



DEAR READER

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Novel practices: Reading groups and narrative ideas

by

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I am a bookworm. In fact I cannot remember a time when I was not attracted to books. There are many photos of me as a young girl with my nose in a book, absolutely engrossed. I quite often think I have never really lifted my head up to look around.

As a child, books were my preferred companions during the long, otherwise lonely, summers at our remote cottage close only to the aunt's and uncle's cottages. My early reading often occurred by torchlight under the blanket and there is still something a little clandestine about my reading habits. They are often nocturnal and stealthy so that sleeping people are not disturbed. I have a belief that I cannot fall asleep at night without reading, even if it is only half a page.

Whenever I am to spend a night away from home I am more concerned about taking a good book to read than remembering to take anything else. On our beach holidays my great pleasure is to sit on the sand, consuming a delicious novel, daring anyone to interrupt.

I do so appreciate the local library and I take my reading seriously. I remember to put my name on waiting lists for popular books. It is really pleasing to receive a letter in the post advising that a sought-after book is waiting for me. I love the indulgence of being the first person to open a hardback novel. Opening it

up, being careful not to damage the spine, smelling the print and feeling the clean, untouched pages.

It was my commitment to reading and the hope that my children would also share this pleasure that informed the choice to be a television-free home for many years. I experience great joy when I witness the children's love of reading and I believe that I have played a part in making this a possibility in their lives.

And so it is probably no surprise to you, the reader of this piece, that, like many other women, I have recently initiated a reading group. Although we have only just begun, I have already experienced considerable joy by participating in this group.

At the inaugural meeting, the introduction exercise included talking about favourite books and our 'reading habits'. So taken-for-granted is my own reading that I was surprised when others spoke of 'struggling to find time to read', of sporadic, 'seize-the-moment' reading, and of reading for study or fact-finding purposes only. Two women have withdrawn, feeling unable to read the assigned novel in the six-week period between meetings of the reading group. For these women, reading could easily become a daunting pressure. Whereas for me, well I guess over the course of my life I have often neglected important things to get on with reading! One thing the reading group has already invited me to think about is the diversity of meaning that books and reading have in other people's lives.

Over the last two years I have also been studying narrative therapy and engaging with narrative practices in my work as a social worker in a hospital setting. I have become increasingly interested in the links between reading and narrative ideas and practices. In this paper I describe some of the ways in which I have been engaging with narrative practices in relation to talking about reading - both in my reading group and also in my work.

Novels and therapy

When people consult me to speak about a problem they are facing in their lives, their story may quickly have me thinking about something I have read. These connections or links are too distracting to ignore and I often find it appropriate to share the link with those with whom I am speaking.

For instance, I can remember the times when I have met with a group of parents of children with epilepsy. A continuing theme of our conversation has been the tension between protecting their children on the one hand and on the other hand allowing them to have the opportunities available to other children. Children who experience seizures may be hurt while they are just doing the things that children like to do and, because of this, the invitation to parents to form a hedge of protection around their child is very strong. Often though, parents recognise that this is an invitation to take away the challenges, hazards and privileges of childhood.

When parents talk about these hopes and fears, in my head I often hear the voice of Alan Marshall, who wrote the acclaimed book *I Can Jump Puddles* (1981) about his experience of living with polio.

Alan Marshall's writings then become a part of our conversations. I might remind the parents of the scene in the book when Alan, as a survivor of the polio epidemic, wobbly ambulant on crutches and physically frail and unsteady, precariously rides a horse and asks his Dad: 'Do you reckon I can ride?'. And his Dad replies: 'Yes, you're good, you've got good hands and you sit him well'. I might then ask the parents what they think it took for Alan's dad to reply in this way. I might ask, 'What do you think it might have meant for Alan that his Dad noticed his riding skills, not the risks of Alan being on a horse?'

