

How does reading fiction in one's childhood affect the value-perception and frequency of reading fictional books in adult life?

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Course Instructor:	Dr. Ajay Gandhi
Student:	Kavien Suleiman (Begikhani) – s1904795
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In this final paper I will describe the reflection processes that I went through in conducting this qualitative research project. In parallel with the five sub-assignments that we had to complete throughout the course, I will make an attempt to explain the value of these assignment and how it contributed to exploration and reflection process. In particular I will try to explain here how each assignment provoked me to think about my research objectives, and more importantly, how I learned to modify my research approaches in order to gain more meaningful insights and try to give answers to the questions that motivated me in the first place to start with this project. At the end of this paper, I will crystalize some of my research findings.

The first brainstorm assignment allowed me to ask myself many questions, without there (seemingly) being a clear connection between them. I knew that I have a huge passion for books and bookstores; that it was a space in which I could find myself, in all calmness, and also find inspiration and energy for some of the many challenges that life holds for us. I believed that I could also see this process happening for other people, when I saw them walking at one my favourite bookstores, being the ABC in The Hague. Then I read an affirmation by Alan Peshkin, which said: "subjectivity is something to capitalize on rather than to exorcise."¹ This helped me a great deal to honestly reflect upon my own positionality: I came out of quite a long period of emotional turbulence and a physical burn-out, which also caused me to miss a semester of my university. But why was it then, that despite my emotional volatility, I could walk for hours in bookstores, which was soothing, like a sanctuary? This awareness of reality, I then understood, could transform into a source of strength throughout the research; and that's what I kept remembering myself of. The principle of openness and evenly suspended attention, as asserted by Freud², also stimulated me to be sensitive to new phenomena that I could discover, and to challenges my own views. This would particularly prove useful for the mapping and observation exercises. Although, in retrospect, I also realize that I was often perhaps too sensitive, i.e. by the desire to absorb and document everything and everyone, I was likely to miss the pieces that were most important to solve my own little puzzle. And was there anything to solve in the first place? In retrospect I could have shifted my focus more from the desire to 'answer' questions, to just ask questions.³

So in this early phase, one of my justifications was to "understand the process by which events and actions take place", which was also one of the intellectual goals of qualitative research as asserted by Maxwell.⁴ In addition, I made a 'triangulization' map (systematic triangulization of perspectives as discussed by Flick⁵) in order to get an overview which perspectives were most valuable for me. This also strongly suggested that I was mostly interested in emotional and psychological factors of visitors of the ABC, rather than e.g. economic factors or the general perspective of the bookstore.

Proceeding to the mapping assignment was insightful because it allowed me to get a more holistic overview of the spatial characteristics of the bookstore. It allowed me to discover things that I otherwise wouldn't have seen, like how the distribution of different products throughout the store was well thought about and balanced. These were for example the clearly demarcated 'bubbles' of special products like audiobooks or comics/graphic novels, but also things like the little music boxes,

¹ Maxwell, 2012, p. 38.

² Maxwell, 2012, p. 91.

³ So my initial drive to find a 'unique' answer to the questions that intrigued me, worked counter effective in the sense that I placed too much pressure on myself. This is also interesting because I knew that due to the limited time and resources in this project, this was also not required from us. I think a positive and valuable implication of this research project was that it enabled me to understand myself a bit better, and to thus solve some pieces of my own puzzle.

⁴ Maxwell, 2012, p. 23.

⁵ Flick, 2009, p. 101.

the attractive postcards, and the magical 'Betty The Book Machine'. I also realized how well lighted the space and the shelves were (and how important this was for the experience), and how music-speakers were allocated throughout the store and played just 'very fine' music. (In my observations I would see visitors moving on these melodies). Such simple a thing as the little tabourets which were located every few meters for visitors to take a book on the higher shelves (or to take a little – or not so little – seat and start reading). When I had the final map in front of me, I was able to imagine how the totality of these factors contributed to the spirit of the bookstore. As a space where everything was connected and served to inspire the visitor. But there was also too much interesting things to see, so I had to confine myself to just a few primary factors. Spradley's nine dimension to "delimit" observational situations provided some guidance here; I choose to focus on the first four dimensions: 1. space; 2. actor; 3. activity; and 4. object.⁶ This helped me to contextualize the dynamics that were to come: I have a space (which I attempted to confine mostly to the fiction area), in which an actor engages into an 'activity' with an object. I wanted to 'grasp' this activity between the actor and the object; was there really an 'interaction' between a book as an inanimate object and the individual?

