

# ‘Who Reads?’: Perspectives on Reading Research

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The eighth international comparative literature colloquium, which was part of the twenty-fifth Vilenica literary festival, was devoted to the issues of the reader and reading. It offered three thematically divided, albeit interconnected and overlapping, sections: the first one was to focus on the historical reader and reading habits, providing the social and cultural contextualisation of reading practices, including the contemporary ones; the second was to address various reading motifs (e.g., the motif of the reader or of the library), and the third to (re)consider theories of reading and reflect on the future of the practice. As such, the topic of the reader was intended to complement the previous two Vilenica colloquia, which centred on the role of the author (*The Author: Who or What Is Writing Literature?*) and on the importance of literary mediators (such as publishers, editors and critics) in contemporary literature and culture (*Who Chooses? Literature and Literary Mediation*), thus closing the chain of author – publisher/book-seller – reader.

The end result, however, steered away from the planned themes, as the papers comprised two, rather than three, sections, i.e., treatises addressing theoretical and methodological approaches to reading research (Grosman, Bachleitner, Towheed, Habjan, Pezdirc-Bartol), and historically oriented discussions closer to individual case studies (Littau, Pintarič, Čepič Vogrinčič, Smolej, Santini, Schandl). Needless to say, historical and theoretical approaches were often productively interrelated. This resulted in an interesting combination of theory and practice, inviting us to consider the possibilities of applying the one to the other.

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In her essay ‘Readers and Reading as Interaction with Literary Texts’, Meta Grosman, Professor of English literature at the University of Ljubljana, stresses the importance of understanding reading as a process of communication and a unique literary experience. Even though her per-

spective was largely ahistorical, an attempt to understand what readers do when reading and how they themselves contribute to the mental representation of the text can, as she argues, help us understand the contemporary situation, i.e., the reader's interaction with e-texts.

If Grosman refers to individual reading as an intimate act of temporary cohabitation with fictional characters, Norbert Bachleitner, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Vienna, addresses in his contribution, 'From the Reading Public and Individual Readers towards a Sociology of Reading Milieus', the importance of sociological approaches to the history of reading, which enable us to grasp the reading habits of different classes and audiences, rather than individual readers. Referring to numerous studies that addressed the social aspects of reading, most notably Jost Schneider's recent study of reading milieus, i.e., of reading audiences from the perspective of social milieus, Bachleitner calls for the merging of the history of reading with history of literature, and thus forming a history of literary communication.

In some respects Jernej Habjan, researcher at the Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies, SRC SASA, deals with methodological issues as well, albeit of a particular sort. In his paper 'Research as Reading: From the Close Reading of Difference to the Distant Reading of Distance', he focuses on Franco Moretti's concept of 'distant reading', which was introduced as an alternative to the dominant method of close reading. Habjan offers an epistemological comment on Moretti's approach, and attempts to answer, from its own viewpoint, the most typical CompLit critiques of distant reading.

The article of Roger Chartier, Professor of the History of Modern Europe at Collège de France and one of the most prominent book historians, bridges the methodological and the historical contributions. In 'Cervantes, Menard and Borges', Chartier sketches six different readings of Borges' story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, as a text that is self-referential at the biographical, autobiographical, allegorical, critical, aesthetic and bibliographical levels.

The section comprising case studies is introduced by Karin Littau, who teaches English and Comparative Literature at the University of Essex. In 'An Archaeology of Affect: Reading, History and Gender', Littau traces the marginalisation of affects, i.e., the affective pleasures of reading. Whereas affect was a measure of a work's excellence from antiquity to the eighteenth century, by the twentieth century the link between pleasurable reading and the heights of literary achievement has, as she argues, become almost untenable. By introducing the physical, bodily response to the text into the discussion on reading, her paper brings forth

the infamous woman reader, a crucial topic of (feminist) reception and gender studies.

While Littau's paper reveals the historically changing perception of reading, more precisely, of the changing evaluation of the power of literature, Shafquat Towheed, Lecturer in English at the Open University, presents in his paper 'Locating the Reader, Or What Do We Do with the Man in the Hat?' a unique reading database that can help us understand the historical transformations of reading practices. Towheed is a Project Supervisor of *The Reading Experience Database* (RED), an open-access database already containing over 30,000 records documenting the history of reading in Britain from 1450 to 1945. Evidence of reading is drawn from published and unpublished sources as diverse as diaries, commonplace books, memoirs, sociological surveys, criminal court and prison records. As such, the database containing qualitative and quantitative information about what British people used to read, where and when they read it, and what they thought of books, presents an invaluable resource not only for book and reading historians, but also for a variety of other disciplines.

Ana Č. Vogrinčič, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, discusses in her paper, 'Materiality of Reading: The Case of 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Novel-Readers in England, and a Glimpse into the Present', material aspects of book-reading and the non-textual dimension of the literary experience. She argues that from the eighteenth-century England onwards, the novel as an object has played an important role in the popularisation of leisure reading. Among significant contributions to the rise of the genre has been the materialisation of literary characters in other leisure and pleasure forms. This process, as well as numerous other ways in which the material read was articulated in conversation, is defined as 'externalisation' of the otherwise silent individual reading experience. This 'externalisation' can also be observed in contemporary book culture, characterised by the talk 'around' books rather than 'about' books.

