THE CREATIVITY OF READING FICTION: AN EXPLORATION OF THE
CREATIVE PROCESSES AND RESPONSES OF FICTION READERS

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Abstract

Fiction reading is a valuable leisure activity with the potential to confer a wide range of positive benefits upon readers. The indication is that reading can powerfully impact upon an individuals' quality of life, and this has led to increased efforts to promote fiction reading in recent years.

Reader-centred approaches (known collectively as reader development) are key to this promotional effort. They aim to develop confident readers capable of maximising the quality of each reading encounter through an increased understanding of their own reading experience. Integral to this approach is the concept of 'creative reading', which is intended as a means of raising the status of the reader as an active, creative force. Little is known about the creative processes that take place within fiction reading; this study aimed to provide an increased understanding of the way in which readers 'create' their own reading experience.

In order to provide a basis for the recognition of the interaction between reader and text, reader-response theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study. The detailed, nuanced nature of the information required indicated the need to apply qualitative research methods. In accordance with best practice in this field, focus groups were the primary research tool in this study. Focus group composition was a purposive sample of enthusiastic readers who could provide rich, high quality data. In addition, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken.

Findings indicated that readers played an important creative role in the reading experience, with the majority of readers identifying the existence of a creative partnership between the reader and the writer. Highly creative processes and outcomes were very much in evidence across all groups, and evidence suggested that textual quality was of only limited importance in this area.

However, it was clear that despite the strong evidence in support of reader creativity, reading continued to be viewed as non-creative by many. There was a distinct indication that earlier reading interventions through formal education were key to the formation of this view, through the emphasis that such teaching placed on

author and text. As a result, a number of readers identified the skills gained through previous experiences of literature study as incompatible with creative reading.

A number of recommendations for reader development can be made; these include the need for greater library/school co-operation, and the need to integrate the full range of reader development methods within the library service. A full examination of these recommendations, along with a summary of the main findings and areas of further research as suggested by the information gathered in the course of this study, are presented in the final chapter of this report.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Fiction reading and the question of quality

Until the early part of the twentieth century fiction reading was held in relatively low cultural esteem as a result of the perceived harmful impacts that such reading could have on its readers (Sturges & Barr, 1992). These ranged from the promotion of dangerously unrealistic or negative views of society with all the related socially and personally damaging effects on readers that this suggested (Ross, 1995), to the stifling of readers' potential in their real lives as a result of the time and energy wasted on fiction reading (Radway, 1994; Sturges & Barr, 1992).

Latterly these criticisms have shifted from fiction reading as a whole, and instead have been levelled solely at 'popular' fiction (Carey, 1992; Choules, 1994). This move can be traced back to the important influence of the cultural and literary elite on intellectual enquiry in the early twentieth century. Writers such as Leavis (1932), argued against the rise of mass culture in general and specifically popular fiction, believing that it could only result in the cheapening and coarsening of reader tastes and a lowered appreciation for literary quality.

At the same time, within the field of literary theory, the pre-eminence of 'New Criticism' ensured that readers were marginalised within the reading process, in favour of a strong focus on the texts themselves (Freund, 1987). As a result, quality of reading experience became an irrelevancy beside the more important question of textual quality, with Ortega y Gasset suggesting that preoccupation with the human element in reading was 'incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper' (Carey, 1992:18). Rather it became of primary importance to decipher the true meaning of the author through close study of the text, with the impact of the reading experience on the ordinary reader being of little importance (Bennett, 1995), an approach that continues to dominate pedagogical approaches to literary study in the present day (Freund, 1987).

1.2 The beneficial impacts of fiction reading

In spite of the strong focus on texts and authors, the potentially positive influence of 'literary' fiction on those reading it began to be recognised during this period, albeit as a fortuitous subsidiary issue, rather than as a factor which could be considered central to the reading process (Leavis, 1932). Subsequently, these benefits have come to be recognised as one of the primary reasons for reading fiction (Kinnell, 1991; Van Riel, 1992; Hoggart, 1995). As a result, from the mid-twentieth century onwards there have been a large number of studies aimed at investigating in greater detail how these beneficial impacts manifest themselves amongst the wider fiction reading public.

The range of benefits identified by these studies have been many and varied, they include personal development and empowerment (Taylor, 1999; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002; Twomey, 2003); increased understanding and sympathy with different cultures (Usherwood & Toyne, 2002; Elkin et al, 2003); escapism and relaxation (Lee, 1996; Singleton, 1999; Taylor, 1999; Elkin et al, 2003); acquisition of new knowledge about the world (Radway, 1984; Ross, 1999); stimulation of new literary creation (Escarpit, 1966); and as a tool for improving literacy amongst both children and adults (Elkin et al, 2003).

However, popular fiction remains an under researched area within the field; aside from a few notable exceptions such as O'Rourke (1993) and Singleton (1999), the majority of studies have either chosen to discount the 'snobberies and inverted snobberies' (Twomey, 2003:3) surrounding popular fiction and treat fiction reading as an homogenous whole – thus avoiding the possibility of addressing these issues; or else, have taken for granted the superiority of 'literary' fiction.

Despite this omission, the large scale and broad collective scope of these studies suggests that most fiction readers are likely to experience some of these benefits regardless of their choice of reading matter, and this presents a strong argument in favour of the increased promotion of fiction reading.

1.3 Reader Development and the promotion of fiction reading

Public libraries have not traditionally felt able to intervene in the act of reading once the reader has moved beyond school age (Train, 2003). Reader Development activities aim to alter this position; promoting fiction reading through the reader-centred promotion of reading materials (Elkin et al, 2003; Opening the Book, 2003). The aim is to develop readers who are not only able to recognise their own fiction reading preferences and feel confident in their choices, but also to develop their tastes through an increased understanding of their own reading experiences (Van Riel & Fowler, 1996; Opening the Book, 2003); thus enhancing the quality of each reading encounter (Elkin et al, 2003).

The Public Library Service is in an ideal position to intervene in the reading process in order to aid the successful achievement of these goals (Van Riel, 1992; Goulding, 2002), and this has positive implications for its ability to maintain a role of relevance and importance in a time when it faces ever increasing competition from other fiction providers (Van Riel, 1993; Forrest, 2001). However, intervention requires a strong understanding of the role of the reader in producing a successful reading experience, and with this in mind, Reader Development organisations such as 'Opening the Book' and the Reading Agency have attempted to raise the status of the reader in the reading process – most importantly in their promotion of the concept of 'creative reading' (Opening the Book, 2003; the Reading Agency, 2004; Holden, 2004).

1.4 'Creative reading'

'Creative reading' is the term conceived by Van Riel and Meade (Opening the Book, 2003) to describe the creative impact that fiction reading has on fiction readers. Opening the Book (the Reader Development organisation founded by Van Riel), in their discussion of a 'new aesthetic of reading' (Opening the Book, 2003), contend that the reader does not simply passively absorb the original thought of the writer, but rather takes an active, creative role in the reading process.

Despite the increasing use and success of this approach (Elkin et al, 2003), the creativity of fiction reading has not been explored in any depth within the field of

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librarianship. Little is known about the creative processes that take place within fiction reading, or about the extent to which the individual reader's creative response to a text impacts upon or informs either their reading experience or their life.

1.5 The reading process

Research into the beneficial impacts of fiction reading has touched only tangentially on the concept of creativity in the reading process, partly as a result of the focus of the research being outcome rather than process-centred in general (Taylor, 1999; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002; Twomey, 2003), but possibly also as a result of the use of generic terms such as escapism which may potentially mask the elements of creativity found amongst readers (Taylor, 1999).

Within librarianship there are a small number of instances of process-centred research, and these attempt to examine the interaction between the reader and the text in more detail. In such studies the creative processes and impacts of the fiction-reading process have been directly acknowledged and explored. Unfortunately, their number has not been augmented in over two decades (Mann & Burgoyne, 1969; Mann, 1971; Hatt, 1976; Mann, 1982), and it can be observed that in addition to the age of these studies, there are several major weaknesses with the scope of the research.

Firstly, it should be noted that this examination of reader/text interaction has taken place almost exclusively within wider sociological studies into general reading habits (De Certeau, 1995), and has thus failed to examine the process in any depth.

Secondly, as with the outcome-centred research, a distinction has generally been made between materials considered to be of high intellectual value and those at the lower end of the scale, with 'popular fiction' generally being excluded from consideration on the grounds that it is without creative or intellectual value, its purpose being primarily to fill time (Mann, 1982).

Finally, it has been extremely theoretical in the main, with little attempt to link theoretical findings to real world readers. Outside this field though some of these weaknesses have been addressed.

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1.6 Theories of reading

Despite the continuing influence of 'New Criticism', since the 1970's the field of literary theory has seen the emergence of a contradictory view of the reading process – reader-response theory (Suleiman & Crosman, 1980), which has examined the interaction between the reader and the text in more depth than any other field of enquiry. Here the reader moves back into the centre of the process, as an active, creative force to match the writer, rather than simply being a passive receiver of another's creativity (Freund, 1987).

However, within this field there is considerable divergence of opinion, with the exact role of the reader in the reading process still a subject for debate, Bennett (1995) identifies a scale of reader importance within this field. At one end are theorists such as Bleich (Bennett, 1995) who suggest that the text is still the main, though not the only, controlling element. In the middle ground are writers such as Iser (Tompkins, 1980), who argue that reader and text are of equal importance in the creation of meaning. Finally, at the far end of the spectrum, it is contended by Fish (Suleiman & Crosman, 1980) that readers are the key factor in the making of meaning.

While this body of research provides strong support for the proposition of 'creative reading', as with the examination of the reader/text interaction within librarianship, it is unsurprisingly extremely theoretical in the main. There are some notable exceptions, for example Rosenblatt (1970) and Davis (1992), who discuss reading processes not merely in terms of the theoretical reader, but also in terms of real readers (Clifford, 1991); although the real readers in question are predominantly students of literature, and so their reading responses cannot necessarily be considered representative of the ordinary reading public.

Other fields of study have also added to the picture of the reading process that emerges from research in literary theory and librarianship, with useful practical insights into the reading processes of ordinary readers being found within the areas of cognitive psychology (Gerrig, 1993) and studies into the more quantifiable aspects of reading research such as language acquisition and literacy (Ruddell et al, 1994).

However, research which makes an attempt to synthesise the findings of these disparate disciplines, or that attempts to study the creative processes and responses of readers to both popular and literary fiction, has yet to be undertaken.

1.7 Aim of study

This research question was proposed by 'Opening the Book', with a view to increasing our comprehension of the way in which readers 'create' their fiction reading experience. To this end, the following more specific research questions need to be examined:

- Do readers consider fiction reading to be a creative activity?
- How does creativity manifest itself as a result of, and during, fiction reading?
- Where is the balance between the creative input of reader and writer?
- Does textual quality influence the quality of reading experience?
- Do external factors such as context of reading and the presentation of books in other formats influence the process?
- Can any differences be perceived between readers of different ages?

The findings of this study will allow the creative processes of reading fiction to be understood in a greater depth than any previous research has allowed, and thus provide Opening the Book and other Reader Development organisations with more complete understanding of, and support for, the concept of 'creative reading'.

While it is not intended that this dissertation would cover such ground, better understanding of reading processes enables librarians to implement more effective reader-centred promotion of fiction in libraries, and 'deepens and strengthens [their] appreciation of their relationship to the reader and the book' (De la Peña McCook & Jasper, 2001).

1.8 Presentation of study

The study is presented in the format of a written report in seven chapters. Chapter one provides an introduction to the general area of research, identifies the research gap, and details the specific research questions to be addressed. Chapter two discusses the methodological and theoretical framework for the study.

The main findings of the research will be discussed thematically in chapters three to six. It should be noted that in a study of this nature, where results do not present themselves in easily analysed units, thematic divisions are inevitably subject to a small degree of overlap. However, this should in no way detract from the validity of the findings. Finally, conclusions of the study and recommendations for future research will be summarised and presented in chapter seven.

Chapter Two

Methodology

2.1 Theoretical framework of study

The central aim of this study is to gain a more in-depth understanding of the creative processes that underpin fiction reading. The theoretical framework for this examination will be 'reader-response theory' (Freund, 1987). While it is recognised that this group of theories represents a wide range of views, 'all reinforce the notion of an active reader' (Galda & Liang, 2003). This therefore provides a basis for the recognition and exploration of the creative transaction that takes place between the reader and the text. Denham (2003) supports this, stating that 'the concept of reader development is a natural extension of…reader-response theory' (p 59).

2.2 Methodological approach

In a study of this type it is appropriate to use qualitative methods of inquiry to gather data. Such methods have two main advantages for this type of study.

Firstly, the nature of qualitative methods is such that they are 'particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic' (Patton, 1987:15). This means that they allow for the maximum generation of new information – unfettered by the need to determine 'the general picture or the average' (Mason, 2002:1). Unlike quantitative research methods, there are no 'predetermined categories of analysis' (Patton, 1990:12), which may otherwise narrow the scope and accuracy of the study by obscuring the true nature of the reading experience.