Now, 'I could cast my net' into the ocean, as suggested in Emerson's chapter on observing and jotting notes.⁷ This chapter was useful because it provided some practical instructions, such as "stepping back" now and then and use the gained experience to increase sensitivity, and the advise to jot notes in a systematic manner. What also proved effective was Dr. Gandhi's advise to divide our observation page in two sides; one for the 'factual' (observed) phenomenon and the other side for the personal inference and remarks. I retrospect the observations were highly insightful, which lasted around 4 hours in total on two separate occasions; there was so much to see and absorb. I saw how every visitor had its own unique way of lingering through the space, of looking at the shelves, feeling and flipping through the books. But also the interaction between visitors and the staff, which I believe is sincerely valued by both sides (especially by frequent visitors). In that regard, the sensitivity of the passionate staff was also stimulating for me to take the freedom that I needed and follow my intuition. Their remarks and experiences were valuable to put things into perspective.

Because the nature of my observations were non-participatory⁸, I felt that I was mostly just writing down my own interpretations of what I saw, without being able to validate my views. A thought by Erich Fromm came up: "Being refers to experience, and human experience is in principle not describable."⁹

So what was I describing then, I asked myself. Was I writing stories, about people who were looking, feeling and flipping through stories, in a space which was covered with stories? Well, the venue's spirit proved ideal to write fiction anyways. Right. But beyond that, I soon realized that I had to prioritize my interviews in order to get more 'tangible' insights.

Looking back, I can see how from that moment the focus of my research question changed from "the patterns of interaction and movement, i.e. looking, touching and feeling of books" to the more psychologically and emotionally driven factors that caused people to enter such a place. I felt this would enable me to "build a story" around it, whereas now the 'patterns of interaction' almost felt more quantitatively, i.e. that surveys would have been better suited for that endeavour. I think this

⁶ Flick, 2009, p. 228.

⁷ Emerson, Fretz, Shaw, 2011, p. 29.

⁸ (I tried to be invisible also because I really didn't want to interrupt the flow of the visitors inside the bookstore, and my attempt to minimize the reactive effects as a result of my presence.),

⁹ Fromm, 1997, p. 75.

incremental process of moving forward and changing focus and interest is significant. Not the least because it has been referred to in most general texts that we read for this course, i.e. how the inductive and comparative nature of this process can help us to build new (grounded) theories.¹⁰

An important realization for me was that I needed to confine the kind of books that I was referring to in my research, i.e. also to make a distinction in motivations for people to read either fictional stories or books like history or philosophy. (Was it really possible to make such a distinction, considering the interwovenness of books – whether fictional or non-fictional – with the variety of disciplines that they cover?) This was again a phase in which I tried to come back to myself as a reference point; what moved me to read fiction?

This is also one of the reasons that I asked my interviewees to respond to a quote¹¹ from Erich Fromm that captures the essence of reading (fiction) for me: I was most curious to see if and how they would connect this to their own reading experiences. In addition, and building upon Fromm's first thought that human experience was in essence not describable, I asked the interviewees to draw a book, simply transformed from their hearts and minds upon a piece of paper.¹²

In preparation for my interviews, I tried to find a balance between a semi-structured approach and a more conversational style of interviewing, as explained by Merriam.¹³ However, despite my theoretical preparation, I realize that especially during my first interview I was highly leading the interview and still made mistakes that read about in the literature; I was leading the interview dominantly, often asking multiple questions at once in a sentence, and most importantly – I realized during writing my transcript – I left almost no space for natural silence. Over the totality of 5 interviews, I could see a gradual improvement in my interview approach, defined mostly by a more calm and conversational style of interviewing, and most importantly, to cultivate silence.

The final reflection assignment on *Grief and Headhunters Rage*¹⁴ by Renato Rosaldo was helpful in the way that it affirmed my belief that the story in a fictional book could serve as a 'vehicle' to understand and feel situations that can occur in life. However, it also made me more critical, by asking myself: to what extent are we really able to feel (understand) experiences that occur in books? That is, despite our goodwill, interest or motivation. Like Rosaldo, by losing his wife in a tragic accident, he realized that he never really understood the "rage and grief" of the Headhunters, until the day he experienced it himself. It's kind of similar to "therapy" groups for (ex)-addicts or people who have suffered other traumatic experiences; it's the "shared experience" that creates a deeper understanding between them. And an interesting question here is to what extent stories in (fictional) books are able to catalyse such experiences to an individual?

This also brings me back to the interviews I conducted; to what extent was I truly able to relate to experiences, memories and value-judgements of the people who shared these so generously with me?