Miha Pintarič, Lecturer in French Medieval and Renaissance Literature at the University of Ljubljana, examines in his paper, 'La satire de la Bibliothèque de l'Abbaye de Saint-Victor' (The Satire of the Library of the St. Victor Abbey), a fictional reading-related motif: that of a library parodically described in Rabelais' Renaissance classic *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Although the library of the St. Victor Abbey is, at first glance, just a list of titles, Pintarič succeeds in analysing the complex meanings behind them.

On the other hand, Tone Smolej, Associate Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the University of Ljubljana, presents a study on 'La bibliothèque et le lecteur en Carniole

(1670–1870) et l'histoire littéraire slovène' (The Library and the Reader in Carniola [1670–1870] and Slovene Literary Studies), which focuses on the well-documented libraries, i.e., those established and run by Slovene aristocracy from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Monica Santini, a post-doc fellow and junior lecturer at the University of Padua, draws attention to yet another important issue: writing for children and young adults as a specific reading audience. In 'Young Readers and Old Stories: Young-Adult and Crossover Adaptations of the Arthurian Stories', she reviews and compares the choices and changes made by the authors/retellers of traditional Arthurian stories in an effort to adapt them to a modern and young readership.

Veronika Schandl, Assistant Professor at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary, presents reading practices in the historical context of socialist Hungary. She demonstrates how the authoritarian Kádár regime wished to influence, and hence exercise control over, the reading habits of the nation. Her study 'Where Private is Public: Reading Practices in Socialist Hungary' is based on numerous reports that have become available only recently and thus offer fresh findings on the government's tailoring of the reading menus.

Mateja Pezdirc Bartol, Assistant Professor of Slovene Literature at the Department of Slovene Studies at the University of Ljubljana, closes the volume with an overview of approaches to reading reception. Her article 'Reading a Drama Text: An Empirical Case Study' examines the contact of readers with a selected drama text and then compares, at several levels, this contact to the spectators' perception of the staging of the text.

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Although the contributions undoubtedly present very different views, some recurring topics can easily be recognised. The first and foremost is the problematic relationship between research on individual readers and on audiences: the latter is most thoroughly discussed in Bachleitner's study but present in many others as well, notably in the contributions of Towheed and Pezdirc Bartol.

With the exception of the Emma Bovary case discussed by Karin Littau, none of the papers portrays the reading habits of a certain individual, as they are all focused on general issues and on collective audiences. However, according to Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities (see Fish), the individual and the collective audience can never be regarded separately, since every individual reading implies the presence of a larger audience.

The *Reading Research Database* stresses this relationship particularly strongly, for it seems to bridge the gap, providing some insights into individual reading practices, as well as allowing for a more general idea of collective ones. Contrary to the first impression, RED, despite starting from predominantly fragmented and often anecdotal 'instances' of reading traces, offers, when properly examined, knowledge about reading audiences. This is not only because it includes a special category on reading groups, but also because, in a comparative perspective, even anecdotal evidence reaches beyond the accidental. What seems more problematic is the question whether this information can be taken as representative at all. Since the vast majority of readers, as we all know from our personal experience, leave no traces, those who do are necessarily atypical, which means that any writing about reading is automatically unusual. What RED offers is therefore inevitably exceptional, and that certainly limits its otherwise impressive potential. But even so, the collected information already pushes the study of reading in new directions, enabling it to progress beyond the speculative, especially since RED has recently been internationalising its scope and is currently working with research partners in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

Another recurring dichotomy is the relation between historical and ahistorical focus, the former providing overviews of certain historically changing reading-related questions and/or providing particular case studies, and the latter tackling methodological and theoretical issues.

On the whole, the papers offer insights into various spatio-temporal contexts – sixteenth-century France, seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Carniola, eighteenth-century England and socialist Hungary – and discuss different reader types, such as the young (Santini), the censored (Schandl), the professional (Habjan), or the female reader (Littau).

The last clearly surfaces in Littau's and Vogrinčič's discussions on the moral panic antinovel discourse. The two essays complement each other at other levels, too. When read together, they seem to maintain that the contemporary book culture with newly emerging book formats reintroduces the questions of the bodily dimension of reading, the material aspects of the book and the sensual experience of reading, as it forces us to reconsider the way we handle books.

One might even suggest a connection between Moretti's distant reading and the talk around books, although distant reading should not be taken as something replacing proper reading, but rather as a new sort of research that introduces a hitherto unknown literary history, allowing us to grasp general tendencies and patterns in literary evolution (the *longue durée*

of literary history). Which is in fact also what RED tries to accomplish in the field of the history of reading.

Interestingly enough, the participants did not devote much thought to the challenges of the e-era. This should most likely be taken as a sure sign that the e-era is to some extent already taken for granted and does not call for special attention anymore. As such, it is clearly present in the contributions of Grosman, Vogrinčič and, obviously, Towheed. If we are soon going to switch to e-books, and if the Google Books project succeeds, the Reading Research Database will become a precious e-storage of readers' traces, preserving print book marginalia that would otherwise be lost forever. Even so, one should keep in mind that such databases are silent on the tangible, material side of the reading evidence, which obliges us once more to pay close attention to both past and contemporary processes of the materialisation of reading.

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#### WORK CITED

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