Novels sneak into serious places. Some might say they are interlopers, gatecrashers, have tickets on themselves and should be evicted. Some medical students are surprised when I walk into their lecture and quote from well-read, dog-eared favourite novels instead of at the very least from the works of well-regarded social researchers. My school edition of 'I Can Jump puddles' has accompanied me to the podium of several conferences.

In thinking about the relationship between reading novels and counselling I am sure that many therapists have drawn inspiration for their work from characters, storylines and the rich descriptions of life offered by authors.

A reading group

When our reading group of women met for the first time, it turned out we had brought with us disparate hopes. Some came to catch up with friends, a rare treat in their busy lives. Some brought along a long history and love of reading. Some brought along a hope that the reading group would ignite a commitment to reading. While we all agreed that the ritual of food and wine was important.

In the very first group there was evidence of the tension between process and content. Some were dead keen to deconstruct the first book we had chosen - *The Idea of Perfection* by Kate Grenville (1999) - with no further ado. While others said 'Hang on, let's talk about our hopes for the group. Let's talk about our relationship to reading and books.'

What followed was a wonderful sharing of women's stories. Intimate snapshots of women's lives were offered, which on reflection seemed to be influenced by reading Kate Grenville's book. We heard stories of abandonment, of disappointments, of regrets, of being hurt and of hurting others. There was no curriculum vitae detail. I know that I shared a story that startled those who have known me since shared schooldays.

I spoke of being reminded of 'The Invitation' by Oriah Mountain Dreamer (1999) to share not 'what you do for a living' but 'what you ache for', not 'how old you are' but 'if you will risk looking like a fool for love':

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true ... It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up, after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done to feed the children ... It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back ... It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you, from the inside, when all else falls away.

Engaging with narrative ideas in a reading group

Having spoken about our hopes for the group and our relationship to books and reading, the next gathering of the reading group provided an opportunity for conversation informed by narrative practices.

I wrote to the reading group a week before the gathering to outline some of the ideas that inform narrative practice and to seek their consent to ask some questions when we met which would be influenced by narrative maps of practice. The women all said that they were willing to proceed with this plan.

In deciding to interview one woman in relation to her response to the chosen book, I wanted to try to avoid the sort of conversation about books that can become a thin critique. Newspaper or book-flap book reviews are often removed from the reviewer's experience, they could be written by anyone. My interest was in a different sort of conversation, one informed by the following quote by Robert Dessaix (2001): *When we read the stories of other people's lives, we reconfigure our own lives. The reader must write a parallel novel when reading one of my books- every reader brings his experience to make meaning of the.* I was interested in exploring how the novel resonated with the reading group member's experience. How had her own experience influenced her reading of the novel?

This time the book we were discussing was *Conditions of Faith* by Alex Miller (2000).

Snapshot of the conversation

Here is an edited snapshot of the conversation we shared:

Question: Is there anything in the story, the plot, the themes or a character in *Conditions of Faith* that caught your attention?

Answer: The main character, Emily. I got impatient with her - this young girl who decided just like that to get married to this chap and go to a foreign land and do all these wonderful things she imagines, driven by her Papa. I found that the narrative was not gripping enough for me to classify as a damn good read.

Question: Can I ask you a question about that? You said two things - you said that

you got impatient with her and that she wasn't gripping enough. Were those two things connected in any way?

These beginning questions were to 'negotiate an experience-near description' of whatever it was that the reader wanted to talk about that had attracted her interest in the book. I chose her words - 'impatient' and 'not gripping enough' because I was curious to know more about the reader's connection or not with the character, Emily.

Answer: I think so ... I found it hard to find anything intriguing that would make me want to go along on the journey with her. I was such an outsider. I didn't get involved. I didn't care very much what did happen to her. In fact I thought she was *silly*.

Question: If you were asked to describe her, you used the word *silly*, is that the word you would use to describe her?

Answer: Just young, shallow, *silly* - due to a lack of knowledge of the world. She comes from a very upper middle-class background, a protected, privileged lifestyle. Spoilt really.