Secondly, since it is not the intention of this study to attempt to make generalisations that might be applied to the wider reading public, the information generated does not need to fit into a particular format in order to allow for data gathered to be quantified, statistically analysed, and averaged. Instead, greater allowance is made for the possible range of individual experience to be studied and given equal importance and relevance; an approach which accords with the ethos of Reader Development (Elkin et al, 2003; Twomey, 2003). The information gleaned

from the study can be as nuanced, complex and multi-dimensional as the creative experience itself (Mason, 2002:1).

2.3 Methods of investigation

There are two primary methods of investigation being utilised in this study: a literature review and focus groups. Denscombe (2003) suggests that triangulation of multiple research methods will 'allow the researcher to see [the situation] from different perspectives and to understand the topic in a more rounded and complete fashion' (p 132).

However, in a study of this kind it is impossible to apply this theory, as a result of the difficulty of usefully applying additional methods of enquiry to the research. The internal nature of reading effectively precludes observation of the process, though the researcher did make observational notes on the focus groups in order to accurately place the information gathered in true context when transcribing these discussions.

Other studies of reading have used questionnaires to good effect, however, the researcher felt that these could not provide additional information of comparable depth and quality to the focus groups. In studies where questionnaires have been applied, it has generally been to provide a statistical background to other data gathered (Ross, 1999) – a feature that would not usefully augment the findings of this study, since it is not intended to offer generalisations.

It was initially the intention of the researcher to conduct supplementary individual interviews, in order to (a) follow up findings of particular interest generated in the focus groups, and (b) allow participants who may have been unwilling to fully enter discussions in the group context to express their feelings about their reading.

However, initial focus groups indicated that this was an unnecessary additional method of inquiry. The unstructured nature of the focus groups allowed points of interest to be followed up effectively within the context of the group; and their generally relaxed style, doubtless resulting from their pre-existing composition

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(see 2.5.6), suggested that initial fears about some participants potentially being overshadowed were unfounded.

Furthermore, Morgan (1998) states that 'there are many situations where focus groups alone are more than adequate…for many purposes [their] strengths [are] entirely sufficient' (pp 51-2). The researcher decided that, on the balance of evidence gained from both personal observation of early focus groups and detailed examination of the information gap to be addressed, this was true of the current study.

2.4 Purpose of a literature review

The literature review for the current study began in early May and continued throughout the research process.

Neuman (2000) suggests that the purpose of a literature review is:

To show the path of prior research and how a current project is linked to it…To integrate and summarize what is known in an area…To learn from others and stimulate new ideas (p 446).

The researcher found the literature review undertaken for this study to be useful in all these ways. The complex, multi-disciplinary nature of the existing research framework required a thorough review of literature generated from a number of subject areas in order to master a large quantity of new information and unfamiliar theoretical ideas.

This review enabled previous research to be identified and analysed, in order to allow for the successful integration and synthesis of previous research with the development of the new research being undertaken; a particularly important requirement for this study due to the scarcity of similar cross-disciplinary research in librarianship. The main research gaps were thus identified, and this enabled the researcher to formulate the aims of study outlined in section 1.7, which in turn provided the basis for focus group discussions.

In terms of the more generic methodological literature review undertaken, the researcher gained useful insights into standard practice for qualitative research generally, and specifically into the manner in which focus groups should ideally be conducted in order to maximise the quantity and accuracy of information gathered.

Finally, the literature review highlighted examples of methodological best practice amongst previous qualitative studies undertaken both in the field of librarianship and beyond.

Findings of the literature review are not presented as a single study, instead they are woven into the main body of the research where appropriate.

2.5 Focus groups

2.5.1 Focus group strengths

The primary form of data collection for this study is the focus group. This research method possesses a number of strengths that make it suitable for a study of this nature.

To begin with it should be noted that preliminary information gathered in the literature review indicated that the complexity of the reading process could not be adequately explored in any format that did not allow participants the opportunity to fully express themselves, and this inevitably dictated the use of some form of interview or discussion, rather than a more restrictive research method such as a questionnaire. This decision is supported by Denscombe (1998), who states that:

> *The nature of [data based on] emotions, experiences and feelings is*
> *such that they need to be explored rather than simply reported in a*
> *word or two* (pp 110-111).

Within the range of interview styles available, the group interview provides the greatest potential for generating the quantity and quality of data required to thoroughly examine the research questions under consideration. Firstly, on a purely practical level, it is possible to interview a greater number of participants in a shorter period of time than would be possible with individual interviews. This was a

particularly important factor bearing in mind the relatively tight schedule available for the current study.

However, it is important to note that:

[The] group interview is not an opportunity for the researcher to pose questions to a sequence of individuals taking turns around a table (Denscombe, 2003:168).

The second strength of the group interview is that it allows the researcher to collect higher quality data, as well as a greater quantity overall than the individual interview; there are a couple of reasons for this assertion. Firstly, they present the opportunity for participants to challenge each other's views and thus produce much richer responses to interview questions (Denscombe, 2003:168). Secondly, Kitzinger (1994) has noted that:

When group dynamics [work] well the co-participants [act] as co-researchers, taking the research into new and often unexpected directions (p 107).

Thirdly, the interview can be tailored to the needs of the research to a far greater degree than in many other research methods, since interview structure is a matter for the discretion of the interviewer, and can respond to the circumstances and progress of each discussion. Denscombe (1998) identifies a scale of control within interviews, with structured interviews such as face-to-face questionnaires at one end, and entirely unstructured interviews at the other.

In practice, most group interviews will be conducted in the middle of this range, and this is true of the current study. The semi-structured format allows the researcher to strike a balance between assuring free-flowing discussion with minimal interviewer intrusion, and enough control over the direction of discussion to ensure that all research questions are addressed. The researcher found this to be an effective style in all groups.

Finally, the use of group interviews within the field of reading research is well established (Lee, 1996; Taylor, 1999; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002; Twomey, 2003) and can be said to represent research method best practice in this area.

2.5.2 Focus group weaknesses

There are, however, certain acknowledged weaknesses with the focus group method, particularly as far as they have been applied to reading research, and the potential threat they represent to data validity must be recognised and avoided as far as possible.

As identified by Twomey (2003), the reading experience is essentially individual, and there is a danger that the use of focus groups will only allow for group-level experiences to be registered. This situation is compounded by the fact that there is always a danger with group interviews that some views will be 'drowned out…[or only expressed if they] are perceived to be 'acceptable' within the group' (Denscombe, 2003:168).

Additional problems posed by this study relate to the use of group interviews to explore the views of children. Lewis (1992) identifies a number of ways in which data collection amongst children can be compromised:

Impediments to reliability include children's distractibility, memory limitations, desire to give some sort of response, however nonsensical, susceptibility to leading questions…[and] receptive and expressive language limitations (p 417).

Dealing first with the potential difficulty in ensuring that individuals are able to fully and adequately express their views in the group context. The researcher attempted to prevent this problem emerging by keeping as firm a control as possible on the course of the discussion within the confines of this research method, and where necessary moving the focus of discussion onto those who showed signs of wishing to contribute but were less forceful in doing so than other group members.

While the researcher must acknowledge possessing very limited experience in this area, this approach seemed generally effective, with the slight possible exception

of the first focus group, where some members were able to dominate slightly more than is desirable. However, the content of discussion in later groups suggests that this had very little impact on the quality of data gathered, since most groups discussed broadly similar issues. More importantly, there was no sign that these dominant group members had any impact on the full expression of dissenting views.

In terms of the group interviews conducted with children, the researcher minimised the problems that could be posed by participants' shorter attention spans by ensuring that group discussions were relatively short. For the group of younger children (see 2.5.8), the discussion lasted around 20 minutes, while for the group of teenage readers (see 2.5.8), where such problems would be expected to cause far fewer problems, the discussion lasted around 40 minutes. This can be compared to an average time of around 1 hour for the four adult groups (see 2.5.8).

In addition to these measures, questions were posed in as straightforward a manner as possible in order to minimise potential difficulties in comprehension. Finally, the children's desire to contribute was allowed for by posing several simple questions at the start of the discussion that could be answered by all group members. This was intended to avoid the slowing of later discussions with irrelevant responses, and seemed to work quite effectively.

2.5.3 *The role of the interviewer*

May (1997) states that it is important to consider the following:

What effect is the interviewer having on the [interviewees] and hence the type of material collected?…[It] is important to consider a match of characteristics, on the basis not only of race, but also of age, sex and accent…texts speak of 'blending-in' (p 115).

The researcher was aware of the need to minimise the impact of these potential differences in personal characteristics, but it is obviously the case that 'there are limits to the extent that researchers can disguise their 'self' during interviews' (Denscombe, 2003:170). In line with good research practice, the researcher acted to limit the potential influence of personal characteristics by

remaining polite, neutral and receptive to the views expressed by all participants (Denscombe, 1998).

On balance, the effect of these factors is considered to have been minimal. The majority of group members were female (see 2.5.7), and the researcher's local background ensured that there was no jarring difference in accent to influence the discussion. The key differences in characteristics were age and educational background.

However, these only appeared in noticeable contrast in one group, where participants were on average around 30 years older than the researcher, and the group had fewer members with educational experience beyond the age of 18 (see 2.5.8). It also seems possible that participants in this group were slightly uncomfortable with the abstract nature of the enquiry. Despite these differences, focus group discussions were still valuable, and the differing group composition and general attitude provided a useful degree of contrast to discussions in other groups, and one that is likely to demonstrate the range of views in this area more thoroughly as a result.

2.5.4 Recording focus group discussions

The researcher decided to tape record all focus group discussions in order to ensure that all verbal responses were collected fully and accurately, and thus the potential problem of the researcher substituting their own words for those of the participants was effectively avoided (May, 1997). While sophisticated recording equipment was not available, use of an ordinary dictaphone was more than adequate and presented no problems in transcription. Although it has been noted that some participants may find recording equipment a distraction that inhibits their responses (May, 1997), the researcher noticed nothing in any group to suggest that this was the case in the present study.

Following the guidance of the research methods literature (May, 1997; Denscombe, 2003), in addition to the taped record provided by the use of the dictaphone, field notes were also taken at the earliest opportunity after each focus group, in order to make a record of as much of the relevant non-verbal communication as possible. These notes were then used to supplement the taped

discussions, so that focus group transcriptions (also made within a short time of each interview) provided the most accurate record of each discussion.

Although it would have been possible to take notes during each discussion, both as an alternative to tape recording, and in order to collect additional field notes, the researcher decided that more effective focus group discussions would take place where attention was not divided between notebook and participants.

2.5.5 *Focus group selection*

While it is clear that potentially any individual will have a different creative response to fiction reading, for the purposes of this piece of research, focus group participants were not a randomised sample. Instead a 'purposive sample' was selected; that is to say that they were deliberately selected on the basis that they fulfilled certain criteria - specifically that they were able to speak articulately about their experiences of fiction reading, which was essential if a sufficiently detailed picture of the creativity of reading fiction was to be elicited from the process (Denscombe, 1998).

The obvious weakness of this approach is that the study did not examine the experiences of a representative sample of the population. The findings of the study are not capable of providing a basis for generalisations that could be applied to the entire reading population.

However, while this is a valid concern, the aim of this study is to gain as rich and nuanced a picture of creative processes as possible, rather than to sacrifice this level of detail for the sake of shallow but generalisable data. This would certainly be the result of attempting to gain a greater coverage of the population, since the resulting time constraints would prohibit interviewing, and in any case, not every individual is able to speak articulately about the reading experience.

Although the primary aim of this study is to examine the reading processes of adult readers, the research aims (see 1.7) require groups of younger readers to provide a comparison of creativity between readers of different ages. In order to obtain a 'purposive' sample, this research chose to use existing reading groups as the basis for focus groups where possible, this is in accordance with best practice within

the field of process-centred reading research (Ross, 1995; Ross, 1999). Members of reading groups have the advantage of being avid readers who are comfortable with the process of sharing their thoughts on their fiction reading experience with others.

In the end, five out of six groups were selected on this basis, with the final group of child readers resulting from a slightly different selection procedure (see below). Within the relatively narrow ambit of this particularly enthusiastic sector of the reading population, care was taken to select reading groups which represented a wide spread of age and background, in order to obtain as broad a representation of views as possible within the purposive sampling context.

This study was able to take advantage of pre-existing groups for the majority of focus groups. Unfortunately, no reading group for younger children existed within the local area, so the researcher was obliged to organise a group using pupils at a local primary school. As Denscombe (2003) notes, there is a need to gain authorisation from relevant authorities if a study is to include children amongst its participants. This can be a time-consuming process that slows down the progress of research. Fortunately, this obstacle was avoided by gaining the co-operation of a member of teaching staff to sit in the classroom where the focus group was taking place, thus bypassing the potential problem.

In order to produce a group of children who were in some way comparable to the adult reading groups, it was essential to select children who read regularly and enjoyed reading, and secondly, who were capable of expressing their views on such an abstract subject. A two-stage selection process enabled a strong group of children to be assembled.

In the first stage, selection was confined to pupils who were in the highest ability literacy group in year five (ages 8-9). This year group was chosen on the grounds that these were felt to be the youngest children able to respond adequately to such a complex subject, and this is an assumption supported by the literature (Appleyard, 1990). Children in this literacy group were on average one National Curriculum level above the national average reading level for children within their year group (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2004).

Secondly, a questionnaire was used to ensure that children who took part in the focus group were able to match a high level reading ability with the ability to describe these reading processes in a good degree of detail (see Appendix A). Part One aimed to discover which children read regularly outside school and enjoyed reading, while Part Two was intended to give some indication of the child's ability to speak in more depth about their fiction reading experience.

