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NOT TO BE QUOTED WITHOUT PERMISSION**

Memories of Fiction: Oral Histories of Reading Experiences

Introduction

I'm going to talk today about oral histories of reading.

I'll start with Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa's book, *Australian Readers Remember: An Oral History of Reading* (1992), and also mention some other oral history projects with readers. I will then lead into the project I've been working on with my colleagues Amy Tooth Murphy, Graham Smith, and Sarah Pyke, '[Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories](#)' (London 2014-2018, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council).



Photograph of Sarah Pyke (project PhD researcher), Amy Tooth Murphy (Research Associate), Shelley Trower (Principal Investigator), and Martyn Lyons (from left to right), at the launch of the 'Memories of Fiction' project in September 2014, when Martyn gave a talk for the Oral History Society seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, 'Why We Need An Oral History of Reading'. Podcast [here](#).

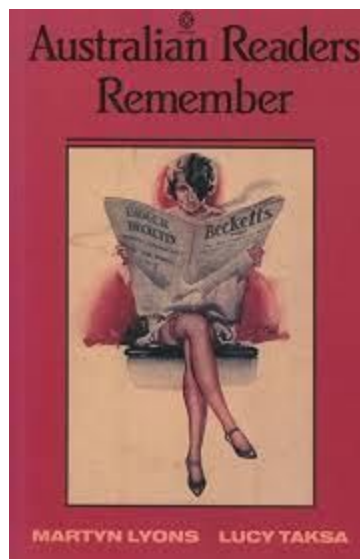
I'll also talk today about oral histories as narratives. A familiar way of thinking about oral histories is to consider the interviewee as a narrator, or even, to some extent, a storyteller. So with oral histories of reading, we have narratives about reading narratives; stories within stories. These are oral histories of reading that can themselves be read (and listened to).

¹ *From Shelley Trower: This is a modified version of my keynote talk. I submitted substantial parts of the talk to two journals and one article is soon to be published; another is in the process of revision. I have condensed and adapted part of the talk for this piece in order to avoid overlap, while still working with the key conference themes.*

I will go on to indicate how memories of childhood narratives may themselves take on narrative form in oral history interviews.

Oral histories of reading, in Australia and the UK

Over the last three decades, oral history has grown in importance as a resource for research into reading. *Australian Readers Remember* has been influential. Lyons and Taksa's project involved 61 interviews in New South Wales on the role of reading throughout people's lives. It made some attempt to be representative, by finding narrators in different classes, and in rural and urban regions, and women and men (although there were limits as they acknowledge, e.g. a middle-class bias). The book covers all kinds of reading material, including novels, poetry, newspapers and magazines. It also discusses reading across the lifespan, from childhood onwards, and other aspects of reading including libraries, bookshops, and attitudes to reading. It covers a lot!



Australian Readers Remember is an important starting point for at least two recent projects using oral histories to study reading. The first is 'Scottish Readers Remember'. Directed by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (2006-2009, AHRC), this was the first sustained attempt to record the reading experiences of twentieth-century Scots. (For more information see [here](#).)

One point of focus for both the Australian and the Scottish Readers Remember projects was the extent to which reading contributes to a sense of national identity. Lyons and Taksa found that the Australian readers they talked to remembered titles from the British literary canon (including novels by Charles Dickens) far more often

than Australian literature, and found this somewhat surprising as commentators had heralded an Australian literary tradition as gaining strength in this period, contributing to national identity. Finkelstein and McCleery similarly found that readers' memories were by no means restricted to Scottish literature. So they write for example, that 'The reading memories of [Mr Todd, a worker in the local steel works], like many others in his age group demonstrates that the tastes of Scots were eclectic and wide, and tended to look outwards, rather than simply at their own traditional literary heritage' (Fleming *et al*, 199).

So both studies explore the extent to which readers remember national literatures, to give brief sense of connections between them. Other UK place-based oral histories of reading projects include [Reading Sheffield](#) (2009 ongoing).