Here I faced a dilemma. Although we had been able to gather an experience-near definition of the problem (Emily's silliness), as a reader and lover of novels and their characters I am interested in finding ways to talk about books without inviting judgement or reproach of characters.

Question: It's interesting to me that you don't find Emily gripping, that you got impatient with her, but in spite of this you started our conversation about her. I just wonder what it was about that attracted your attention?

Answer: Because it is her story. The other people are peripheral. I don't think the other characters matter to Emily much, even her daughter whom she chooses to leave. This is incomprehensible to me because there is nothing she couldn't have done while not abandoning her child. Much of the plot seemed romantic to me, as if it was an unreal fairy story.

I notice that the group member finds the mother leaving her daughter - 'incomprehensible'. There is something that resonates strongly for the reader here as she spoke with animation. In hindsight I could have asked her more about this,

about what the effects were on the reader about reading about a mother who 'chose to leave her daughter'. I also could have tried to open space for a consideration of an alternative story of Emily's life - what about her courage in leaving her home to go with a man she barely knew to the other side of the world? What about determination as she pursued her intellectual goals against incredible odds? What about a consideration of the influences in time and culture which were either constraining or facilitating of women at the time? What are the beliefs about the role of women that may encourage a judgement of Emily as silly?

Instead, I asked the reader more about her views on the 'silliness' of Emily's actions. In the course of the conversation the group member said a number of things that I then picked up on with the following question:

Question: When you were talking about your own impatience with Emily you said you 'sounded judging or a bit harsh' and said 'it wasn't as if I made all good decisions'. Do you think there could have been anything about your own experience as a young woman that might have made you more or less patient with her?

Answer: Well, I left home at twelve to go to school in Brisbane and never really went back again. After school I spent five years overseas. I know that wanderlust that Emily spoke of, wanting to be overseas. And some of my decisions when I was overseas were absolutely appalling. I was young, but my decisions never affected a child. I could never do that to a child.

This seemed to be a point of entry to have a conversation with the reader about her beliefs, principles, commitments, purposes, and intentions around mothering. Before I could ask some questions about this, however, the other women in the reading group were determined to reflect on what they have heard so far. This then took place with the most significant theme being to deconstruct notions around 'good' mothering. I then came back to the interview to ask the following question:

Question: Can I just check out with you, was the thing that really brought your strong feelings about the book and about Emily's character in particular, was this primarily a response to Emily's lack of commitment as a mother? I am just wondering about this. That seemed to be a strong comment you made about mothering. Was this in some way linked to your views on mothering?

Here I was interested in making visible the reader's values around mothering which are almost assuredly different from Emily's. I was thinking that this could then open space for a consideration of these differences and different histories. I was also hoping that articulating these values would enable a thicker description of what I am anticipating may be an alternative story about mothering.

Answer: It has a lot to do with it. You write your own morals about everything. I haven't been a mother to my regret. It's one of the real regrets of my life. I love children, I absolutely adore children, so for anyone to give up a child ... I just don't like it. What I couldn't relate to is that Emily could seemingly do it so easily. I thought there were other options available to her.

Question: What's your hunch about why she acted in the ways in which she did?

Answer: I think it was due to the influence of romanticism and that other woman encouraged her to be an academic, to do it in spite of having had a baby, to do it at whatever cost.

Question: Do you think this book set in the 1920s raises questions that have relevance for us as women today?

Answer: I think it invites us to consider the ideas about how women should behave. It's about women having to make choices about career or motherhood in ways that men do not.

Question: Could you say a little more about the complexities in choices between career and motherhood? Is there a story from your own experience perhaps?

Answer: Well, although I am not a mother, I work with children every day. I am a teacher to very young children at school. I spend most of my time being mother to them not being a teacher ... I remember one dear little boy. We were all sitting on the floor. I spend my days on the floor with them. Well, we were sitting on the floor. I think I was reading them a story and I felt something odd happening to my knee. I looked down and Matthew was licking my knee. I said, 'Matthew, darling, what are you doing?' 'It tastes good', he said. You just have to love them, don't you!