This questionnaire was given to all 21 children in the group, and the results are reported below:

PART ONE

Question no.	Response
Q1	Yes-19 No-2
Q2	Yes-13 No-8
Q3	School-6 Public-7
Q4	Yes-6 No-15

PART TWO

Question no.	Response
Q5	Yes-21 No-0
Q6	Fiction-15; Non-fiction-2; Both-4
Q7	Adventure-8; Fantasy-2; Mystery-0; Science Fiction-1; Horror-5
Q8	Yes-14 No-7

The collated results of the questionnaire results revealed that 14 children answered in the affirmative to questions 1, 5 and 8, which indicated that they read outside the school environment, enjoyed reading, and could express a preference for a favourite author or authors. A further two children in this group preferred reading non-fiction (see question 6), and were eliminated from this list. Finally, analysis of question 7 ruled out three more children who had not answered the question. This left a final group of nine children to participate in the focus group.

The questions that had not been used for analysis had been excluded on the grounds that either all children had answered them, or that their responses could not be usefully correlated with those to the other questions.

2.5.6 Additional advantages of using pre-existing groups

Morgan (1998) makes the following statement concerning the composition of focus groups:

> *[It] is essential that the participants in a group be compatible…Each participant needs to feel that other people around the table will understand and respect what she or he has to say…focus groups are not a viable option unless [participants] feel comfortable* (p 61).

The use of pre-existing groups is possibly the best way of ensuring that this compatibility will be achieved, since members are already familiar with one another, and with the experience of sharing their views. This seemed borne out by the successful interaction between group members in the current study, and by the amount of support in the literature for the use of reading groups to study reading processes (Radway, 1984; Taylor, 1999; Twomey, 2003).

The second major benefit relates to the location of the focus group discussions. Taylor (1999) suggests that using the same setting as the ordinary reading group adds to members' 'feeling of comfort' (p 23), and this inevitably has a positive impact on participants' confidence in responding.

2.5.7 Potential problems with the use of pre-existing groups

The key problem with the use of pre-existing groups is the resulting lack of control over group composition and general dynamic. It is impossible to regulate the number of people participating in the groups, and difficult to choose a location for holding the discussion that will allow the researcher to arrange the seating in a manner which places all participants on an equal level of importance and keeps the interviewer out of a focal position (Denscombe, 2003). Furthermore, there is the danger that group hierarchies will be too well established for the interviewer to

counteract their possible negative effects by careful management of the discussion (Taylor, 1999).

For the most part these problems were not acute; group membership averaged at around six members, and this accords with good focus group practice (Denscombe, 2003), and the question of pre-existing hierarchies seemed to play no part within most groups. One group was an exception to this, but even here more dominant members did not prevent quieter members from contributing entirely – though it must be acknowledged that they may perhaps have been able to speak at greater length in more favourable circumstances. However, this was to some extent beyond interviewer control.

The question of location did not become problematic in the research undertaken for this study. Groups naturally gravitated towards a circular arrangement of chairs, and this avoided placing either group members or the interviewer in undesirable positions of prominence, or conversely, outside the main group. This also allowed the dictaphone to be placed in the centre of the circle where all participants could be recorded with ease.

The only aspect that was less successful was the regulation of group composition in terms of member characteristics. While there was a wide spread of age and general background, there was an unbalanced male to female ratio in all groups, with women outnumbering men to a considerable degree. While this is unfortunate, it is a feature of book groups that other researchers have recognised and accepted (Ross, 1999; Twomey, 2003), and so it seems unlikely that other groups could have been selected which would have allowed for a better balance.

2.5.8 The final focus group selection

All groups were contacted around a month and a half in advance of the planned focus group date, in order to allow group organisers sufficient time to contact members and gain their consent. These contacts were made on a relatively informal basis, either over the phone or by e-mail, and this garnered acceptance from all groups contacted. The researcher found all groups to be motivated and enthusiastic about their participation in the study.

- **Group 1 (Pilot)**

5 members, all female, with ages ranging from 22 to 25. Educated to degree level.

- **Group 2**

4 members, all female; with ages ranging from around 25 to 65. All educated to age 18, with approximately one half of the group educated to degree level.

- **Group 3**

6 members, five female, one male; with ages ranging from around 50 to 75. One third of the group educated past the age of 16, with perhaps one quarter educated to degree level.

- **Group 4**

8 members, all female; with ages ranging from around 24 to 55. All group members educated to 18, with around three quarters educated to degree level.

- **Group 5 (teenage reading group)**

5 members, three female, two male; with ages ranging from 11 to 16. All group members still in full-time education.

- **Group 6 (child reading group)**

9 members, five female, four male; aged 8-9. All group members in full-time education.

The composition of the groups as a whole allowed for a very broad age range; between 8 and 75 years. While there were a large number of participants educated to degree level, there were also a number of group members who had left school aged 16, and this represented a good range of educational experience. The female bias was less fortunate but, as has been discussed (see previous section), was unavoidable. This was also true of the racial bias; all group members were white. Once again, this

was beyond the control of the researcher, and it is difficult to estimate what impact, if any, this had on study findings.

2.5.9 Focus group questions

A full list of the questions asked at focus groups, along with the prompts that were utilised if and when required, is presented in Appendix B at the end of this study. In addition, a basic transcript of the pre-discussion preamble is also presented, although it should be noted that for both this and the questions, the general tone and wording changed from group to group as deemed appropriate.

The questions were developed initially based on the research aims (see 1.7), and were then refined throughout the course of the research based on the progress of the focus groups. The only questions for which this was not true were those aimed at the younger children (the teenage group were asked the same questions as the adults, with slight modifications where necessary); simply as a result of this being the sole group to be asked that particular set of questions. However, in an attempt to maximise the chances of a successful outcome with this group, the questions were refined in collaboration with the children's class teacher and with the researcher's dissertation supervisor.

Denscombe (2003) suggests that focus groups should begin with a relatively simple question in order to allow participants to build confidence. In the case of the child focus group this advice was followed, and allowed the children to become accustomed to the novelty of the group experience. Questions 1 to 4 all functioned in this way, although only 3 and 4 were specifically intended to draw out information that related to research aims.

However, in the adult group the format was slightly different. Rather than prejudice the research by asking simpler questions that may have revealed more than would be desirable about the aims of the research, and thus potentially led participants to answer later questions in the light of earlier ones, question 1 was relatively abstract. The potentially negative effect of this was minimised by spending a few minutes at the start of each adult group in an informal discussion about the group and members' reasons for joining. This acted as an effective

'icebreaker'. It should be noted that all groups responded thoughtfully and usefully to question 1.

2.5.10 Relation of focus group questions to research aims

- In the adult groups:

Questions 1 and 2 were intended to draw out readers' opinions on the status of reading as a creative activity, and to gain some idea of their own definitions of creativity. Question 1 and its prompts were also used as a means of exploring readers' views on the respective creative roles of writer and reader.

Question 3 was intended to explore the way in which creativity manifests itself during, or as a result of, the reading process.

Question 4 was intended to explore the issue of textual quality, and thus provide the researcher with an understanding of the ways in which readers' read books of all literary standing. In line with good practice (Choules, 1994; Twomey, 2003) the word 'quality' was avoided in order to allow participants to introduce this theme for themselves if they considered it relevant.

Questions 5 and 6 were intended to assess the impact that reader characteristics have on the reading process. Question 5 was also used as a means of exploring the influence of other formats, specifically film and television adaptations.

Question 7 was intended to prompt discussion of the impact of the reading context (e.g. purpose and place of reading) on the reading process.

- In the child group:

As discussed, questions 1 to 4 were intended primarily as 'icebreakers', however, question 3 was also intended as an introduction to the concept of the 'reading process'. Question 4 was used as a simple way of encouraging children to address the issue of quality.

Questions 5, 6, 8 and 9 were intended to explore the way in which creativity is manifested within the reading process.

Question 7 was intended to supplement question 4 in its exploration of the issue of quality.

Question 10 was intended to explore the impact of external factors on the reading process.

Obviously the children's questions do not completely mirror the questions of the adults, although as far as possible this was the intention. Some aspects of the research were considered too abstract to be effectively discussed with such young children, and this was also the opinion of their class teacher. However, the children's responses provide a useful method of analysing the ways in which children perceive the process in comparison to adults, and of the way in which processes evolve.

Chapter Three

Creativity

3.1 Introduction

The concept of reader creativity is intended by reader development practitioners to enhance the status, visibility, and thus confidence, of fiction readers (Opening the Book, 2003). With this in mind, readers' own views are particularly relevant; questions 1 to 3 (see Appendix B) were intended to explore the participants' perceptions of the creativity of reading. Discussions centred initially on participants' own opinions concerning the definition and status of reading as a creative activity, before moving on to discuss their reading processes in greater detail, in order to explore the way in which creativity may be manifested.

3.2 Status of reading as a creative activity

3.2.1 Comparison with other creative activities

Reading has not traditionally been perceived as a creative activity (Holden, 2004). Williams (1961) suggests that 'the attachment of 'creative' to the work of the artist remains the easiest to trace' (p 9). The majority of focus groups made comparisons between reading and activities where an element of creativity is taken for granted:

> *If someone asked if you were creative, you think of people who make their own birthday cards or things like that.*

> *I see creative as someone making something – like a collage.*

> *If someone asked [what I considered creative] I'd probably have thought of maybe painting or playing music.*

One focus group went so far as to suggest that, rather than being creative in itself, reading was actually an activity that stifled their own potential creativity:

I wonder if I would create things if I wasn't spending so much time reading…you know, whether we'd all be making our own clothes and decorating our own houses…[You read in] the time you should have put aside for doing something really creative.

This suggests that the negative attitudes to reading that prevailed in many quarters in the nineteenth century (Sturges & Barr, 1992) are still evident amongst some fiction readers even today.

One of the key reasons for the low status of reading is perhaps the close relationship to writing, an acknowledged creative act. Freund (1987), assessing the impact of New Criticism on perceptions of reading, presents the following analysis of a major New Critical text:

Wellek and Warren's 'Theory of Literature'…lists not more than two brief references to the item 'reading'…the authors outline the necessity to distinguish between literature ('creative, an art') and literary study ('a species of knowledge or learning') (p 58).

A number of focus group participants echoed these observations when asked to consider whether or not they considered reading creative:

I'm not sure the act itself is creative, though I suppose you're taking part in someone else's creativity aren't you.

I'm more likely to put writing as creative than reading, I'd probably put it quite far down the list in that respect…I don't think it would even make it on to my list actually.

3.2.2 *Characteristics of reading*

Aside from the issue of status, other reasons for readers' perceptions of the creative value or otherwise of reading, centred around characteristics of the process itself. Holden (2004) suggests that 'reading is often seen as 'not creative' because it has no physical output' (p 25); a number of participants regarded outward production as a sine qua non for any creative activity:

I think to be creative there has to be an actual physical thing.

[When you read] you're not passing it on to anybody else, except the book group.   Whereas the book can go to whoever wants to read it.

I'd definitely put writing, and acting, and composing music [ahead of reading]…on the basis that you're making something from nothing.

One group put forward the theory that the outward production is in fact the creation of a reading 'history' that represents the reader:

You create your bookshelf…that says a lot about you and where you are at the time.

You are almost creating your world [through your bookshelf] and portraying yourself.

While a couple of participants suggested that the end product was the discussion that reading created between members of the group:

The creative process…I think it's the joy of the book group, the sharing of books and ideas.

When we've had discussions sometimes…you wouldn't think we'd all read the same book. Perhaps I'd come up with something that somebody else didn't…so that's creative.

These suggestions echo Macintyre (2004) in his suggestion that reading '[creates] a dialogue among readers' (p 26).

Despite this, writing is seen by many to represent *the* creative output of the reading process. As reader-response theorist Stanley Fish comments:

A line of print or a page or a book is so obviously there – it can be handled, photographed, or put away – that it seems to be the sole repository of whatever value and meaning we associate with it
(Freund, 1987:92).

However, while this was probably the majority view, a significant minority of participants across the range of focus groups felt that this was not an essential element. They considered it to be more a question of outcomes, however these might appear, than the creation of an end product:

It's something you do on your own [and] there's no outward
production of anything…that sort of makes me think that maybe it's
more creative because it's just going on…you're just thinking about it.

Reading…I don't know, I mean, where does it go.

These views are reminiscent of Birkerts (1994), who speaks of reading in the following terms:

The act only begins with the active deciphering of the symbols. It ends
(if reading can be said to end at all) where we cannot easily track it,
where the atmospheres of self condense into thought and action (p
96).

Amongst this set of readers, reading was felt to be a more complex activity than the arbitrary requirement of outward production would allow:

I don't think you could ever say that [it's] just reading…I don't think
you could ever kind of separate the creativity from it. I think there are
lots of things that are creative…I think you still have all these
processes going on whether you share [them] or not.

A second major consideration for participants in terms of reading characteristics was how passive or active they considered the pursuit. While this concept will be considered in greater detail later (see chapter four), it is important to note that it was another relevant factor in reader judgements about the creativity of reading:

I think that [reading] is more receptive than creative.

It's not really creative is it – it's just a response.