Memories of/as fiction 1: narratives of gendered reading

The 'Memories of Fiction' project also looks back to *Australian Readers Remember*. This project title refers its focus on how people remember their reading of fictional narratives, spanning from stories read in childhood to novels read in adulthood - so again spanning lifetimes. It was based in London, as we found members of library-based reading groups in the south west borough of Wandsworth to interview – but our focus was on memory, rather than place. (Libraries as public places have become an important strand, however, and this dimension is going to be taken forward in the new AHRC follow-on project, 'Living Libraries' (2019-2020). The oral histories will be archived with National Life Stories at the British Library, and will be incorporated into performances and artworks, an audio documentary.)

The 'Memories of Fiction' title also alludes to another aspect of *Australian Readers Remember*, drawing on its claims that memories themselves can take on fictional form in oral history narratives. So in other words, 'Memories of Fiction' alludes to how memories as narrated can take on the form of fiction, as well as to how memories can be *of* fictions. Such an angle chimes with the attention given by numerous oral historians to the subjectivity and narrativity at least as much as the factuality of what oral history narrators remember (dating back to 1980s, and especially Portelli's influential work). Lyons and Taksa go so far as to describe oral history narratives as 'novels': 'The oral historian's task is to listen to other people's novels... All autobiography, whether written or oral, is a form of fiction' (13). This claim may go too far - there are differences between oral history narratives and novels (not least in that novels don't traditionally make any claims to be factual). But I think it is interesting in how it points towards the interviews themselves as narratives that are

comparable to the remembered narratives. Or in other words, for our project, how we might think about memories of fiction being themselves potentially fictional (or at least as containing non-factual elements).

Lyons and Taksa discuss how ‘myths’ can influence perceptions of reading. These myths concern stereotypical male and female roles:

Readers' perceptions of books and reading were apparently clouded by a series of pervasive myths. The myth of the Great Outdoors produced the assumption that reading was somehow incompatible with playing football or tennis, going surfing or indulging in other physical or sporting activities. This was largely, but not exclusively, a male myth. Several readers thus found it difficult to reconcile their own love of reading with mythical versions of masculinity.

A second myth encouraged readers to equate reading with idleness. Women seemed particularly strong protagonists of this extension of the work ethic. They viewed reading as an individual indulgence, which could conflict with their perceived duty of service to a family group. This myth made it difficult to reconcile their taste for reading with their vision of the ideal housekeeper. (191)

Such myths can also influence the narration of memories of reading, including of other readers reading. The Australian narrators commonly asserted that women had no time for reading as they were too busy carrying out domestic duties. Memories of mothers include Pearl K’s, for example: ‘I don’t remember mum having much time to read, much. She read stories to us when we were young but I don’t remember her sitting down with a novel, or anything. She seemed to be always busy’. But Lyons and Taksa observe that further questioning in many cases ‘revealed that a considerable amount of reading was often done, albeit of a fragmentary nature, whether of newspapers, magazines or books themselves’ (158-9).

In the ‘Memories of Fiction’ project, we similarly explored how reading is gendered. For this part of the project we went back to a large oral history archive from the 1980s – the short title of which is ‘100 Families’, and in full: ‘Family, Social Mobility and Ageing: An Intergenerational Approach’. The project's aim was to record multiple generations of family members discussing many aspects of family life, which included reading.²

² More information about ‘100 Families’ and our analysis along with a much greater use of the archive can be found in the article, “‘Me mum likes a book, me dad’s a newspaper man’: Reading, gender and domestic life in “100 Families””, by Trower, Tooth-Murphy, and Smith, published in *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* in May 2019. <http://www.participations.org/Volume%2016/Issue%201/26.pdf>

We found a conventional tendency across generations to see mothers as readers of fiction, and their reading to be escapist and to interfere with housework - as opposed to men's apparently more purposeful reading (e.g. of newspapers) (a tendency that goes back at least two centuries). Again, much like Lyons and Taksa, we found an opposition between reading and women's domestic duties. But this time it was not so much that narrators remembered their mothers *not* reading, so much as they remembered their mother's reading interfering with 'their perceived duty of service', as Lyons and Taksa put it, as in this example:

Mrs Schlarman (d.o.b. 1946, professional, North West, married):

Interviewer: You were saying your father enjoyed reading?

Interviewee: Well, I'll qualify that a bit, he did seem to, but he never seemed to read books, I didn't, you know, novels or anything, he didn't read those, but he did read the newspaper and things, and my mother read books, and she used to get lost in a book, I remember as a child, 'When are you going to get my tea?', as she was reading a book, she read a lot, yes.