This was a beautiful moment in the conversation. It spoke to what the reader held dear in mothering small children. It spoke to this woman's skills at mothering. It spoke to the very different ways in which women find to balance mothering and careers. In hearing her words, I felt both the regret which the reader had articulated in relation to not having had children of her own, and also so heartened to consider the acts of mothering/parenting that teachers and other adults play in lives of children.

There were various directions that this conversation could then have gone. I could have thickened this story of alternative mothering by asking about where her ideas and skills of mothering have come from? Or I could have enquired as to her views on the effects of these acts of mothering. As it was, though, we then turned to reflections from the reading group.

A re-telling of the telling

The conversation with the rest of the reading group that followed was more about Emily, mother in the novel, than reflections on the reader's reflections on mothering. In hindsight, there were a number of questions that might have been helpful for me to ask the reading group at this time. I have listed these later on in the paper when I discuss possible structures for reading groups.

Other options for interviewing questions

The conversation above was guided by my intention to engage in a conversation that linked the lives of the characters in the book to the life of the reader. I was interested in which aspects of the book and characters resonated with the reader and why. I was hoping that, in the process, the values and commitments of the reader could become more richly described. In this instance, the conversation revolved around ideas of mothering and we were able to engage in an exploration of the reader's hopes and intentions in relation to mothering and how these are demonstrated in her work.

I have been thinking about the kind of conversation that might have been possible if my conversation with the reader had been more orientated around a re-

telling of her 'listening to the novel'. In hindsight, I believe that the categories of questions with which reflecting teams are engaged (White 1997) might be helpful in structuring future reading group discussions. For instance:

1. What did you read that caught your attention?
2. What did that evoke?
3. What sense did you get of that person's / character's identity?
4. How come you related so strongly to that?
5. Where has this taken you in your thinking? How has this changed your understanding of your own life?

A further conversation about reading

I have followed up the reading group conversation by asking a young adult to think about a book or film that they had recently enjoyed and then I asked them to consider the above questions.

In this instance, the reader spoke of reading the book *The Great Gatsby* (1990) while a schoolgirl and how she was captured by it: 'It was unusual, not like anything I had ever read before'. She remembered *Gatsby* as a rich man who had everything. He threw money around, hosted splendid parties, was surrounded by people but was a recluse. He was lonely and she ended up 'feeling really sorry for him'. This book transported the reader in her thinking about happiness and its connection to 'having it all'.

In turn, thinking of these things reminded her of a film she especially liked called *Life is Beautiful*. She spoke of this film (which depicts the efforts of a father to protect and guide his son through the concentration camps of Nazi Germany) as moving between total happiness and great sadness. She was moved by the ways in which the main character, in the most desperate of circumstances, 'made the best out of everything'. For the sake of his child, he sought and found hope and even humour to the very end.

In thinking about this book and this film, the reader spoke about how they had assisted her in shifting from believing that happiness is connected to 'having it all'. Instead she could now articulate the importance of a sense of personal agency

in creating a feeling of 'having it all', no matter the circumstances. Both the book and film had also contributed to a commitment to 'make the most' of each day no matter the obstacles.

When I enquired as to the effects of these thoughts in her life, the young reader said she knew that this knowledge had been important to her in these uncertain times (post-September 11th and the attacks on the World Trade Centre, and the subsequent military action in Afghanistan). The young reader spoke of how these knowledges were linked to her decision to go ahead with long-held plans to travel overseas in spite of increased uncertainty in the world.

This conversation about a book and a film was very different than the conversation in the reading group. The questions I asked invited a reflection about how the novel and the film had made a difference to the reader. At first this was difficult for the reader to articulate, but when I asked some scaffolding questions the reader was able to speak of how her responses to the book and the novel were linked to her intentions and purposes for her life.