Other readers regarded reading as a much more active pursuit and their judgements were correspondingly contradictory:

If you think of [reading] as a creative activity as opposed to a passive activity of just being entertained or amusing yourself then it's creative.

The correlation between judgements as to the passive or active nature of reading, and the creative content of the activity are well established in a number of sources (for example: Williams, 1961; Davis, 1992; Birkerts, 1994; Hoggart, 1998).

3.2.3 Definitions of creativity

The final major determinant of the opinions held by participants concerning the creative status of reading relates to the difficulty of thinking about reading in such unfamiliar ways; participants were uncertain how to examine their own reading process in these terms. Williams (1961) has suggested that arriving at a definition of the meaning of the word 'creative' is extremely problematic, and amongst the focus group participants this was very much in evidence.

Many readers, possibly due to the influence on the collective consciousness of writers such as Hoggart (1995) who consider the imaginative input of readers to simply be a response, were unsure whether or not their intellectual input merited the label of creativity:

If you count intellectual thought as creation then yes it's creative.

I think your brain is being creative, but it's…I think it's really hard to think about actually.

But if it's stimulating mentally is it creative?

Indeed, for a significant minority of readers, the only way to link the concept of creativity to their own reading was to consider the ways in which it could stimulate the creation of new works of art:

There've been examples, like with last month's book, where you [referring to another group member] took those photos and you did work that was based on it…so it's inspiring to your creation perhaps.

This is unsurprising considering the preponderance of this particular view of reading in the literature, both from a theoretical perspective (see for example: Escarpit, 1966) and in practical reading research within the field of librarianship (see for example: Taylor, 1999; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002).

Despite this, some readers were confident that their intellectual input was synonymous with creativity, regardless of differences between reading and other recognised creative pursuits:

It's creative, kind of not in an arty sense, rather it starts off new processes in my mind.

We're not actually creating something that is tangible…[but] it's a bit like seeing a beautiful painting – you might just enjoy it and not get something out of it, but you might go away and it might start an idea for something else.

I think it's creative, because it stimulates my imagination and the way I think about things.

Participants are clearly divided in their views of the status of reading as a creative activity. However, this aspect of the discussion only gives an indication of their objective perceptions of reading, therefore further investigation centred on the nature of their subjective reading experience. Readers' experiences in this respect could be divided into two basic categories: creative processes of reading, and creative outcomes.

3.3 Creative processes

3.3.1 Creation of the narrative world

Despite the differences in opinion concerning the creative status of reading, readers in all groups identified their creation of the narrative world of the novel as a

key element in their own individual reading process and amongst the most important of their motives for reading fiction in the first place:

> *I mean a book can be very absorbing…if you see people reading on*
> *the tram, or at the station, or even when they're walking – they're in*
> *that world, which is wonderful in a way.*

> *I find when I'm reading, I quite often read books where I use my*
> *imagination a lot and create my own little world.*

> *I get involved in the world of the book and I kind of switch off from the*
> *world around me.*

This is a finding that accords with theoretical studies into the psychological processes of reading (Gerrig, 1993), and with the vast majority of practical studies of the value of fiction reading (see for example: Radway, 1984; Choules, 1994; Singleton, 1999; Twomey, 2003). However, as with previous studies, participants did not relate this aspect of their reading experience to the concept of creativity in a number of cases, despite the assertion by proponents of reader development that:

> *When people read they make words real, they put themselves in places*
> *and situations that are described in the text, they play with meanings*
> *and act out scenes in their heads. This imaginative engagement is a*
> *creative endeavour* (Holden, 2004:23).

More positively, unlike earlier discussion on the merits of reading, where some participants had suggested that reading took time away from other creative pursuits (see 3.2.1), immersion in the narrative world was seen as an overwhelmingly positive benefit of reading, regardless of the disengagement with the real world that was necessary in order to achieve it. Fears that negative views more reminiscent of the nineteenth century prevail seem unnecessary (Stierle, 1980; Radway, 1994), and this suggests that earlier comments were a result of the nature of the discussion taking place – where much currency had been placed on recognised creative pursuits, possibly due to one group member being a professional artist – leading participants to express views which did not accord with their overall perspective of reading.

3.3.2 Reader divergence and textual enhancement

Within the concept of the creation of a narrative world, some readers were able to identify sub-concepts that were integral to their reading process, and which further demonstrated their creative engagement with texts. The tendency of readers to diverge from the written word, or enhance it with their own imaginative input to a greater or lesser degree, was the most notable means by which the reader exhibited their creative input into the narrative world. For some participants this took the form of adapting the visual aspects of the novel to suit their own tastes:

> *I kind of picture characters in my head, and then if I'm talking about them and I go back to a description of them it's normally kind of quite different from them, I've got a different one in my head.*

> *I think you start off going along with the author's description, and then you start filling them in as you want them.*

This supports the suggestion of Wolfgang Iser that reading is ' 'Imagistic' in character, [with] meaning dependent upon the reader's imagination' (Freund, 1987:142). For others divergence took the form of creatively rewriting and re-plotting to create a narrative path that they would find more satisfying:

> *[If] it ends a little bit disappointing…you think 'I wish it had ended like **this**', you think of a new end.*

> *And even when it got to the end I still carried on imagining stuff because I wanted to know more why [the plot turned out in that way].*

This finding is in line with previous research into reading (Radway, 1994; Ross, 1999) and supports the claim of Graves & Hodge (1943) that:

> *Imaginative readers rewrite books to suit their own taste, omitting and mentally altering as they read* (p 24).

Readers valued their creative contribution to the texts they read, and for many this divergence enhanced their reading experience; a greater value was often placed on books that allowed their imagination room to work:

Those are often the best books though aren't they? Where they give
you some information…but you kind of do the rest.

Well it's nice to let your brain do a bit of the work…when you do a bit
of constructing on top of what they give you.

The value that is placed on the novels that contain these fragments of
information (described by Proust (Proust et al, 1972:34-35) as 'incitements') and yet
allow the reader room for imagination, is consistent with the following statement by
Gerrig (1993), quoting Bruner:

Texts which require readers to fill in gaps – by forcing 'meaning
performance' upon the reader – will on the whole, be better stories
(that is, higher quality visits to narrative worlds) (pp 4-5).

3.3.3 *The unique nature of individual reading experiences*

The creation of the narrative world therefore results in reading processes that
are unique, mediated, as they are to a large degree, by the characteristics of the
individual reader. Mann (1971) refers to the 'essentially personal way' in which we
read, while Hatt (1976), quoting Mannheim, describes the process in the following
terms:

[The reader] shares the necessary conditions for reading with all the
other members of what is called 'The reading public', but he sees
things with his own unique perspective…as determined by his
historical and social setting (p 38).

This was something that all groups recognised:

I think maybe the judgements you make about characters and their
behaviour are influenced by your own past experience.

I think it makes it quite interesting if a lot of you have read the same
book, like in a book group like this. Because you pick up on different
things, and it depends on like your gender, and your age and stuff.

The implication is that the reading process is inevitably creative and original, since all readers possess a unique life experience and outlook.

3.4. Creative outcomes

3.4.1 Reading as means of navigating life

The creative processes of reading were by far the most common way in which participants made a creative contribution to the reading experience, however a number of readers were able to identify ways in which the outcomes of reading contributed to a creative reading experience. As one reader explained:

> *If a book gets you into thinking about life then it is creative*
> *expression.*

Readers use the reading experience, in combination with their own actual experiences, and thus produce uniquely personal outcomes (Elkin, 2003). Many writers have recognised that reading has an impact on people's lives (see for example: Kinnell, 1991; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002); but it is essential to recognise that these impacts depend very much on the individual reader. Reader development advocate, Judith Elkin (2003), quoting Meek, describes the way in which reading results in creative outcomes in the following terms:

> *Think of all that you would never have experienced if you had not*
> *learned to read – readers are at home in the life of the mind; they live*
> *with ideas as well as events and facts…Literate adults make their*
> *reading work for them* (p 21).

It has been suggested that librarians can help with this process by 'guiding [readers] to the stories that speak uniquely to them' (Shearer, 2001:32) – a view that indicates the important role that libraries and reader-centred promotion play in producing creative readers (Van Riel, 1993). Ross (1999) also indicates the need for such promotion, stating that a small, confident selection of readers in her study – those she referred to as "super-encounterers" – were almost always able to select fiction which would result in this type of creative outcome (p 785).

Examining this outcome in more specific terms, the way that most of these readers felt they could use the creative experience of reading was as a means of better understanding the world and themselves:

For me reading is very much about understanding the human condition.

It's about understanding yourself better, that's the main thing for me really, actually understanding more about myself.

These readers were not unique in identifying this outcome; studies by Choules (1994), Taylor (1999) and Usherwood & Toyne (2002) (to name a few examples) have also identified this as an important feature of reading. The result of this enhanced human understanding was that readers felt better able to deal with problems or obstacles in their own lives:

If they're going through similar experiences [reading] can help you make sense of it…or sometimes it can make you see the other side.

Sometimes it actually works because it helps you deal with [problems].

For the readers quoted above, these outcomes were evidence of their reading creativity, since they considered these outcomes unique to the individual. Other readers were more sceptical, but still identified similar outcomes:

I don't think it's creative, though I suppose it affects other things you talk about, or think about, or write about.

This particular creative outcome was the one most often stated by participants, but a much smaller selection of readers also identified one further outcome that resulted from their reading, which will be discussed below.

3.4.2 Creation of personal gestalt

Birkerts (1994) states that fiction reading 'plays a vital part in what we might call, grandly, existential self-formation' (p 91). Some readers identified ways in

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which their reading experience was connected to the creation of their unique internal reality:

> *[When you read] it's your internal reality that you're constructing*
> *and everybody sees the world differently.*

Hatt (1976), quoting Joost Meerloo, describes this process of construction, of which reading must be considered an important element:

> *Man...borrows more than he knows from his epoch and the*
> *zeitgeist...as an individual creator he soaks up as much as he can to*
> *mould and transform the perceived into some kind of personal gestalt*
> (p 39).

The reading process furnishes the reader with experiences above and beyond their own real life experience (Rosenblatt, 1970), aiding in the '[construction of] 'the inner life as nothing else does' (Byatt, 1992:16). Some readers recognised the ways in which reading experience had become integrated into their own personal reality:

> *The other example I've just thought of, of how it's creative...my*
> *favourite book when I was little was 'The Hobbit', and that was*
> *because the landscapes in that book became a landscape in my mind*
> *that's just forever there.*

These landscapes constitute the substance of what Lundin (2001), quoting Eleanor Cameron, describes as 'the country of the mind' (p 162). Other readers recognised reading as a means of 'moving across the threshold into the inner life' (Davis, 1992:304) and thereby 'reconnect[ing] with a memory of themselves in a different world' (Shearer, 2001:30):

> *Certain books I've read, and I re-read them to help me recreate*
> *memories in my life. Like 'Wuthering Heights', I first read it during*
> *my A-levels, and I read it now to bring back the memory of that time*
> *and I how I felt then.*

3.4.3 Objective views vs. subjective experience

The subjective processes and outcomes that constituted the reading experience described by participants (see 3.3. and 3.4) were generally found to be unrelated to their objective perceptions about the creativity or otherwise of fiction reading (see 3.2). The suggestion is that while many readers are unable to consider their own reading in terms of its 'creativity', they nonetheless describe their subjective reading experience in ways that demonstrate a considerable level of creativity. This indicates that reader development have some distance to go if they wish to promote the confidence of readers in their own role and importance.

The only pattern that was identified related to the fact that amongst participants in this study, readers who expressed objectively that they considered reading to be creative, were generally much more likely to experience the more long-term benefits of reading – the creative outcomes. If reader development succeeds in promoting reader confidence about their status as readers, it is possible that more readers will begin to experience or recognise the creative outcomes discussed above (see 3.4.1 to 3.4.2).

3.5 Reading experiences of children and adults compared

Finally, discussion attempted to examine and compare the reading experiences of adults with those of the teenagers and younger children who had also been interviewed. Both children's groups identified similar creative processes to the adults, in terms of their creative input into the text; with the vast majority of participants identifying the necessity of using ones own imagination to bring the narrative world to life:

> *When we're reading, like 'Tales of a fourth grade nothing', I always imagine pictures in my head of what they looked like.*

> *I prefer fiction to non-fiction, because when you read fiction books it creates a picture in your mind.*

This recognition of their experience of narrative involvement can be considered a typical reaction of the child reader (Appleyard, 1990). Furthermore,

they also recognised that as readers they diverged from and enhanced the text to suit their own preferences:

> *Sometimes, if it's not like a place you know, you add things to it, and*
> *you make it more exciting.*

> *If in a book it says they're going into a shopping centre, I always*
> *imagine they're going to Meadowhall.*

It was also clear that readers of all ages recognised that their experience was creative and unique, and valued it as such:

> *I think it's good because when you read you picture it in your mind,*
> *and no one else can have that same picture.*

Despite these strong similarities, both children and adults suggested that their reading processes were dependent to an extent on their age, although the reasons they attributed to this differed to an extent. The adult groups felt that the most important difference was the extent of involvement in the narrative world:

> *I think the focus is more intense… you live it when you're a kid,*
> *you're really sucked into it in a way, and you aren't to the same extent*
> *as an adult.*

> *As a teenager I used to hide…away from the family, and just read…I*
> *could do that for hours and hours…I think the only time I can really*
> *get that absorbed in a book now is when I'm on holiday.*

Obviously the children were not in a position to compare this aspect of their experience to adult readers, their level of absorption would inevitably seem usual and therefore not worthy of comment. However, the difference they were able to identify was also suggested by members of the adult groups – specifically their relatively limited life experience. The teenage readers recognised the gaps in their life knowledge that had existed when they had read as younger children, and considered this to be the key way in which their creative input had been modified with age:

You find it kind of easier when you're older; it's easier to imagine the world and the characters and stuff than when you were a kid. You're imagining characters like people you know…you've got more experience.