Interviewer: What sort of things?

Interviewee: Well, novels, not romantic fiction, but not, she's got a bit heavier as the years have gone on, but yes, she's always read quite a lot.

We see here how reading is seen to conflict with housework (mother is reading instead of getting her child's tea; 'When are you going to get my tea?'). And also we can see the opposition between mothers and fathers reading: fathers were seen to read newspapers and other forms of non-fiction, and not to read in a same escapist kind of way as women (who 'get lost in a book'). And we found that this opposition between women's and men's reading habits may also be somewhat 'mythical', as further analysis showed men to similarly engage in escapist reading, using it to erect a barrier between themselves and their domestic environment. As in the case of Mary Lear (d.o.b. [etc...]), who recalls that her father 'Always got an *Evening Chronicle*', which he 'always read to himself after he'd had his tea':

Interviewer: When your dad was reading a newspaper or anything did he read out bits and pieces to you?

Mary: No. No, always read to himself.

Interviewer: Was that his quiet time?

Mary: Ah huh. After he'd had his tea and that.

Interviewer: And you had to leave him on his own and...?

Mary: Oh uh huh. He didn't like to be disturbed.

In other words, both women and men used reading to disengage with the domestic family realm, to mark out time for themselves. But gender stereotypes seem to shape the way these family scenes are narrated, as none of the interviewees describe men's reading as escapist in the same way as they do women. (Men *not* getting 'lost in books' like women, may also even draw on the notion that men are better drivers with their superior sense of spatial and geographical direction than women.) (Please refer to our article for a full analysis with multiple examples.)

Memories of/as fiction 2: childhood books and storytelling

Reading materials (including books and newspapers) can be barriers, and also bridges, as Leah Price observes in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*. As well as instances in which books are barriers, there are many instances in '100 Families' of books as a strong means of bonding in families, of children and parents remembering reading together, often just before or in bed. There are many cases of fathers as well as mothers reading to their children, although it is more often mothers who read stories, while fathers are more likely to read non-fiction or to be read to when their children are learning to read.

I want here however to move on from the 1980s archive to a 'Memories of Fiction' interview carried out in 2015. Reusing an archive from the 1980s, considered alongside Lyons and Taksa's interviews from the late 1980s and early 1990s (along with the work of Janice Radway and others in our article) can allow us to consider oral histories as narratives of gendered reading in that period (in the UK, Australia, and the US), but by making our own interviews for 'Memories of Fiction' we could ask many more questions concerning our own research focus: about memories *of narratives*, as well as considering those memories *as narratives*.

One of our main findings was that despite many questions along the lines of 'what do you remember about that book?', many of the strongest, most detailed memories were of reading experiences rather than of the narratives themselves as written words. Alison Barton, a librarian and book group facilitator, was typical in this respect and will provide the brief, indicative case study here. Within the first five minutes of her first interview, Alison described her father reading the *Alice* books aloud to her at some length, which he did very theatrically and memorably (it is a 'very strong memory') (The interview is available to listen to [here](#)). About 30 minutes into that interview, Amy's questions about Alison's memories of the content of books, prompted memories instead of people and places:

Amy: You mentioned *Winnie the Pooh* - what particularly captivated you about Milnes's work?

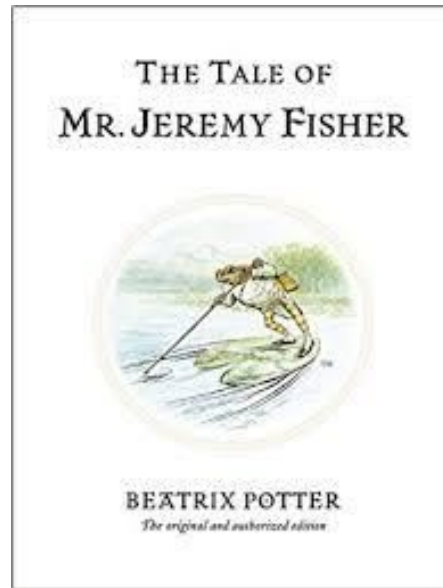
Alison: I think again that's to do - you see *Alice in Wonderland* was very Dad, but *Winnie the Pooh* was my Mum, so I think again its remembering Mum reading it with me, and um, yeah, so that's because of memories of Mum. [...]