¹⁰ Merriam, 2009, p. 175.

¹¹ "But when we start out with the reality of human beings existing, loving, hating, suffering, then there is no being that is not at the time same time becoming and changing. Living structures can be only if they become; they can exist only if they change. Change and growth are inherent qualities of the life-process." (Fromm, 1997, p. 22)

¹² See appendix 1.

¹³ Merriam, 2009, p. 89.

¹⁴ Rosaldo, 2003, p. 150.

Some of the general findings that I found are the following: individuals who visit the American Book Center or other bookstores tend to do this because they want to take a break and get inspired by stories. The phase of life that they are situated in at that moment also seems to affect the type of books that they seek to discover; the question remains to what extent this happens consciously. Individuals also tend to be attracted by certain colour-combinations of books (as part of the overall design), and this can be explained by connotations they make to previously read book-designs that made an impact on them. Most importantly, the encounter with books in childhood and later formative years, seems to resonate and can significantly contribute to different phases of the individuals life.

Martijn¹⁵ is currently the deputy director of the ABC in The Hague. When he was young, his mother used to work in a bookstore for around 10 years and often read to him. Now he often reads to his own children, enjoying the process of reliving those moments from his own childhood. Iris works for around 3 years as a bookseller at ABC¹⁶. She already had her own public library-card when she was one year old and was intensively being read to by her parents; now, many years later, she reads the Harry Potter series again every February in an attempt to discover new dynamics and relive the stories (which I think is intriguing and defines a booklover at heart). Both Martijn and Iris are now avid readers and work passionately in the ABC bookstore, although they never anticipated to end up here necessarily. Beyond the love for their work, they seem grateful for the position they find themselves in, e.g. by being able to recommend books to others and in that way make a meaningful difference.

On the other side of the spectrum I find Warsha¹⁷, 19 years old and student *International studies* at Leiden University, and Jane, 84 years old. With other side of the spectrum I intend to say that their early encounter with books in childhood occurred in a more difficult manner. Warsha was bullied for a long time when she was young, and in reading she found the escapism and solace she needed; reading also helped her to put things into perspective, i.e. with time passing by she understood that those who bullied her were suffering in their own way. Now, many years later she is keeping all her books as her "own babies", and doesn't feel comfortable lending them to others, i.e. which also implies a form of attachment. She hopes to read the books of her childhood to her own children one day. The 84 year old Jane¹⁸, recalls: "don't forget, it was war. There were not many books. The Dutch language was forbidden. So I read mostly the boy-stories of my brother, secretly at home." Jane is referring to Indonesia under the Japanese occupation in WWII. The early politicization of language in her childhood (prohibition of her mother tongue, Dutch), and the consequent restrictions it had on her freedom to read what she wanted to, could explain her extensive reading throughout her adult life by reading the same books in different languages, such as Yiddish and Friesch. Or how she was lying on her belly as a little girl, trying to read Jane Eyre, while she was not even able to read English, she recalls. And yet she finished reading the book as a girl, in her memory. Many years later here in The Netherlands, she would be able to read the book properly and it still could make her deeply emotional. Jane's final remarks: "when you are young, you can feel a lot [by reading stories], but when you get older, the feeling becomes less and less, because you've all seen it once before." Both Warsha and Jane have a strong passion for reading and books and wouldn't be able to live without them. In my interpretation, their childhood encounters with books now define the relationship and the value they hold for books and reading.

¹⁵ Martijn, personal communication, March 8th 2019, The Hague.

¹⁶ Iris, personal communication, March 20th 2019, The Hague.

¹⁷ Warsha, personal communication, March 5th 2019, The Hague.

¹⁸ Jane, personal communication, March 20th 2019, The Hague.

With some of these findings in mind, I think it can be helpful to look further into the relationship between reading (fiction) in one's childhood and the effects it has on the general value-perception and frequency of reading fiction in later (adult) life. A practical application could be for therapy or trauma-recovery purposes, but also more generally for individuals to reflect on life and be able to answer questions that they have been struggling with; a story in a book could make the difference.