This was echoed by participants in the adult group:

When you get a bit older you tend to bring more experience to things.

However, none of the participants mentioned the key difference that was noted by the researcher between readers of different ages in the study – namely the extent to which participants were able to identify creative outcomes as well as creative processes within their reading experience.

Neither the teenage group, nor the child group made reference to the outcomes discussed above (see 3.4). The closest they came to suggesting that books impacted upon their life were comments relating to the moral and factual knowledge they gained from books:

You can learn from it…like fables and stuff.

You can learn things from fiction books.

Generally, when asked about the longer-lasting impacts on their lives that reading fiction had, many participants in the children's group referred to the way their subconscious imagination incorporated their reading experience:

I read them, and then I get dreams about them. Sometimes I dream about the books, and sometimes it's all put together [with my real life].

Overall these findings support the research of Appleyard (1990), who analyses the way in which we develop as readers as we grow older. He suggests that while younger readers may well experience a reading process which substantially resembles that of the adult reader:

Consciousness of their own motives and responses may be the one
truly distinctive mark of adult readers (p 164).

The general impression would seem to be that, while there were notable differences in their reading experiences, it was not the case that age of reader influenced the level of creativity brought to these processes. Rather the key difference was the level of awareness that readers exhibited about their own reading and creative experience.

Chapter Four

Readers and Writers

4.1 Introduction

Opening the Book (2003) has declared its intention of championing the reader 'as a creative, critical and active force in the world of books and literature', and one which, moreover, constitutes 'a different contribution from the writer…not imitating or usurping their role'. Question 1 and related prompts (see Appendix B) therefore led focus group discussions towards attempting to examine the creative relationship between the reader and the writer, in order to better understand their respective roles in the creation of a reading experience. Participants in the focus groups demonstrated diverse views, examined in this chapter as a scale of reader input.

4.2 The primacy of the text

4.2.1 Adult readers

When asked to consider the relationship between the reader and the writer, many readers expressed the view that the author, through the written representation of their creativity, the text, was an overwhelmingly stronger creative force in the reading experience:

> *No, I don't think [reading's] creative, I think the writer's creative not the reader.*

> *The writer's much more important, because they create the work don't they?…They put that idea in your head in the first place, so theirs is a much bigger role.*

> *I don't think the reader is creative, when you're reading it's someone else's creative imagination.*

Q. D. Leavis (1932), a strong proponent of this view, suggested that novels have the potential:

[To allow] the reader to live at the expense of an unusually intelligent
and sensitive mind…giving him access to a finer code than his own
(pp 73-74).

Other participants, while not so forthright about their views as those quoted above, made it clear where they thought the creative balance lay through their description of aspects of their reading experience. As with the readers interviewed in the study undertaken by Radway (1984), many saw their reading as an attempt to fully realise all levels of authorial intent:

It's good when you see different meaning in what's written…[but] I
think that's the writer's imagination.

I mean I think I'm quite sceptical when I'm reading things…Half the
time the author might be thinking 'I'm testing you, or I'm tricking
you…'

The importance placed on the writer and the text continues to be a pervasive view within modern society (Hoggart, 1995), and is strongly reminiscent of the New Critical approach to literary study. Freund (1987) describes this in the following terms:

The [text] itself, enshrined as the prime mover of all meanings and
emotions, governs the hierarchy…Since response is not a property of
the reader at all but something inscribed in and controlled by [the
text], the reader need only be taken for granted (p 4).

This may seem an irrelevancy, since these are ordinary readers, not engaged in any course of study, simply reading for pleasure. However, as Culler (Freund, 1987) points out, the New Critical view has had considerable influence on the teaching of English, and habits of study once learnt are difficult to break:

Whatever critical affiliations we may proclaim…we are all New
Critics, in that it requires a strenuous effort to escape notions of the
autonomy of the work…and the requirement of 'close reading' (p 64).

4.2.2 Child and teenage readers

In order to answer the research questions outlined in chapter one (see 1.7), it was necessary to compare the responses of the main adult study groups with the two groups of children who were also interviewed. As with the adult group, question 1 prompted the responses of the teenage group, while questions 5 and 6 in the children's group led the participants towards discussion of their role in the reading process.

It was clear from their responses that all the readers in these two groups saw the writer as the key creative force:

> *It's just really good describing, and you just automatically get a*
> *picture in your mind.*

> *I think when you're reading a book you get as much out as you put in.*
> *If you actually put in the effort to sit there and think about it, and pick*
> *up on things like the play on words, then you get a lot better idea of*
> *it…because you pick up on different things.*

As with the adults who held similar views, they saw their role as the reader as being that of decoder of meaning within the text. Appleyard (1990) suggests that this view is typical of the younger reader, with the reading development of adolescent readers (exemplified by the second quotation above) characterised by the 'discovery of multiple levels of significance deriving from authorial intention' (p 112). Readers at this stage will:

> *[Debate] about interpretations, but the point at issue is which on is*
> *the right one. The answer is assumed to be a fact of the text, put there*
> *by the author…Many high school and college students do not get any*
> *further than this* (Appleyard, 1990:112-113).

4.2.3 Implications for reader development

The implication is that the adult readers who expressed these views had reached a certain stage in their development as readers, probably shaped to a large

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extent by their experience of studying literature at school, and had continued to read in this way well into adulthood. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that the group that most strongly expressed this view was group 3 (see 2.5.8). Members of this group were much less likely to have continued their education beyond age 16 than the members of the other groups.

A suggested reason for the firmly entrenched views on this topic held by these participants could be that their last experience in terms of reading intervention is both pre-16, and in terms of their average age, in all likelihood at a point in time when New Critical pedagogical approaches were even more pervasive than now (Freund, 1987). This in turn indicates that the strong correlation between the values underpinning reader development and the values of adult fiction readers found to exist by Twomey (2003) is not as widespread as reader development agencies could wish.

This observation is perhaps more notable when one considers that the age and general background of the readers in group 3 had a much greater similarity to the demographic of the public library service than the other groups (Thomas, 2001). This may suggest that the penetration of reader-centred promotion has not yet reached a point where it can be said to have displaced attitudes to reading formed earlier in reader's lives, and this has the potential to limit its positive impact on reader confidence.

One possible solution could be greater co-operation between educational institutions and external reader development agencies, although of course this study is not intended to examine such ground and therefore further research into the feasibility of such an approach would have to be undertaken before such a course of action could be recommended.

4.2.4 Implications for the role of the reader

Participants who considered author and text to be the prime creative force inevitably placed the reader in a position of passive absorption, wherein all reader response was directly related to the writer and their input:

It's got to be the writer who is the most creative, else there'd be
nothing there would there. There's been a lot of work to bring forth
the information in front of you in a certain way that you'll be able to
respond to it.

Other readers expressed this view in terms of the extent to which their assessment of characters and situations in the plot resulted from the creative skill of the writer:

I think it depends on the individual skill of the writer, whether they
can get you to go along with them or not.

However, as with the contradictory objective and subjective views stated by readers earlier (see 3.4.3), this view did not always remain completely consistent in a number of participants, with some indicating that their role as the reader was relevant, despite a stated position in favour of the primacy of the writer:

None of it would be happening without their input, they're the most
important in the transaction, and everyone responds to different
elements according to their experience.

4.3 A role for the reader?

4.3.1 *Readers uncertain about reader/writer balance*

The most common response amongst the readers in this study when asked to consider the relationship between reader and writer was to express a strong degree of uncertainty about their respective roles. Appleyard (1990) suggests that this is the final stage in reader development[1]; readers begin to consider their role in creating the reading experience as the impossibility of finding conclusive answers to questions of textual meaning becomes clear to them:

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[1] Reader development in this instance refers to psychological development, rather than reading promotion.

You're creating the image, but I mean – where's that coming from? Is
it being dictated to you anyway?

I think you get a shadow impression [of books where plot is sketchy], I
think you get a feeling…but I don't really know where it comes from.

Davis (1992) suggests that this uncertainty is representative of 'the most
interesting cases of the power of literary meaning' (p xv) and describes the scenario
in the following terms:

When I cannot quite separate the by-product, the release of personal
meanings and memories, from the very words I am reading out of the
mind of another person (p xv).

A further selection of readers felt a similar degree of uncertainty, but
attempted to go slightly further, suggesting that it was a question of finding where
the balance lay:

One of my favourite books, I've read it at different points in my life,
and each time I feel like I'm taking something different away about
life…Each time my eye's been different in reading and I don't know if
that's about the author, or if it's about me.

Is it because as humans we really share so much? Or is it because the
author knows that people like you are going to be reading it? Or is it
about you, the reader?

At the furthest end of the spectrum of opinion represented by this group of
uncertain readers, were those participants who felt there was a need for reader input,
but did not indicate the relative importance of this input:

I think you have to put your own bits in sometimes, because the author
might never have been there.

I don't know [where the balance is], but like, I've read some books
which were part of the 'Nouveau Roman' movement, and they

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basically had no plot, no characters…you know, they basically

demand the reader be more active I guess.

4.3.2 Implications for reader development

This view places these readers at the farthest end of the spectrum of opinion represented by the reader-response theorists within literary theory, with views similar to theorists like Bleich (Bennett, 1995) who saw the text as the main, but not the only controlling force in the reading experience. Readers who expressed views that placed them at this point on the scale (see 4.1), and those further along the scale represented the majority view within this study, which suggests that reader-response is strongly representative of ordinary readers, as well as literature students. This in turn provides strong theoretical support for reader development (see 2.1). However, it must of course be noted that the results in this study would have to be corroborated in a much larger scale study before this result could be proved conclusively.

4.4 Equality for reader and writer

4.4.1 Reader/writer communication

The suggestion that both readers and writers have an important and equal role in the creation of the reading experience is perhaps the closest representation of the stance taken by reader development agencies like Opening the Book (2003) and the Reading Agency (McKearney et al, 2001). In terms of theoretical support for the idea, the concept of an equal relationship is best described by Iser (1995):

Separate analysis [of the text] would only be conclusive if the

relationship were that of transmitter and receiver, since the message

would only be travelling one way. In literary works, however, the

message is transmitted in two ways (p 21).

This particular viewpoint was relatively strongly represented by participants in the study:

[The writer] lays the foundation for you creating the world, but
without the reader it doesn't exist. So you can't have one without the
other.

[When you read], it's like half of it is the author, and half of it is you.

It's your interpretation that counts, probably as much as what the
artist has to say.

Birkerts (1994) describes this relationship particularly eloquently:

The writer may tell us, "The mother wore a shabby…gown", but the
word canisters are empty until we load them from our private
reservoirs. We activate our sense memories and determine the
degrees of shabbiness (p 83).

For the readers who viewed the reader/writer relationship in this way, it was
not a matter of a generic reader, with a generic role:

In a way, [the author] is launching it for you to be creative around.

Rather it was a question of different readers responding to texts; forming a
line of communication between themselves and the writer. This communication has
been described variously as 'an activity in which…a human experience is actively
offered and actively received' (Williams, 1961:15-16), and as 'a private relationship
between two people, reader and writer' (Byatt, 1992:15). The participants spoke of it
in the following terms:

I think you make yourself the reference point. They're trying to
communicate with you, and it will be very different for people who've
had different experiences.

I think your own experience really dictates what you take from a book
and what you put into it.

One of my favourite books at the moment…half of it's the book
because she's a great writer, but half of it's because it's exactly the

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right book for me at the moment – there was just so much I could fit
my life on to.

Readers who viewed their reading experience in these terms saw the process as a highly individualised one, with considerable emphasis placed on reading books at the 'right time', which is to say, the time when they as readers would be able to actively contribute to the process:

You almost know sometimes I think, when you start to read, that
you're just not at that right point.

You know when the time is right for a particular book

I think [connecting with a book] is about whether or not it's the right
time to read it for you.

4.4.2 Implications for reader development

These comments echo those made by readers interviewed by Ross (1999) in her study of Canadian readers, and this suggests that these views are relatively common and widespread. A combination of different forms of promotion would be the most effective way of enhancing people's reading experiences under these circumstances. Passive methods allow readers to be guided towards making effective choices for themselves without the need for librarians to possess a specific understanding of the needs of each individual, while more active forms of intervention would enable readers to gain the understanding of their reading process that make this process effective (Train, 2003).

Chapter Five

Quality

5.1 Introduction

Research into fiction reading has often taken for granted the idea that the nature of the reading experience is very much dependant on the quality of the text (see for example: Mann, 1982). Reader development organisations such as Opening the Book (2003) suggest that more effective reading promotion can be undertaken if the focus on textual quality implied by this presumption shifts instead towards a focus on the quality of the reading experience (Train, 2003). Implicit in this change in focus is the assertion that external textual value judgements are irrelevant to the reading experience of the individual reader; this type of reader-centred approach 'promotes 'great works of literature' as much as the most popular genre fiction' (Train, 2003:35).