What else have I got? [written on a list of books Alison remembered to prepare for the interview, as a kind of self-prompt.] My Grandma, my Mum's Mother and my Grandpa lived in this enormous great big house, and in the enormous great big house was an enormous great big attic, which was like a kind of um, it was like a childrens' playroom really. There was a great big old like a travel chest thing, full of fancy dress, and there were lots and lots of shelves of books, very old books, things like the flower fairy books, and Beatrix Potter, and there were lots of really old books, and there were some books up there that were fairy story books, and I can only remember them by the covers and the names, but I can still remember really enjoying them, and it's because of the memories they bring back not because of the books themselves. I remember the room really clearly, and that was the Andrew Lang fairy story books, the purple fairy stories, and the green fairy stories and yellow and gold and silver I think there was.

As Alison reflects, what she remembers most of all is the people with whom she read and the places where she read, rather than what the books were about or the words inside them. In her memories of reading books with her parents, she describes the sofa and the bed where she reads (in rather a Proustian manner); in her memories of books at her grandparents' house, she remembers 'the room really clearly', along with the book covers.

A key difference between the family scenes in which books are barriers or a means of connecting, is that the former are read silently and the latter aloud. The oral quality of oral history interviews may be important here, in allowing Alison to echo her father as a storyteller. Although Alison does not refer to the content of the books in any overt or even conscious way, the childhood stories may be implicitly remembered through the narration of the scene of reading. Her description of the house is itself something like a children's story, with its use of repetition to convey largeness: her grandparents 'lived in this enormous great big house, and in the enormous great big house was an enormous great big attic'. Alison conveys the perspective of a child, for whom most things seem large on an exaggerated scale, in much the same way as many of the children's books themselves do.

Among those Alison mentions, in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Mr Jeremy Fisher*, there is the 'great big water-beetle' and the 'great big enormous trout'; in *Winnie the Pooh* the Heffalump is 'A great enormous thing... like an enormous big nothing'; in *Alice in Wonderland* we can find an 'enormous puppy', a 'great thistle'; and in Andrew Lang's *Blue Fairy Book* there is the 'great big cauldron'. While Alison does not describe any of these enormous great big things in the stories, her memories of fiction could take on the storytelling form of the interview itself.



Oral and written narratives

One of the fascinating aspects of Finnish oral history, about which it was a great pleasure to learn more at the IOHA conference in June 2018, is how it brings together oral and written narratives. Finland has its unique collections of written narratives, such as the life writings sent into the Finnish Literature Society in response to its various requests. For a project about reading, it gathered 548 life writings containing recollections of reading, and among the many wonderfully rich talks, Anna Kajander's '[Bookshelves in Memories of Reading](#)' used this archive to consider the importance of books as physical objects for readers. We are also delighted to include an article by two of the organisers, Anne Heimo and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander, 'Everyday Reading Cultures of Finnish Immigrant Communities'[link to follow], in the Themed Section of *Participations* that we recently edited, 'Interviews and Reading' (May 2019), an article that brings together a wealth of written and oral materials to convey the importance of material books to Finnish immigrants in Australia and the US. An article by Mel Gibson in that same Section, 'Memories of a Medium', discusses the use of comics as objects in interviews to elicit memories.

Material books are also important for most of the ‘Memories of Fiction’ narrators, including Alison who described how she still has the *Alice* books: ‘I made sure that I definitely definitely got those to keep’. For all these narrators, books serve at least in part as a means of remembering.

The importance of books and newspapers as objects also comes across in the ‘100 Families’ interviews, as where fathers such as Mary Lear’s use the paper like a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign. Although these materials may be far more throwaway than the *Alice* books, again, these interviews have led me to question the primacy of textual content (as has Janice Radway, Leah Price and others). As a literary critic, I have long been trained to analyse textual content and to see that as of primary interest, but these diverse sources have all led me to consider the materiality of books as ripe for further investigation. At the same time, however, we can analyze the content of the oral history interviews themselves (whether oral or transcribed versions) to reveal how they may implicitly take on the narrative form of memories *of* narratives.

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