that vivid memories of books were reinforced by meaningful relations with the person who mediated the reading, and possibly *vice versa*. To elaborate on this connection, we can invoke some recent theoretical interventions made by Rita Felski and see how they fit in with the pertinent findings in this study. It should be noted that the whole study was designed with a motivation similar to the one Felski mentions as crucial to her work, to "slice[s] across this dichotomy of skeptical detachment versus naive attachment" (Felski 2020a: 135), and in order to do that it was important to avoid pigeonholing professional reading into Felski's first category, and non-professional reading into Felski's second category, as literary criticism is wont to do. For her part, Felski advocates a "postcritical reading," which would focus "on what carries weight. Its key concept – attachment – invites us to re-evaluate the significance and salience of ties. (...) Literary critics are starting to register the limits of purely cognitive approaches to art and to chafe at an exclusive focus on language and interpretation" (2020a: 138-9).

In her monograph discussion of the term "attachment," Felski shows how it "doesn't get much respect in academia," where the default mode of viewing readers "pits detachment against attachment," or professional readers against non-professional ones (2020b: 2). She goes on to show that such attachment – to a method, rather than an object – also fuels literary criticism (2020b: 133), and it may be utilized productively in teaching (2020b: 156). Most importantly, by utilizing actor-network theory (ANT) she goes on to show that "nothing can be automatically excluded: fictional characters, figures of speech, physical objects, supernatural beings, philosophical ideas, generic conventions, physical landscapes, or patterns of metaphors. These are very different kinds of phenomena, to be sure – and their differences are to be respected – but they are connected and coexistent rather than parceled out into opposed realms" (2020b: 138).

The results of this study would suggest that this kind of diversified and dispersed attachment may be identified and theorized by locating it in individual memories. Put differently, a reader's specific memory of a text provides the basis of her or his attachment to it. This is corroborated by the fact that each and every phenomenon mentioned in Felski's quote was present in the one hundred interviews, most often "fictional characters" and "supernatural beings." In addition to that, they were already very much "connected and coexistent" as part of their mental representations of the text, not just as a potential "ANT-ish close reading" (2020b: 138) of literary texts:

close reading of the interview transcripts yields such information readily. By identifying such memories as tokens of readers' attachments to texts and their authors, this study confirms that readers routinely mix attachment with detachment. The evidence for this is the objective textual and paratextual data which they routinely recalled, also confirming that non-professional and professional reading overlap in important ways.

As mentioned previously, readers were indeed capable of attaching themselves to a certain writer's way of writing as their memorable trait. Felski herself offers such a professional, but also quite personal (re) mark of attachment: "[the] defining mood of Bernhard's work, we might say, is irritation" (2020b: 139). Similar qualifying remarks were interspersed throughout the interviews, especially when readers were asked to define the genre of the texts they were remembering. This also goes to show how important it is to "explore a fuller range of emotions about reading experiences," which are not disqualifying when it comes to attachment and memorability, even though – or in some cases because – the texts in question have been described as irritating, "boring, frustrating, impossible" (see Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2019). Such qualifications in fact enable a particular kind of relatability which Felski, following Brian Glavey, identifies in regards to the "aesthetic experiences [which are] transitive or intransitive, a relation to others or to the self" (2020b: 160). This means that such reading experiences were sometimes conveyed to close persons not just to spread

the joy of reading, but to share the frustration left by a difficult or unpalatable book, which made it that much more memorable.

Discussion (readers' age and paracanon)

Of course, the most obvious and direct kind of attachment to a book recorded in the study was the utilization of a pre-existing personal connection. About a fifth of the subjects reported how such connections played a role in determining both positive and negative views of books. If it is true that "one can feel as closely connected to a film, a painting, or a song as to another person" (Felski 2020b: ix), when it comes to books this seems to be so because they are often remembered as part and parcel of an attachment to another person, who is not necessarily the fictional character or author. In fact, the subjects were far less knowledgeable about the person who wrote the book and their circumstances than the person who recommended the book to them and the circumstances in which that occurred. However, another less direct kind of attachment may be identified when we look into the age at which all of the remembered books were most often read, which was 17, while the total average age of the first reading was 23.