Question 4 (see Appendix B) was intended to explore the issue of quality, with a view to examining its potential impact on the creativity of the reading experience.

5.2 A need for textual quality?

The traditional view of fiction reading holds that the benefits of fiction reading are entirely reliant on readers selecting only fiction of the highest literary quality. Leavis (1932) describes the impact of popular fiction thus:

> *Popular novels…get in the way of genuine feeling and responsible*
> *thinking by creating cheap mechanical responses and by throwing*
> *their weight on the side of social, national and herd prejudices* (p 74).

In more recent years, similar prejudices continue to flourish, with writers such as Stierle (1980) and Hoggart (1995; 1998) expressing similar, if slightly moderated, opinions about the need for textual quality. Even the field of reader development has not been immune to such judgements; conferences such as

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'Reading the Future' (Van Riel, 1992) have tended to maintain the distinction between the 'literary' and the 'popular'.

Despite this, opinions of this kind were noticeably absent from the present study. The reading groups that formed the basis for the focus groups mentioned a number of novels that would certainly be considered to fall within the category of 'popular fiction' that had been read for the group discussions and enjoyed.

As with the readers in Twomey's (2003) study, participants in this research were confident enough in their own reading tastes and selection to make their own judgements as to which fiction could be considered 'worth reading'. While readers still used terms such as 'well written' and talked about 'good' and 'bad' writers, these were not opinions formed on the basis of any external source, but rather on their own assessment of textual quality:

> *The style of writing, that must really grab you, because if you don't like it then maybe you won't ever go there [i.e. into the narrative world]. So it's got to be well written.*

> *At the end of the day I just know what I like, what I think is well written, what I think is worth reading. And I don't really care terribly much about what other people think.*

This accords with the observations of a number of writers that 'well written' does not necessarily indicate objective textual quality. Ross (2001) and Train (2003) both discuss the need to recognise the inherent subjectivity of the phrase; it can more accurately be said to suggest that the book to which the term is being applied meets the 'personal standards [of that specific reader] for a satisfying reading experience' (Train, 2003:38).

Participants still indicated that there was a need to select texts carefully in order to enjoy the creative processes and outcomes discussed earlier (see chapter three), however, this selection process was made using substantially different criteria.

5.3 The need for resonance

Many readers in the study felt that their creative engagement with a novel was far more a matter of finding some personal resonance and connection with the fiction they chose to read:

> I've been reading 'The Lovely Bones', and it's a lot about the spiritual world, and I think a lot of people think about 'what is heaven like?' and so on…and I've found it's really made me think about that.

> I think for me to really get into a book it has to be…like, I prefer crime novels, maybe because at the end of the book everything's gone right with the world, and as a child and young adult I had quite a chaotic life.

A number of readers talked about this need for personal resonance as a universal feature of reading, rather than something that was unique to their own reading experiences:

> It's not necessarily about the quality of the book though is it, it's much more about how much it speaks to you, you know. Different books speak to different people.

> My son's going through a Tony Parsons stage…I know people who don't think much of [Tony Parsons], but at least he's reading something, and it's started him talking about relationships and all this kind of stuff… and I think [that's] creative expression.

This view is even acknowledged by Hoggart (1995), who quotes C. S. Lewis' suggestion that 'readers may bring worthy impulses to trashy literature, good responses to poor fiction' (p 103). This opinion is further supported by the findings of other studies into the reading experience; a good example is the participant in the study by Ross (1999) who praised a novel by adventure writer Jack London for its capacity to make him question the world and his place in it, even though, as he freely acknowledged, it could not be considered a high quality text.

The view that quality and creative resonance were not necessarily related was emphasised by the negative reading experiences of 'classic' fiction reported by a number of group participants:

I remember I did 'Jane Eyre' at university, and I remember we all talked about it, and we just hated the endless description…because she wasn't allowing you any of your own imagination, and I felt very patronised…like she wasn't allowing me my own creativity.

I think what's really struck me is Margaret Atwood. My mum and her friends absolutely love her, and I think she probably is a good writer, but I feel she's just not speaking to our generation at all…I just don't care.

This is echoed by Van Riel, quoted by Train (2003), when she states that:

We all know that it is possible to have…a poor reading experience with a book that has been accepted as brilliant (p 39).

5.4 Creative processes always in evidence?

The discussion of the need for resonance above (see 5.3) is focused almost entirely on the way in which certain novels generate creative outcomes in fiction reading (see 3.4). While it was clear that readers also experienced the creative processes related to fiction reading when reading the items under discussion above, a further selection of reading materials were identified as producing these processes even without such personal resonance. Once again this was not a question of quality:

Like I read 'Under the Tuscan sun', easy to read and whatever, you know…and I could just picture it all, I could imagine myself there easily.

One of my favourite crime series, they're good storylines and move along quickly, you know. And there's a lot of stuff about music in it, and you can imagine [the protagonist]. So you create this image of him from what he likes.

These views are shared by the readers studied by O'Rourke (1993) and Radway (1984), with the readers of romance fiction in the latter piece of research drawing particular attention to the 'process of world construction' that they saw as a key feature of their reading (p 187). This supports the assertion by Gerrig (1993) that whatever the quality of the novel 'some core set of processes is likely to allow readers to experience narrative worlds' (pp 4-5). As discussed in chapter 3, the creation of the narrative world was an important creative process for the vast majority of readers in this study (see 3.3).

5.5 Genre preconceptions

The views discussed up to this point are broadly in line with the promotional approach of reader development, however, there was one area of fiction reading where readers in this study held noticeably contrasting views about the need for quality. On the whole the participants in this study were confident readers who felt able to deal with each novel on its merits; they did not regard popular fiction as a single homogeneous mass.

However, a number of participants did attach the negative assessments described earlier (see 5.2) to a smaller selection of reading materials, namely 'genre' fiction. As with the readers in Twomey's (2003) study, a number of participants expressed the view that certain genres would not result in a creative reading experience:

> *I don't think [the process is creative] for what I'd call 'chick lit'…it's like eating a box of chocolates rather than something more substantial.*

> *Those sorts of trashy books [i.e. 'chick lit'], it's just easy to flick through. You know the story by the end of it but you don't feel it's actually touched you.*

Even participants who felt that they still judged each work individually, regardless of genre, had a tendency to make similar block assessments:

I think for the books you actually connect with, I think the genre generally isn't important…I mean you do look at the genre, and I guess I don't read horror or sci-fi…it's whether or not it's the right time to read it for you.

However, it was also notable that for a number of the participants who expressed these views, it was generally admitted that they had little experience of reading genre fiction:

I don't know, with sci-fi I feel like…I've not really read any sci-fi and maybe I have certain preconceptions about that, but I couldn't be bothered to put the work in to get anything out of it.

It is therefore difficult to assess whether or not these views are valid, whether genre fiction will result in an automatically less creative reading experience. The indication in this study is that pre-existing and societal prejudices were perhaps the motivation for a number of these statements, since previous studies focusing solely on readers of genre fiction found evidence to suggest that creative processes[2] of reading were a feature of participants' reading experience (O'Rourke, 1993; Singleton, 1999).

It should also be noted that definitions of genre fiction are problematic and subjective to a degree. In this study, this element of subjectivity was most evident in the participants' discussions of crime fiction. As noted by Cawelti (1976), while some readers derided crime fiction as an example of genre fiction, others excluded it from this category and were thus able to enter into discussion of its merits or demerits fairly easily, since the suggestion of stigma had been removed.

Under these circumstances, a full examination of the creativity or otherwise of reading genre fiction would require fuller discussion of the definition of the term, and this would only have been possible in a differently focused, larger scale piece of research than the current study.

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[2] Creative outcomes of reading were not examined in any degree of detail in these studies, so it is impossible to comment on their presence or absence from participants' reading experiences.

5.6 Different books for different purposes

5.6.1 The value of genre fiction

Despite the negative views that most participants expressed about the creativity of genre fiction, readers did not necessarily dismiss this type of reading material altogether. For a number of readers, this type of reading played an important part in the stimulation of a creative reading experience, either because it provided a necessary 'rest' from more taxing reading material, or because it was viewed as an important stage in their development as creative readers.

5.6.2 'Rest' reading

Participants in the study valued the genre fiction, and more lightweight materials generally, that they did read, since it allowed them to return to more challenging, creative reading with a fresh mind:

> I don't think… 'chick lit' [is creative], sometimes it's nice to read a bit of nonsense, and you really need to do it, it's like eating a box of chocolates rather than something more substantial.

> If you have a detective or a mystery in between other books where you're taking in quite a lot of stuff about relationships and ideas…it rests your brain in a way.

> It's nice to read challenging books, but you couldn't do it all the time could you? I mean Harry Potter's great isn't he? I don't see anything wrong with finding something that satisfies you on a surface level.

These views are consistent with both theoretical (see for example: Mann, 1982) and practical (see for example: Lee, 1996) studies into reading, and support similar claims within reader development about the value of all fiction reading (Van Riel, 1993).

5.6.3 Developmental reading

Other readers suggested that this sort of lightweight fiction was an important developmental step towards reading more creative materials, several readers who had now moved on to novels that they considered more intellectually challenging still spoke animatedly of their childhood enjoyment of such novels:

> *I used to just devour all those school series ones, you know 'Sweet*
> *Valley High' and all that, and I loved them then…I remember all the*
> *Mallory Towers [an Enid Blyton series] ones – I used to fantasise*
> *about going to boarding school.*

This supports the assertion by Ross (1995) that at the very least, series books and genre fiction:

> *[Keep] children reading for the countless thousands of hours*
> *necessary to produce the bulk of reading practice that creates*
> *confident readers* (p 202).

This claim is supported by pedagogical writers such as Moss (1989) who claim that 'intrinsic merits' are somewhat irrelevant besides questions of what texts can *do* for pupils (p 47).

The suggestion that such fiction is a developmental stage is further supported by the comments of the readers in the child and teenage groups. Children in the former group described their favourite books very much in terms of genre, with 'horror' and 'adventure' books being particularly popular. When discussing their reading processes they made no distinction between different levels of quality, with prize-winning writers like Jacqueline Wilson and Philip Pullman discussed in identical terms to less acclaimed materials.

Furthermore, when asked to discuss what they considered to make a 'bad' book or a 'good' book, readers spoke exclusively in terms of subjective criteria such as excitement level or level of description, with no reference to the question of textual quality:

I think a good book is when you get cliffhangers, and it's really
exciting to the end.

I think a bad book is when it goes forever describing, and it just gets
so boring.

The teenage readers were much more aware of the concept of genre, and recognised that some fiction titles are more highly praised than others. However, this appeared to play no part in their reading experience, and participants generally valued the process of 'making up their own mind without any influence from outside'.

Despite this apparent disregard for the concept of quality, the readers in both child and teenage groups still experienced a high level of reading creativity (see 3.5). It cannot be declared conclusively whether this is due to the children's views being free from societal bias against certain materials, or because, as Appleyard (1990) maintains:

[Books which would be considered] repetitive…and boring from an
adult point of view…can be imaginatively satisfying to readers of a
certain level of ability (p 62).

However, this seems irrelevant for the purposes of the present study. While it would probably be considered worrying if no readers read more challenging fiction (Van Riel, 1992), there is no indication that the reading of materials of a lower textual quality is damaging or even non-creative. Moreover, the evidence from the children and teenagers in this study indicated that they read a wide variety of materials of all qualities. Books discussed in recent groups by the teenage readers had ranged from a title in the 'Point Horror' series to 'The Catcher in the Rye'.

Chapter Six

The influence of external factors

6.1 Introduction

All human beings are influenced by their environment (Hatt, 1976). With this in mind, it is important to examine the ways in which external factors may impact upon the reading experience, in order to arrive at as complete a picture as possible of creative processes and outcomes. Questions 4, 6 and 7 and their related prompts in the adult and teenage groups, and questions 7, 8 and 10 in the children's group, led discussions towards a consideration of the impact that external contextual and societal factors had on reading experiences. Their responses are examined on a thematic basis.

6.2 Environmental context

6.2.1 Negative environmental impact on reading

For a number of readers the environmental context, that is to say the location and time of reading, had a strong impact on the creativity of their reading experience. Many readers found it impossible to become completely involved in the narrative world unless they were in a position to read without distraction or worry:

> *I think the only time I can really get absorbed…is when I'm on holiday. I've just been on holiday on my own and it was brilliant, I read like I did when I was a child because I didn't have any distractions.*

> *I'm of an age now where I have to set time aside, if anything distracts me I've had it.*

> *I think if you know that you're going to be constantly interrupted you can't really settle down…my idea of bliss is cat on my feet, on the sofa, everybody gone out. Then sit down with a book that I can really think myself into.*

This was particularly the case where they were conscious that other life concerns could suffer if they became too involved in the experience:

I'd rather be on a beach, or in bed…so that I can feel it doesn't matter if I get totally absorbed.

I don't know, I think when you're working, and there's other stuff you could or should be doing…reading a bit of fiction seems fearfully indulgent.