We were able to explore how *The Great Gatsby* had reminded the reader of her determination to travel, how travel was connected to a commitment to appreciating people from other lands, and how this appreciation had been fostered by time spent overseas. This in turn led to a conversation about time she had spent in the USA as an eight-year-old and what she had found significant about this experience. Links were made between her beliefs in independence, travel, taking a stand against prejudice and the labelling and blaming of people, and making the most of every day no matter what the circumstances. When I asked if it was helpful to make these links, the reader strongly declared to be a good thing.

When I asked why this was a good thing, I learned that it was because she could now understand how her actions were in fact linked to values and principles which she holds dear. She could now more clearly see that her actions were not random events but instead an expression of linked principles. In this way, the conversation about the book and the film enabled a thicker description of the reader's preferred identity descriptions. The reader came to see how her actions were not coincidental, not by chance, not a fluke, but were linked to certain values which in turn were linked to events in her past and people she had known. Talking about the book and the film in the ways we did enabled the generation of this richer description of her life.

Starting a reading group: potholes, ditches, safety ramps and street directories

I would like to now return to some considerations about reading groups. In this world of busyness, participating in a reading group can be a significant commitment. At the very least, it will involve reading the assigned novel and meeting regularly, usually monthly, with other members of the group. The more I have come to think about reading groups the more aware I have become of some of the obstacles that need to be overcome in order for everyone to feel satisfied. These range from practical considerations and demands upon participants, to ideas that people may have about reading and/or talking in a group that may get in the way of their participation, to differences of opinion as to the purposes of coming together.

To avoid some of the pitfalls which commonly beset reading groups (ours as well as others) I have tried here to come up with a list of possible precautions that can be taken, and ways in which narrative practices may assist in the process.

1) Allocating time to talk together about some of the hazards implicit in creating a reading group.

Here are some questions that may be helpful in guiding an initial conversation. What comes of this initial conversation could perhaps be documented in some way and referred back to throughout the duration of the group:

- What are the intentions of readers in coming to the group?
- What are the hopes of the readers in attending the group?
- Are there fears for the reader in attending the group?
- What are the things/thoughts/ideas that could get in the way of your participation?
- In what ways could the group support the reader(s)?
- Consider a conversation with a group of people that you enjoyed. What was it about this conversation that you enjoyed? How can this be brought into the reading group context?

- 2) *'Talking about the book' and 'talking about ourselves'. Clarifying that both are possible.*

The tension between 'talking about the book' and 'talking about ourselves' is often considerable in reading groups! Some people inevitably wish to talk more socially, less related to book content, while others have been waiting expectantly to talk with others about what the book meant to them. I believe that one way of pre-empting this may be to have a conversation early on about how book talk is inevitably a sharing of our experiences, beliefs and values. This was brought home in our group when early on each member was invited to speak about books they had most enjoyed in the past. As each person spoke of their engagement with the particular book, they spoke of what had caught their attention. Readers were then invited to embody these responses when we enquired as to why particular books or characters were significant to them and what a difference they had made to their lives. In response to these enquiries, people often made connections and links between the reading and their own lives, or people who they have known and treasured.

Talking a little about our relationship to reading, and to particular characters in books, and how these have shaped our lives, has transformed our conversations from looking at the novel as 'other' to looking at the novel as in relation to the reader. This appreciation that the personal is implicit in our conversation about the novels we discuss has somehow made our conversations more gentle. It has slowed down our talking, heightened the listening and encouraged the responses to readers' views to be tentative rather than conclusive. It has also helped to alleviate the tension between 'talking about the book' and 'talking about ourselves' - although I doubt this tension will ever disappear completely.

A possible structure for reading groups

One way to facilitate the sort of conversation that links the lives of readers with the books that are being discussed is to use a definitional ceremony structure (such as the one I mentioned above). Here I have suggested a possible definitional ceremony structure for use with reading groups (see White 1997).