This age span conforms with the notion of a "reminiscence bump", a period of young adulthood identified by research in psychology as the time from which most vivid memories are retained later in life (see Williams and Conway 2009: 47, and Copeland et al. 2009 as an excellent example of another way in which

it is relevant to remembering literature). The duration and frame of this period varies according to different research studies, but it usually includes adolescence, which is also the time when American readers – and any other readers from a society which features a compulsory school system that extends into late teenage years – are introduced to books deemed culturally memorable. These books are the stuff of literary canons by virtue of American education, but also the stuff of private, intimate memories, and the majority of the books remembered in the study were *not* classics, but rather contemporary novels. Marianne Hirsch's distinction neatly captures this cultural and private divide when she notes that "[Jan] Assmann uses the term 'kulturelles Gedächtnis' ('cultural memory') to refer to 'Kultur' – an institutionalized hegemonic archival memory. In contrast, the Anglo-American meaning of 'cultural memory' refers to the social memory of a specific group or subculture." (Hirsch 2012: 255) So, the books which the subjects remembered well from their teenage years are culturally memorable in the first, hegemonic sense, as the product of the American educational system which, as Steven Roger Fischer detects, "still tr[ies] to uphold civilization's literary pillars and do[es] awaken, in some, a permanent hunger for more." (2005: 309) But, at the same time, the titles themselves and the way in which they were discussed indicate that these books are memorable within "the social memory of a specific group," that group most often being family, close friends, or school teachers and peers.

As the top title from the list of remembered texts would indicate (Table 6), the reminiscence bump might also overlap with another phenomenon identified by Fischer on the same page: "globalization has progressively meant fewer titles from fewer countries: most recently, English-language 'supersellers'." But while there are some titles which fall under that category, they were far from dominant in the whole sample, which one might expect if globalization was as omnipresent as Fischer implies. A more useful framing of the convergence of age, memory and literature in the American public might then not be the canonical, but the paracanonical one. Alison Waller does a great job of introducing the concept in her own study of remembering childhood books: "The paracanon has been defined by Catharine R. Stimpson as a set of texts 'beloved' by individuals and communities of reading (…). This approach encourages a more complex consideration of the affective influence of literary encounters over time. The paracanonical books that feature in this study are not only 'love object[s]', (…) but also texts that have been and remain meaningful in all kinds of ways, not all of them positive." (Waller 2019: 4) This ties in well with Felski's notion of attachment, as the 'reminiscence bump' period within the wider American society is also one when strong (sub)cultural attachments, including romantic relationships, are made – or unmade – autonomously for the first time. Although the present study offers few clues about the communities in which these American readers were situated, it is beyond doubt that the kind of books they got attached to form a certain paracanonical

Non-professional readers tend to establish links to texts through their physical forms (books) and the people they have received them from

selection in their recollections. Therefore, the period in which readers are systematically introduced to the canon of literary works also seems to be the one in which foundations are laid for their long-lasting paracanonical attachments.

Lastly, a curious sort of discrepancy in the recollections may be remarked upon here as it may imply a feature of paracanonical selection. Even though the memories in general did not seem to vary noticeably according to the respondents' age or sex, there was a notable difference in correlation with sexes of both the readers and the authors. The 47 women in the study recalled works written by 81 male and 56 female writers (59% and 41% out of their share of the total author count, respectively), while the 53 men recalled works by 136 male and only 16 female writers (89% and 11%). When men did remember female writers, about a third (6 out of 16 books and writers) of their writing was aimed at children and young adults, consisting of science/speculative/fantastic fiction. The rest was focused on experiences of women, but their male readers had virtually no memories about that. Therefore, it would seem that the differences between male and female readers have at least something to do with

content preferences, whether it is for specific (female) characters or (fantastic) plot. Faced with uneven odds of finding proper representation of their lived experience in books (for example, see Underwood 2019: 127), it might be that American female readers strive for more (ideal) self-representation in the books they read. This effort then makes such books more memorable for them, while the male readers simply default to what is for them already culturally and textually dominant, allowing the female aspects of writing to evaporate from memory.

Discussion (titles and classics)

Another sort of dominance – that of American and British authors – is by no means surprising as American readers have a well-documented preference for literature written in English (Allen 2007 asserts that translations amount to about 3% of the annual book production in the US, and works of literature are only a fraction of that percentage). The sample is also unsurprisingly novel-centric (around 4 in 5 books discussed), mirroring the general American interest in the genre. This has been elaborated on by C. K. Farr in her book, which shares some similarities with this study. Farr quotes R. B. Kershner who notes how the "'fundamental characteristic that distinguishes the novel from most Western literature that preceded it [is] its appeal to the reader's daily experience (…)'" (Farr 2016: 26) This connection to everyday life is buttressed by the fact that the study's text sample is dominantly modern, corresponding well with the daily experience of the subjects' realities,

with around 60% of texts written after 1950 onward, or more than 80% after 1901. Combined with the tendency of the readers to focus on content and simple retelling (rather than the more complex summarizing by topic), the results indicate that American readers seemed comfortable with their experience of books. To put it differently, they did not seem to feel themselves pressured by any sort of a cultural literacy imperative, like the one implicit in Edward Hirsch's influential and popular *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1988).