The feelings of guilt that some participants attached to spending time reading, particularly if they allowed themselves to get fully absorbed, seem fairly widespread, particularly amongst women, who as noted (see 2.5.7), made up the majority of focus group participants in this study. Readers in the studies by Lee (1996) and O'Rourke (1993) made similar observations about their reading.

The reasons for this are unclear, but it is suggested that the relatively low status of reading that still pervades (see 3.2) is a key factor, since the implication from the majority of readers who expressed this view was that they worried that their time could be better spent on some other activity. This is yet another reason (see also 3.4.3) why it is important for reader development to tackle this particular issue.

6.2.2 *Positive environmental impact on reading*

Where environment had an impact on reading experience, the views stated above were by far the most common. However, a small number of readers found the complete opposite to be true:

I'm so used to reading in a noisy background that that's the only way I can read.

I'd rather be somewhere busy. I get involved in the world of the book and I kind of switch off from the world around me.

However, some similarities could be noted when compared to the previous section. The concept of reading 'guilt' continued to be a factor:

I quite enjoy times when I'm on buses or on trains because it feels like that's allowed time, when I don't have to be doing anything else, I can do this and enjoy doing it.

6.2.3 Environmental context irrelevant

A further selection of readers felt that the environmental context was irrelevant to their reading experience:

I've been on the bus and gone past my stop many a time…If it's a good book, I'm the person that's walking along the road reading to finish it. I can read anywhere.

I don't need a quiet space, it's a quiet space between the pages.

In terms of reading creativity, the range in views indicates that there is no *one* circumstance which results in a more involving or beneficial reading experience than others. However, what is notable about all these views, diverse though they seem, is that the participants were well aware of the environmental circumstances that they found most personally conducive to a creative reading experience, and as a result they generally had high quality reading experiences. This suggests that they possessed the level of self-awareness as readers that reader development activities aim to cultivate (Opening the Book, 2003), and provides support for this approach to reading promotion.

6.3 Context of selection

Many readers identified the context for fiction selection as a relevant factor in their subsequent creative involvement and general experience:

I think as well [creative reading] is about how much you're prepared to let yourself go there. I'm a real sod for pre-judging…[but] if a good friend or my sister recommended a book to me, because I like them and trust their judgement I'm more open to it.

I read differently if somebody's recommended something to me. I probably find myself trying much harder with it than usual.

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This view is corroborated by a number of studies, both theoretical (see for example: Mann & Burgoyne, 1969; Galda & Liang, 2003) and practical (see for example: Twomey, 2003). Twomey refers to these specific conditions as 'familiarizing contexts' (p28), and notes that for readers in her study there were a number of such contexts, with the major benefit being the wider range of materials that readers who were exposed to such contexts would then sample. In this study the key advantage of the familiarizing context for readers was that they felt more able to open themselves to the reading experience, and this aided their creative involvement.

In terms of reader development, the possibility of participating in active forms of reader promotion such as book groups (Train, 2003), or passive promotional activities, such as reader-to-reader recommendation boards, are a number of ways in which reader-centred promotion can help maintain and increase the number of 'familiarizing contexts' for readers. On the evidence of this study, successful implementation of such schemes would enhance and cultivate creative reading.

6.4 Reader background

6.4.1 Social background

Participants in this study considered their social background to be an irrelevancy in terms of their reading experience, but readily discussed the ways in which reading literature from the 'canon' was impacted by their modern identity, and even their class:

> *It's almost like you have two bits to get over haven't you? Accepting it's years ago, with all the values and stuff of that time, and then there's the class bit, because the people who were able to write were just so upper middle class and upwards.*

Despite this, on the whole readers viewed these barriers as fairly unproblematic. While one of the acknowledged aims of reader development is to foster social inclusion (Train, 2003), it is impossible to estimate how much work is required in order to achieve this on the basis of this study; the participants clearly already viewed themselves as socially 'included'. Further research into more

disadvantaged groups in society would be required if this issue and its impact on creativity were to be examined in more detail.

6.4.2 Educational background

The one aspect that did draw comments from a number of groups related to educational background, with a number of participants suggesting that studying literature had had a negative influence on their reading:

> *I did an English degree…but I actually found it unbelievably pompous, it took an awful lot of the joy out of [reading] for me, and I didn't really read for about three or four years after university.*

> *English A-level just killed it for me. I mean, I really enjoyed the texts I did, but it was just so hard going. It's like to a certain degree you're taken away from the enjoyment of it…I don't think I really want to be aware of every detail.*

Even participants who had not studied English beyond GCSE or 'O' Level age had similar concerns about the effect it would have on their reading enjoyment:

> *I always thought of it as very analytical…reading like exact descriptions and so on…clinical rather than creative.*

Ross (1995) supports this view that readers read differently if their purpose for reading is study than they would do if only reading for pleasure. Rather than valuing the skills obtained through study of literature, the majority of participants in this study considered these skills to be incompatible with reading enjoyment.

A further selection of readers identified other aspects of studying literature that potentially created a barrier between themselves and the text, with the type of sociological contextualisation of writing that many literature courses include being highlighted in particular:

> *Isn't that really dangerous? You don't really know what they're thinking. I mean, we studied Shostakovich, and you'd assume his*

music was depressing because he was oppressed, but maybe he just
wrote that way. I don't think it really adds anything.

The readers who expressed these views referred throughout to the distance that such educational experience placed between them and the narrative world of the text, and this suggests that for many, studying reduced rather than enhanced their creative reading skills. This is supported by the similar opinions concerning the potentially negative impact of studying literature that were expressed by participants in the study by Twomey (2003).

These findings should be viewed in the context of earlier discussion into the pre-eminence that many readers granted the writer as a result of earlier experiences of studying (see 4.2.3). The implication is that rather than helping to develop creative readers, study of literature, both New Critical (see Freund, 1987), and within a wider sociological context, has the potential to undermine the work of reader development practitioners. This provides a further motive for librarians to work in partnership with schools to a greater extent than is currently the case, in order to provide readers with a wider perspective of purposes and styles of reading than they might otherwise have, from the earliest possible point in their reading lives.

6.5 Television and film adaptations

6.5.1. *Adult and teenage readers*

All the focus groups in this study mentioned the impact of television and film adaptations on their reading, whether prompted to consider this potential influence by the researcher or not. Despite predictions from writers like Birkerts (1994), which suggest that reading is fast being replaced by leisure occupations such as film and television, all the participants in the adult and teenage groups viewed book adaptations as inferior to their own reading of the particular titles; similar opinions expressed by participants in Twomey's (2003) study suggests that this is not an unusual view. Reasons for this were two-fold; partly readers resented the simplification of plot and ideas that such adaptations entailed, and partly they viewed their own imaginative powers as superior to those of film and television companies,

simply because their own interpretation was unique. Hattersley (1998) encapsulates this latter view particularly accurately:

> *Who wants ready-made images, pre-packaged in a studio, when it is*
> *possible to read the descriptions of character and background and*
> *then create the picture of your choice inside your head?* (p 52).

Despite this, it was often the case that readers found their own perceptions being overlaid by these inferior sources:

> *They take bits out, and it could have been that bit in the book that*
> *really spoke to you…I think when you've read a book the film can*
> *really destroy it.*

> *Going back to the creativity thing, because you create the world in*
> *your head [the film] is never going to quite match up. But then I was*
> *thinking just then about Harry Potter, and immediately saw bits of the*
> *film.*

In order to avoid this negative impact on their own reading experience, several readers made a conscious effort to avoid adaptations of books that had been particularly meaningful to them:

> *If a book really meant a lot to me I don't go and see the film. I*
> *deliberately avoided 'Captain Corelli's Mandolin' for that reason.*

The indication is that for a number of participants the adaptations actually stifled personal creativity, both in terms of outcomes and processes. However, this was substantially offset by the observation from many of the readers who expressed this view that, where adaptations failed to match the readers' own initial perceptions, the inferior subsequent impressions were discarded:

> *In 'The Lord of the Rings', I think it's my own perception of the*
> *characters, because the film was actually quite different to the way I*
> *pictured it. Whereas in 'Harry Potter' [the film] does kind of ruin it.*

Sometimes you just forget the film completely, because it's just so far away from what you expected. When you go back and read [the book] later you think, 'well, actually, I still love the book, and I hardly remember the film – it isn't the book'.

The impression above all is that adult and adolescent readers were aware of the potential stifling impact on their own creativity that adaptations could produce, and as a result, were able to avoid the negative consequences to a degree. Despite research within the field of Media Studies which suggests that reading shares many of the same benefits as other forms of entertainment (McQuail, 1994), the indication from this study was that, as with readers in the research by Usherwood & Toyne (2002), reading was viewed as a unique and irreplaceable activity. As a rider to this, it should be noted that book groups are inevitably peopled by particularly keen readers, so it is not clear to what extent these views are representative of the wider population.

6.5.2 Child readers

For the most part the readers in the children's focus group expressed very similar views to the adults. However, a minority of children suggested that filmed adaptations were superior to their own reading experience:

I always like reading 'The Lord of the Rings' book, but I still like watching it better, because there's loads of different stuff in the book and I can't remember it all.

I like films better because you get all the effects.

These views are not necessarily as negative as they seem. As noted in the previous section, adult readers valued their own reading perceptions for their ability to encompass all the different levels of complexity and thought that existed in the book, and to respond to these. The children who expressed the views quoted above were perhaps demonstrating that they were at an earlier, less sophisticated stage of reading development (Appleyard, 1990), and as such were more comfortable with the simplified filmed versions of the books they enjoyed reading.

The children interviewed for this study were, however, of higher than average reading ability. It would be interesting to examine a more representative sample of children in order to discover if the views quoted above are an indication that children are replacing reading with less sophisticated forms of entertainment. Such an enquiry was beyond the scope of this study.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Chapter structure

A number of research questions were outlined at the beginning of this study, which the subsequent chapters have aimed to examine. With this in mind, the final chapter will provide a summary of the main findings in relation to these specific research questions, and will provide recommendations for reader development and further research within each section where relevant. It should be noted that the nature of the present study does not allow for generalisations to be made, therefore all recommendations are provisional only, and subject to corroboration by larger-scale research of the kind it was not possible to undertake here.

7.2 Do readers consider fiction reading to be a creative activity?

7.2.1 Key findings

Participants in this study had varied opinions in relation to this question, but it was clear that the majority, albeit by a small margin, did not view reading as a creative activity. Reading suffered from its traditional reputation as non-creative, with a minority of participants actually viewing reading as anti-creative.

Three major reasons for the continuing relevance of this view were found to be related to the characteristics of the activity itself. Firstly, the close relation of reading to writing, a recognised creative pursuit, meant that some readers saw creativity in relation to these two activities as mutually exclusive.

Secondly, outward production was often deemed to be a necessary condition of creativity, and the absence of such in reading was thus seen as problematic. While a small number of participants felt that this element was satisfied by the creation of one's 'bookshelf', or by the dialogue that reading created within the group, this view was not widespread. A further few participants disagreed with the majority view that outward production was necessary, suggesting that reading was too complex an activity to be reduced to such arbitrary requirements.

Finally, the status of reading as passive or active was particularly relevant. Only those who considered reading to be active viewed reading as creative.

Aside from the characteristics of reading, one last factor in shaping reader opinions related to the difficulty a number had in relating terms like 'creative' to the activity. Many could only do so by considering their reading in terms of its potential to stimulate other creative endeavours. Once again, a significant minority had no such difficulties.

7.2.2 Recommendations for reader development

The vocabulary of reader development does not seem to have percolated through to the general reading public as yet. While it is not suggested that readers in this study are a representative sample of the wider population, their very status as enthusiastic, regular readers indicates that if any sector of the public were to be familiar or comfortable with these terms it would be reading groups.

Librarians and other reader development practitioners perhaps need to work towards raising public consciousness of their activities and goals in order to bring about a change in reader perceptions. It is recognised that this is by no means a simple task.

7.2.3 Recommendations for further research

It would be useful and informative to widen out this study of perceptions to a more representative selection of the population. This was impossible within the timeframe of the current study.

7.3 How does creativity manifest itself as a result of, and during, fiction reading?

7.3.1 Key findings

The previous research question aimed to explore participant's objective views. This question is an attempt to examine their subjective reading experience. The creativity of the reading experience could be subdivided into two main categories: creative processes and creative outcomes.

Creative processes were by far the most common; all readers identified these as a feature of their reading experience. The processes could be collectively described as creation of the narrative world. This was recognised as a valuable part of reading by all participants, but many readers did not consider it to be synonymous with creativity. Despite this, all groups recognised that the process was highly individualised. Particular value was placed on the books that allowed readers a large degree of imaginative freedom in their creation of this world.

Creative outcomes were less common; two main outcomes could be distinguished from responses in this study. Firstly, readers used their reading as a means to navigate life, both directly, in terms of practical knowledge gained, and indirectly, in terms of thought processes stimulated. Most readers who experienced this outcome acknowledged it to be evidence of creativity. Secondly, reading contributed to the creation of a personal gestalt.

Subjective processes and outcomes generally had little relation to objective views, this suggests that reader creativity is present even where it is not recognised. However, it was noted that creative outcomes, the more long-term benefits of reading, were more commonly experienced by readers who had expressed an objective view that acknowledged reader creativity.