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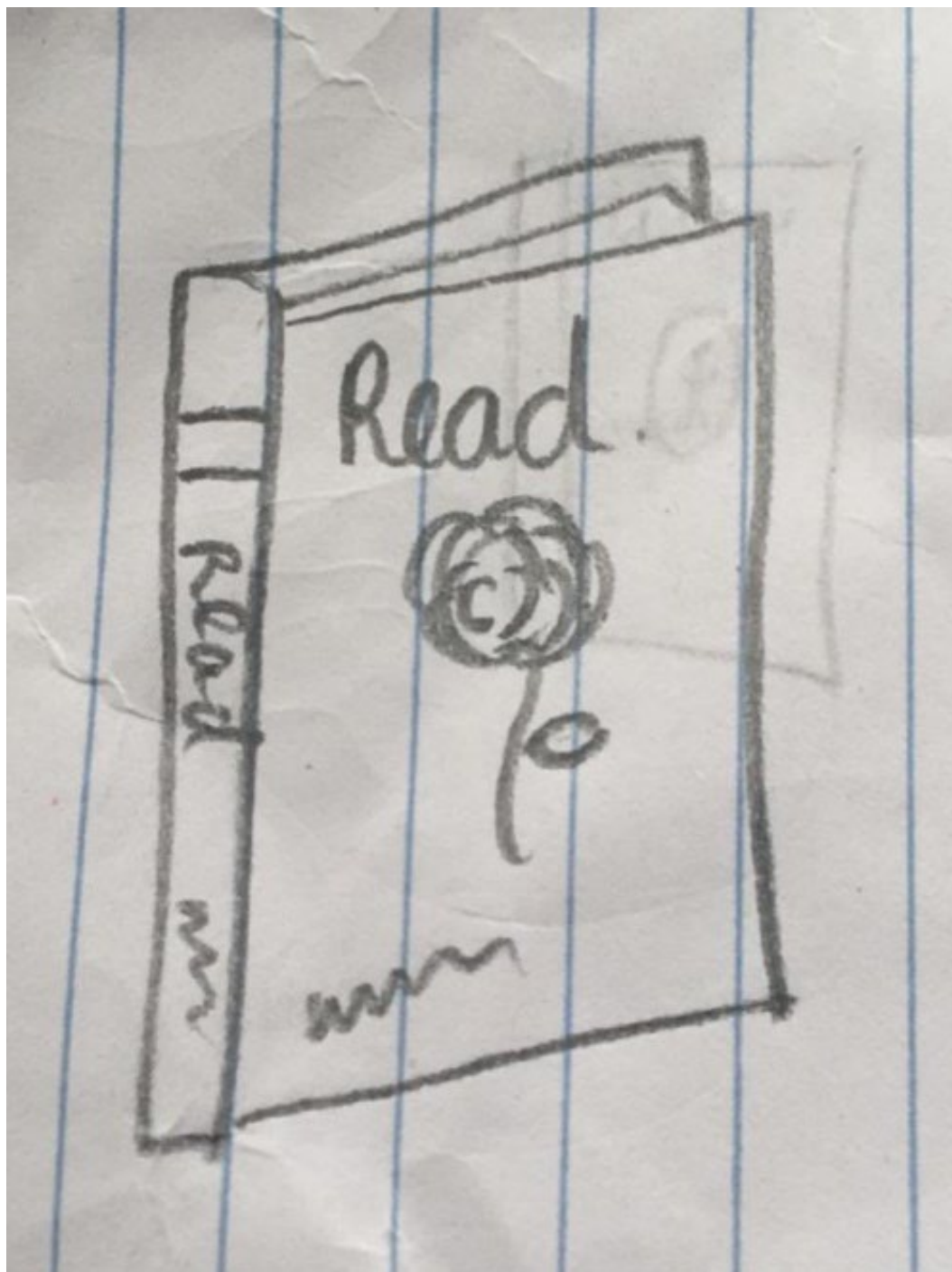
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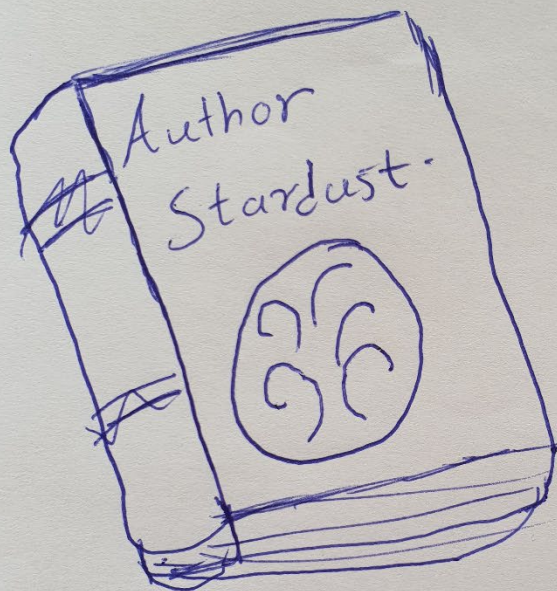
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Appendix 1: Intuitive book drawings by interviewees.