However, this does not mean that the influence of a literary canon disseminated through formal education was not felt by the readers, and that they remembered only their own paracanons. The expanded lists of the most commonly remembered titles and authors provides evidence of a sizable minority (around a third, depending on the definition) of works deemed important by a culture, and therefore worth memorizing. This phenomenon was confirmed recently in another comparable study, which focused on online readers of the *Goodreads* platform and offered some plausible reasons about why the classics (still) seem to be so prominent (readers from the US made up about 40% of the sample; Walsh and Antoniak 2021: 254). After showing why the term itself is still prominent in general use, as opposed to the more academically flavored "canon," and noting how readers can create their own classics by categorizing books as such (243-244), the authors offer their own take on the definition: "A classic, Van Doren said, is simply

'a book that remains in print.' For the twenty-first century, we might update Van Doren's definition and say that a classic is simply a book that continues to make money in whatever form it takes." (245) This definition might then be updated yet again by noting that a classic is also a book which is well remembered by some sizable portion (about a third) of a random reader sample.

In the present study, out of the dozen most commonly remembered titles, seven regularly appear on lists of American and British (or Irish) classics of literature, while the rest may be considered classics in their own (sub-) genres of young adult literature, science fiction, fantasy, and dystopian literature. Also, with the exception of *Harry Potter*, all of the novels were written about half a century ago (*Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969) or earlier. The fact that two American authors are at the top of the most-remembered list with their (mostly long-form) fiction deserves further scrutiny. The wide scope of this study's discussion, however, can afford it just a cursory comment, which should open with the fact that these two authors were represented in the study with the largest number of texts. Whereas both Rowling and Tolkien were represented by, effectively, a single book series each, and Orwell with only one title besides *1984* (*Animal Farm*), both Vonnegut and Steinbeck were represented by four titles each, more than any other author in the study except for another prodigious American writer, Stephen King (four titles, five discussions). This may mean that the saturation of the publishing market with their works, and

consequently their strong dissemination, had a lot to do with their popularity and memorability. But it does not preclude another potential conclusion: It is not the specific texts that make these authors memorable, but it is their specific way of writing.

This does not refer only to the more narrow category of the writer's style, which non-professional readers seem readily able to identify on their own terms, as the *Goodreads* study also shows ("e.g., conversational and slangy language"; Walsh and Antoniak 2021: 243 [Abstract]). The way in which the present study's subjects represented literary writing seems to be equally a creation of their own memory and the writer's input, as the mental representations (kernels, gists) of the texts consisted only of elements (specific quotes, episodes, elaborations of a topic) that were always semantically coherent in their recollections. This conversely means that there were very few instances of readers recalling some random detail or quote that seemed to have no relation to their representation of the text. When readers were able to identify such a mechanism or pattern for representing and conveniently memorizing a text in one or more works by the same author, they would usually ascribe it to the author's specific way of writing. This is of course a form of interpretation, but one that seems quite distinct from more general remarks (concerning, for instance, impressions about the writer's value or importance) by virtue of its always being rooted in specific, episodic instances of memory.

In summary, it may be stated that the results are in general agreement with the earlier Croatian study (Škopljanac 2014), which indicated that what readers usually remember the most after reading fictional narratives are larger-than-life characters, as well as scenes and plot lines incongruous to the readers' everyday life experience. This would explain the memorability of writers such as Steinbeck, who seems to be quite intent on introducing characters that are "no longer conventional", as noted by R83 (M, 67). Vonnegut as the other most remembered American author keeps inserting one "*non sequitur*" after the other into his narration to the point of it becoming regular practice, as noted by R95 (M, 35). Of course, the latter's novels also feature a wide array of unconventional and bizarre characters, but to readers these seem to get subsumed by the unconventional, literary use of language, as well as the literally otherworldly occurrences, such as the ironically incongruous harmoniums.

Conclusion

Based on the data presented and discussed so far, what may we expect American readers to remember? The most comprehensive answer would be that memories of even a hundred readers vary tremendously, as do the texts and the reasons why certain textual elements were remembered and certain personal attachments formed. This should be borne in mind by anyone trying to discuss everyday, non-professional readers and reading, especially if they try to create a model of reading based on such lived

experiences. Which brings us to the first conclusion of the study: any one (American) reader may be reasonably expected to have rich and diverse memories of literary texts. Although they are not extensive, detailed, nor factual in the sense of professional literary criticism, these memories are nonetheless irreducible to a model or scheme without the potential loss of an important aspect of what makes a particular text memorable *to them*. This immediately brings up the second conclusion: readers' memories usually contain not just coherent mental representations of a text, but also some sort of episodic memory which attaches that particular text to their own lived experience. Whether the attachment is professional, personal, positive, negative, or of any other kind, the text is usually remembered within a rather detailed real world context which has to do with at least the reading circumstances, but often also with how readers made sense of it in the first place.