7.3.2 Recommendations for reader development

Shearer (2001) has suggested that librarians can help readers by guiding them towards fiction materials that will produce the creative outcomes described above. However, the outcomes experienced by readers in this study were unpredictable and unique. This indicates that reader development should be used to help readers better understand their own reading experience, for example through facilitation of dialogue with other readers.

The greater occurrence of creative outcomes amongst those readers with similarity of objective and subjective views suggests that these long-term benefits of reading would be more prevalent if reader development practitioners were able to successfully raise the status of reading.

7.3.3 Recommendations for further research

There are no specific recommendations, however, as with the previous research question, an examination of a larger section of the public, both reading and non-reading, would undoubtedly be useful as a means of identifying the frequency and importance of creativity in reading in more general terms.

7.4 Where is the balance between the creative input of reader and writer?

7.4.1 Key findings

An integral feature of the concept of 'creative reading' is the need to champion the reader's role in the creation of the reading experience. Participants were once again divided in their views of this key relationship; responses can best be understood as a scale of reader input.

Many readers viewed the author as an overwhelmingly stronger creative force than the reader, describing their reading as a means of fully comprehending all levels of authorial intent. It seems likely that New Critical pedagogical approaches to the study of literature may be key in this area. The role of the reader was seen as essentially passive by these readers, although as in previous sections, there was a degree of inconsistency between objective and subjective opinions in this matter.

The most common response by participants was the expression of uncertainty about the nature of the reader/writer relationship. However, the implication of this uncertainty was that readers could identify aspects of reader input, but were not sure of its relevance.

The remaining participants saw reading as a relationship of equals. Much emphasis was placed on the individuality of reader response and the need to select the 'right book at the right time' in order to maximise personal creativity.

Participants who expressed the latter two views constituted a majority in this study, suggesting that reader-response theory – the basis of reader development – is relevant to many readers.

7.4.2 Recommendations for reader development

The view that the author represented the prime creative force was particularly characteristic of responses in the child and teenage groups (see 7.7.1), and there is evidence to suggest that this view is related to their stage of reading development. Within the adult groups, one group expressed this opinion much more strongly than others interviewed. Further analysis of results revealed this group to have a larger than average number of members (for this study) whose educational background did not continue beyond the age of 16. It is possible that their views in this matter may perhaps be due to the lack of reading intervention since this age, and the likely dominant role of New Critical approaches to reading before this time.

Reader-centred promotion may more effectively change values in such readers in future if it is experienced at school age – for example through library/school partnerships.

Secondly, the individuality and much stated need for reading books at the 'right time' amongst some participants, suggests that reader development methods, both passive and active, should be combined to allow readers to develop greater self-knowledge in relation to reading experience.

7.4.3 Recommendations for further research

Further study into the feasibility of library/school partnerships should be undertaken.

7.5 Does textual quality influence the quality of reading experience?

7.5.1 Key findings

Reader development represents a shift in focus away from the promotion of textual quality, and towards quality of experience. Well established views suggesting that popular fiction does not produce the benefits, creative or otherwise, of literary fiction, were noticeably absent from groups in this study.

Readers discussed the need for books to be 'well written', but the indication was that these were entirely subjective views. Despite this, participants still spoke of

the need for careful text selection in order to produce creative outcomes, it was simply undertaken using different criteria. Particularly key was the need for fiction chosen to have some personal resonance. This was unrelated to quality; a number of participants identified occasions when fiction of great objective textual quality had failed to produce this required response and been rejected.

A further selection of books was also considered capable of producing creative processes, if not creative outcomes; readers were able to discuss some experience of the narrative world in relation to these books.

These views indicated that readers' views were broadly similar to the promotional approach of reader development. However, readers did express negative views of genre fiction, stating that it would not result in a creative experience. It should be noted though that, a number of readers who expressed this view had no personal experience of such fiction. This suggests that pre-existing societal and personal prejudices had a strong influence on opinion formation in this area. This is particularly the case in the light of contradictory evidence from other studies. There were also questions as to the definition of genre fiction, and this may have had an impact on results.

Despite these negative views, some participants saw a role for genre fiction in producing creative reading experiences. Firstly, this was through its use as 'rest' reading, and secondly, as an important stage in childhood reader development.

7.5.2 Recommendations for reader development

There are no specific recommendations in relation to this research question.

7.5.3 Recommendations for further research

A fuller examination of the creativity or otherwise of genre fiction would require further research into the definition of the term. It would also be necessary to conduct research that more specifically targeted genre readers.

7.6 Do external factors such as context of reading and the presentation of books in the media influence the process?

7.6.1 Key findings

All human beings are a product of their environment, it was therefore important to examine the influence of external factors on the creativity of the reading experience. A number of different factors were examined: the environmental context, the context of selection, reader background, and the influence of filmed adaptations.

Environmental factors were relevant but diverse. Some readers could only absorb themselves in the narrative world in circumstances free from distraction or worry. Others required a high level of noise or other distracting elements, since the process of blocking out these elements was integral to their narrative world creation. A final group found themselves able to read in any circumstance. A number of readers across all groups related feelings of guilt to their reading, suggesting that issues of reading status are also relevant in this area. Though views were diverse, all readers were aware of their needs, indicating a high degree of self-awareness. This is a trait which reader development cultivates and thus these findings support such methods.

Context for selection was also important, producing a notable impact on readers' subsequent creative involvement. Participants identified certain 'familiarizing contexts' which had a positive impact on their reading experience, both by exposing them to a wider range of materials, and by rendering them more receptive to items selected within these contexts.

Reader background was subdivided into social and educational background. Participants in this study did not generally identify social factors as barriers to creativity, there status as 'socially included' may well have been relevant here. Educational background was a key influence for a number of readers. Previous literary study was considered to have had a negative impact on creative involvement. Skills necessary to achieve in this area were viewed as incompatible with reader creativity, and a potential barrier between readers and texts.

Filmed adaptations of books were considered inferior by all the adult groups. Despite this, they were aware that their own perceptions could be overlaid by simplified film versions. In order to minimise the perceived negative effects of this, some readers avoided adaptations of books of significant personal value.

7.6.2 Recommendations for reader development

Findings in relation to this research question supported earlier recommendations. The need to increase the status of reading (see also 7.2.2) was reiterated by the feelings of guilt some readers attached to the activity, while an increased number of library/school partnerships (see 7.4.2) were also indicated by readers' additional negative experiences of study.

The benefits of 'familiarizing contexts' suggest that reader development should help maintain and increase their number through the promotion of methods that aid in the creation of reader dialogue. These can be both passive (e.g. reader-to-reader recommendations) and active (e.g. reader groups).

7.6.3 Recommendations for further research

Social barriers could not be fully explored here, therefore further research should target the socially excluded to fill this research gap. A widening out of the study into the influence of filmed adaptations is also required in order to discover whether the views of these enthusiastic readers are replicated amongst the general public.

7.7 Can any differences be perceived between readers of different ages?

7.7.1 Key findings

The range of views relating to the status of reading as a creative activity was replicated in both child and teenage groups to a large extent. This mirroring was also found to continue in terms of the subjective creative experience, with both younger groups identifying similar creative processes. All groups, both child and adult, considered the only really important difference in this area to be the level of experience that could be brought to bear in the creation of the narrative world.

The researcher noted a further difference in the form of the paucity of creative outcomes amongst the younger groups. This difference can be seen as a key feature of children's development into mature adult readers.

In terms of the balance between reader and author, both younger groups uniformly expressed a belief in the creative primacy of the author. Once again, there is a strong indication that this is due in a large degree to their current stage of development as readers.

Questions of textual quality were generally irrelevant to younger readers in this study. The child group made no reference to this criterion in their discussions, with reading processes discussed in similar terms whatever the quality of the text. The teenage readers showed more awareness of questions of quality, but valued their skill in assessing texts for themselves.

Despite the disregard for quality, readers experienced a high level of creativity. Worries about the popularity of genre and series books seem unnecessary, since there is every reason to believe that these are important developmentally. Moreover, both groups clearly read a wide range of fictional materials.

In terms of external influences, responses from younger readers greatly resembled those of the adults in general. There were some slight differences in relation to filmed adaptations, with a small number of children preferring the simplified visual representation. This may indicate that they were at a less sophisticated stage in development than the other members of the group, although it is also possible that a more representative sample of children would contradict this theory by revealing this view to be more worryingly prevalent.

7.2.2 Recommendations for reader development

The seeming difference in the values underpinning reader development and the study of literature provides further support (see 7.4.2) for the idea of library/school partnerships.

7.2.3 Recommendations for further research

Further research should aim to examine a larger, more representative sample of children. This was not possible within this study, nor was it necessary within the aims of this piece of research.

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Appendix A

<u>Reading questionnaire</u>

Name: **Class**:   **Age:**

PART ONE

1. Do you read when you are away from school?

    Yes/No

2. Do you go to a library?

    Yes/No

3. If you go to a library, which one?

    School/Public (e.g. Firth Park)/Other:…………………..

4. Did you spend your £1 World Book Day voucher?

    No/Yes, I bought……………………………………….

PART TWO

5. Do you enjoy reading?

    Yes/No

6. Do you prefer to read fiction or non-fiction?

    Fiction/non-fiction/both

7. If you like reading fiction, what sort of fiction do you like to read most?

    Adventure/fantasy/mystery/science fiction/horror/other:………………..

8. Do you have a favourite author?

    No/Yes:……………………………….

Appendix B

Focus group questions (adults)

1. Do you think that fiction reading is a creative activity?

Prompts:

Or do you consider the reader to be quite a passive element?

For example, do you think that it is necessary for the reader to use their imagination when reading?

Obviously the writer creates the work – do you think that they have a much more important role than the reader?

Do you think that reader adds anything at all to the reading process?

2. If someone asked you to name a creative activity, would it be on your list?

Prompts:

Is it creatively valuable?

What activities do you consider to be creative

Would you consider yourselves creative people because you read?

3. So, going back to my initial question – what are the elements of creativity in reading? – which bits of the reading process are creative?

Prompts:

For example, the characters (in the way you imagine them to look, in your assessment of the characters etc.)

Setting (do you draw on your own memories, mental images of places – when has this applied?)

Plot (do you fill in the gaps in novels which allow for this? Or imagine how characters end up after the period of time covered in the novel?)

Impact (can you think of any novels which have impacted upon your life? How?)

4. Does the level of creativity, or its existence generally, depend on what type of book you're reading? Feel free to give examples if that helps.

Prompts:

I.e. genre (do some genres encourage a more creative reading – for example, do you think the reader has to work harder to imagine the period setting etc. of the 'classic' novels, or to form opinions about these characters?)

Do characters/settings/themes which more closely resemble own lives allow for a greater/lesser creative input?

Title

Reputation (author/title) (does a strong critical reputation make you loathe to impose your own creativity on a novel – you don't want to take liberties?), previous knowledge of the book (i.e. TV adaptations – could you read Pride and Prejudice in the same way now – or would you see Colin, Jennifer et al as Darcy and so on?; what about less heavily publicised/discussed adaptations that you've seen?) etc.

Do you think some books require more/less creative input from the reader?

5. Do you think that the age of the reader is relevant?

Prompts:

Are you more creative now than you were as a child? Or vice versa?

Is it easier or harder to imagine the world of the book?

6. Do you think that your background is relevant?

Prompts:

Do you think that studying literature enhances or reduces creativity in reading?

Or do you think that that's too simplistic– does it simply modify the process? If so how?

Do you think that your own social background is relevant? If so how?

Do you think that the type of person you are generally has an impact?

7. Does it depend on the context of reading?

Prompts:

I.e. reasons for choosing to read it in the first place – own pleasure/choice; book group reading; etc.
OR where/when the reading is taking place (e.g. season – hols/work etc., location (quiet places, around other people, public places, noisy places etc.))

Focus group questions (children)

1. What sort of books do you like to read? (Prompts: what sort of stories/genres, what types of characters etc.)
2. Do you have any favourite authors?
3. What do you like about reading?
4. What makes a good book or a bad book? (Prompts: what was good about the last book you read and really enjoyed? – and the converse)

5. When you're reading – do you picture what's going on, the characters etc.?
6. When you imagine places in books, do you use memories you have of places you've been?
7. Is it easier or harder to imagine these things depending on the type of book you're reading? (Prompts: or where you're reading, or why you're reading it – e.g. school, for fun etc.)
8. Do you prefer to read for yourself or be read to?
9. Do you think about the books when you've finished reading them?
10. Some books are made into programs for TV, like some of the Jacqueline Wilson books, have you seen any of these? Have you read them? Which do you prefer?

Preamble to focus groups

First of all, many thanks for agreeing to participate in my research today

Introduce myself – name, course of study, purpose of research.

The dissertation itself will only be available in the University of Sheffield library, and of course all interview comments will be anonymised – just something to note in case anyone had any concerns.

The subject of the research – the creativity of reading. Basically I'm interested in the reading process and what the reader brings to it – is there a creative element to this? I'm not making any kind of judgements about what people read - it's about the quality of experience and nothing else. Basically, whatever you have to say is interesting to me, so don't worry about saying things that you think might be a bit irrelevant or about embarrassing yourself. If you think something is worth saying, say it.

As mentioned earlier, I intend to tape the interview today, so it would be really helpful if you could speak clearly and speak up so that I can make sure that I record what you have to say accurately. The recordings are for my own reference exclusively, and once transcribed I will of course dispose of the master tapes.