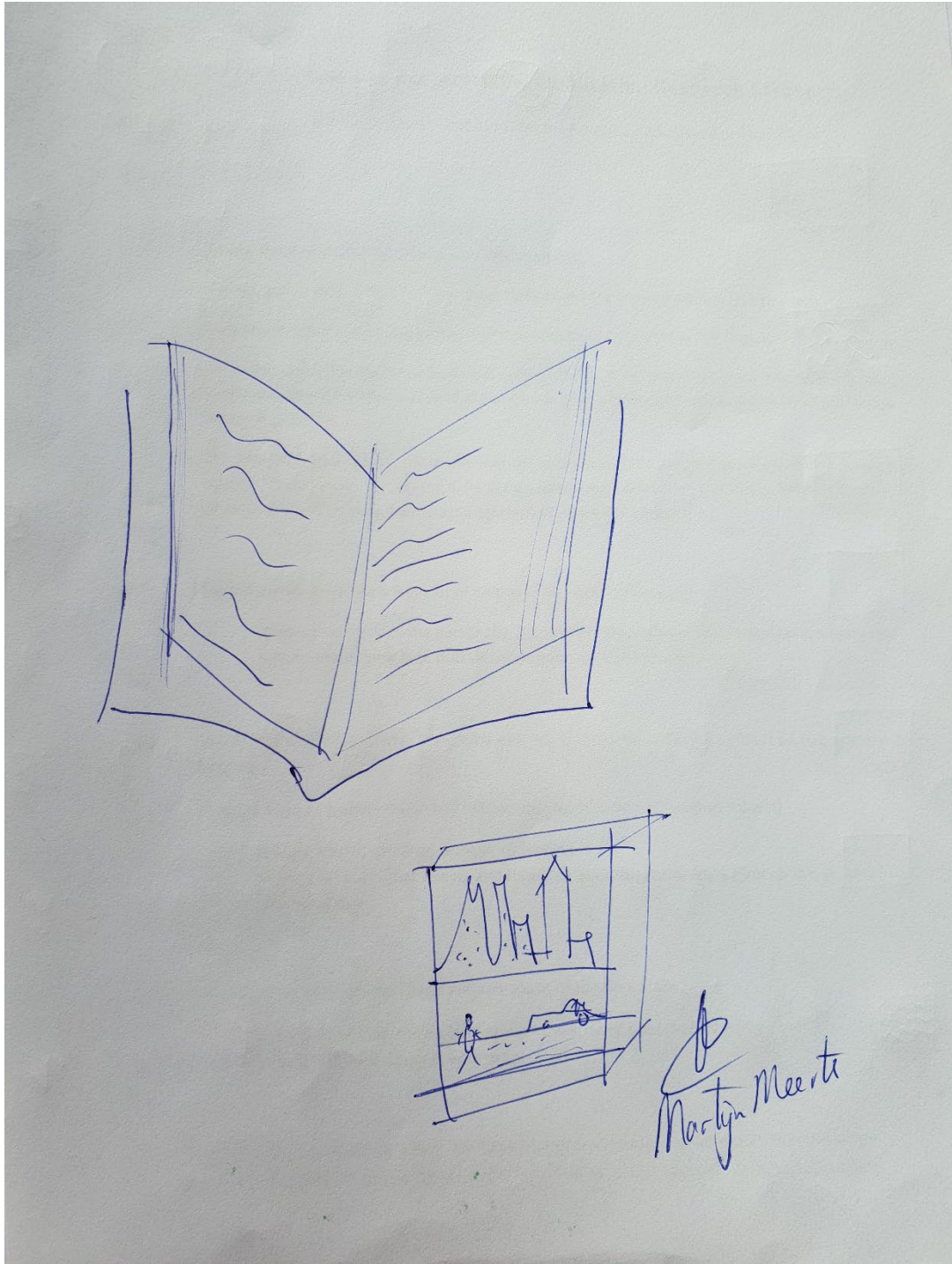


1: Warsha, 21 years old. Student International Studies at Leiden University.



Alexander Groenewegen.

2: Alexander, 22 years old. Student International Studies at Leiden University.



3: Martijn, 45 years old. Bookseller and Deputy Director ABC The Hague.

4:
Iris,
27



years old. Bookseller at ABC The Hague.

5: Jane, 84 years old. Former pedagogic employee at child-care institution.