In a recent study similar to this one, conducted in London with 25 readers, Shelley Trower noted how her subjects "intended to speak about reading, and spoke much less of books than they had expected." She took that point further to conclude that "[r]eaders tend more readily to remember experiences of reading novels (...) than the content of the novels themselves." (Trower 2020: 284, 271) The results of this study would not support this particular conclusion to such an extent, as there was a clear majority of answers (62%) involving content as one of the most salient textual elements. However, an even higher

percentage of answers suggested extratextual content was indeed remembered, and in ways that were sometimes crucial to what made readers "hooked" to the text, as Felski's book bearing that name would have it. It could have been a recommendation, a discussion, a review, a reading ritual, an enjoyable time it provided to the reader while they were on a tiresome trip, or any other of the dozens of reasons put forward by the subjects during the interviews.

That being said, while the context of the memories was certainly varied, it was of course possible to provide typical instances of reading, as shown by the discussion. And this brings us to the third and last major conclusion of the study, which may be framed as an updated version of the remark which ended the discussion: unusual and incongruous characters and plot occurrences are central to the literary memories of (American) non-professional readers. While this certainly seems to hold true, it must be qualified by another remark, which is that readers are keen to establish and memorize their lived experience of the (reading of the) literary text as a sort of a background against which they define what was unusual and incongruous to them. We can apply here one of the basic distinctions of cognitive linguistics, which contrasts the figure and the ground (see Stockwell 2002: 13-18): the subjects' memories acted as familiar ground. This ground was typically based on elements highlighted in the discussion: the readers' reading circumstances and attachments, their sex, the "classics," and their own paracanon. In contrast to that

(back)ground, the varied memories of mostly unexpected characters, their developments, and episodes in which both of these were shown and played out seemed to hold the readers' attention the most, which in turn made them the most memorable figure(s) of the text(s), especially when they were able to land into a "sweet spot" between the known and unknown.

Taken together, these three conclusions outline the following main implication of the study: as much as the texts were reduced and distorted in the subjects' memories, the textual kernel which remained was expanded and amplified by the lived experience of the text, which proved to be quite unpredictable on the individual level. This would also imply that during their reading the subjects were simulating other kinds of experience based on their own life experiences, as they tended to remember the outlines of the selected texts either as departures from (or ruptures of) their everyday life. In other words, although there was a myriad of memories that the subjects recalled, a coherent thread could usually be drawn (during the final set of questions) from the text back to their own lives in the form of a slightly modified experience (departure) or completely different experience (rupture), which memorably modified or changed their perspective of the text. Therefore, these memories give evidence of literature being used as a sort of a simulation, in the sense of reading in order to imagine and partially live out one's own existence in different circumstances (see Pettersson 2012: 105-124 and Boyd 2009: 155-158; also Hogan

2016, Djikic et al. 2013, Koopman 2015). It would be interesting to see if this effect could be found in other empirical studies, and also to investigate if it was culturally based, with American readers tending to simulate more or less than readers from some other cultures, but that is clearly beyond the scope of the work presented here.

One final remark: A study such as this one – based on qualitative data which points to individual readers, but also enables the extraction of quantitative data that subsumes readers into distinct groups – is faced with a conundrum when it comes to proceeding with meaningful generalizations. It also faces the difficult task of aiming the readers' voices back at the texts which they speak of, and showing how one interacts with the other. A potential way forward is to reverse the usual operation, in which one or several literary texts are taken as individual phenomena to be analyzed in great detail, while the readership is taken to be more or less monolithic and not in need of differentiation, at least when taken synchronically. Reversing this would make it possible to try and explain the literary, but also the cultural implications entailed by the findings, such as the appeal of a writer's way of writing over that of a specific text in an individual's memory, or the skewed sex ratios of authors and readers when it comes to what the latter remember, or the general memorability of unusual characters and their circumstances. This also goes hand in hand with the warning Felski put forward in the opening of her *Uses of literature*: "Any attempt to clarify the value of literature must surely engage the diverse motives of readers and ponder the mysterious event of reading, yet contemporary theories give us poor guidance on such questions. We are sorely in need of richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts" (2011: 11). The interviews in this study present about three hundred such accounts – each of the hundred readers recollecting such engagements with at least three texts – as well as corroboration of Felski's four "modes of textual engagement," especially the "logic of recognition," which may be also understood as a more specific case of simulation (2011: 14). In this way, it also becomes possible to show some of "the specific ways in which [literary] works infiltrate and inform our lives" (2011: 5), which makes this paper a sort of a feasibility study about looking into individual memories to gain more insights about what literature is, and how it is mentally represented by a large majority of its users. The paper is finally also a sort of a stepping stone, leading up to the larger goal of researching readership on a more individual basis that can be carefully analyzed and then generalized based on the readers' own thoughts and voices, leaving the analysis of the texts to be processed in the background. In the third and – as always – most productive synthetic step, the two analytic foci may be superimposed on one another for potential new insights into literary texts, as well as their readers, whose memories make up literature itself.

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