Stage One

Consider appointing a rotating position where someone assumes an observer/commentator role as well as a participant role. In Stage One this person assumes responsibility for interviewing one particular reader around the following sorts of questions:

- What was it about the book that attracted your attention?
- In what way did the novel shift your thinking?
- What was it about the book that influenced this shift?
- Was there a character whose experience resonated with some aspect of your experience of life?
- How has this made a difference to your understanding of who you are or the possibility for a future other than the hopes or fears you had for the future before you read the novel?
- (If this is a work-related reading group then a further question can be added, e.g., What difference will this make to your work?)

Stage Two

The observer/commentator/participant then invites the rest of the group to respond to what they have just heard by asking them a number of questions:

- What did listening to the reader's reflections have you thinking about?
- What images, thoughts, memories did it evoke for you?
- What are you thinking now that you wouldn't have been thinking before you listened to the reader's reflections about the book?
- What difference might this make to you (and your work)?
- Has the reader's story affected your thinking about the book and its story? How?

Stage Three

The observer/commentator/participant then asks the initial reader what it was like to hear the reflections of the entire reading group.

Stage Four

A general discussion about people's experiences of the process then takes place.

Some principles to keep in mind

While using such a structure for reading groups, there are a number of principles that I think may be helpful to keep in mind.

1. *An ethic of curiosity*

It seems helpful to approach reading groups with an appreciation that the task of the group is not to arrive at a common understanding about the novel. Instead, differences in what people notice in the novel and differences in understandings about the meaning of certain events are openings for curious questions, for example: 'What was it that had you noticing John's courage?'; 'Why was this significant to you?'. In this way, an ethic of curiosity can inform discussions within reading groups.

2. *An ethic of respecting characters*

I have become increasingly interested in how we can have engaging and rigorous discussions about novels without entering into the judgement or condemnation of characters. One way to engage in conversations respectfully about characters is to acknowledge the multi-storied nature of characters' identities, just as we would other people. In this way, discussions about characters need not enter into totalising descriptions but can instead acknowledge the complexities and multi-storied accounts of their identities.

3. *An ethic of respecting authors*

I have become more committed than ever to respecting authors after listening to an interview with Tim Winton, an Australian novelist (Winton 2001). In this interview, Tim Winton spoke of his writing being drawn from childhood memories of family life, of precious moments with his mother as he helped her with the daily chores such as collecting eggs or picking fruit. He

spoke of his mother's joy in reciting poetry she had memorised in her few years of schooling. He spoke of how she had clung to her learning and valued Tim's attraction and aptitude to an intellectual life despite many obstacles. I heard how all these things are informing Tim Winton's writing now and how these stories are present in his words. I felt a sense of privilege at this sharing of his experience. It has made me curious about other authors' relationships to their writing and it has further encouraged me to speak about people's writing with respect.

Concluding thoughts about novels, narrative practices and reading groups

In this paper I have reflected on some of my favourite things. I have considered how reading novels has enriched my connection to narrative ideas and practices. Novels have provided me with stories that bring the ideas to life. And I have considered the difference that narrative ideas have made to reading novels. Now, as I read, I notice themes that once remained unnoticed - themes of justice, power, ritual, sacrifice, and courage. I find myself wondering what made it possible for people to hold onto their hopes and dreams in daunting circumstances. I am more speculative in my relationship with characters and plots. I have noticed that studying narrative ideas has changed the way in which I read. I stop more often to reflect on what I have just read. I am no longer a fast reader. I find there is more to say when I talk about novels now but I am more tentative, less certain in this talking. I am curious in ways that enrich my reading, and my reading continues to enrich my work. And the reading group? Well, it provides a wonderful place for talking about books and for listening to the ways in which readers' lives are linked to the characters and events in books. Inevitably, this process of talking and listening change the meaning of books for me and for others. There is a great pleasure in the co-existence in my life of novels, narrative practices and reading groups. If others have a similar pleasure and are engaging with narrative practices in their reading groups, I'd love to hear from them!

Note

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