

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

Introduction

The digitalization of the book market, with its fundamental impact on modes of production and reception, has drawn new attention to the social dimensions of reading. The “digital literary sphere” (Murray 2018) has been seen as affording new ways of transforming reading into a communal activity. At the same time, scholars have also taken the latest media revolution as an inspiration to (re)examine the ways in which reading has always been social – see, for example, Heather E. Blatt’s 2018 study on readerly interactions in late-medieval England, which takes as its point of departure the concept of ‘participatory culture’ as introduced in digital studies, or Abigail Williams’s *The Social Life of Books* (2017), which intertwines forms of sociability in the eighteenth century, questions of access and format, with different modes of reading and attention.

In this section, we do not only aim to offer a critical investigation of the different ways in which reading in the digital age can be understood as (or in some cases merely appears to be) ‘social’. We also would like to invite contributions on the sociality of reading in earlier periods. The design of this section is interdisciplinary in that we invite contributions from ELT as well as linguistics and literary studies. Early career colleagues are particularly encouraged to apply.

Possible topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Reading communities from monastic cloisters to digital book clubs
- Empirical studies on real reader interaction
- The study of interpretive communities
- Social reading practices in the classroom
- Fictional scenarios of readerly interaction
- Social reading and/as activism
- Praxeological dimensions of social reading in literary studies
- Social reading and democratization
- Reading aloud (as a historical or contemporary practice)
- Communal reading spaces
- Digital affordances for social reading
- Reading as a family routine
- Reading and socialization
- Accessibility and exclusion in reading communities
- Readerly isolation
- The value of reading
- Hierarchies of taste

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

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Keynote

Christina Lupton (Copenhagen/Warwick): Reading Communities – For Work or for Pleasure?

Abstract: In his recent study *Professing Criticism*, John Guillory describes one challenge for our discipline being the fact that we share our object of study with lay readers. Unlike the texts consulted by dentists or engineers, the texts we study also belong to readers who access them for pleasure. Guillory claims that the professional reading of literature continues to be marked by various tendencies that do not apply to lay readers: professional literary critics, he argues, are members of a discipline, paid to read as a part of an academic community. In contrast, lay readers earn their living elsewhere and are generally solitary in their consumption of books.

This paper contends with Guillory's argument on several counts. Firstly, it argues that reading *after work* involves, and has always involved, forms of congregation, affiliation, and community integral to the way we imagine literature's ability to circulate, to bind the nation,

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

and to provide the basis of a public sphere. This shows up across three centuries of novels (my examples here include *Robinson Crusoe*, *Mill on the Floss*, and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*) that hail workers at rest as the ideal participants in their fictions. Secondly, though, I show that the times and spaces in which readers read off the clock are integral to the idea of a community devoted to the professional reading of literature. Here I draw on the results of a recent sociological study, “What Do Humanists Do,” where, together with Ben Davies, I suggest how important time *beyond work* is as the temporal pipeline along which our own professional interests – and possibilities of readerly community – travel.

Bio Note: Christina Lupton is Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen. She writes about the history and practice of reading from the eighteenth century to the present. Her most recent research has been into contemporary novel reading during the Covid-19 pandemic and is published as the jointly authored monograph *Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic* (OUP 2022) and a memoir about reading in her own life (*Love and the Novel*, Profile 2022).

Panel Speakers

Rebeca Araya Acosta (Berlin): “We, the miners in this place” – Westerkirk Parish Library as an Example of Popular Enlightenment

Abstract: “The enlightenment was different things to different people even at the time, just as it has been ever since.” (Munck 2000, 99) Thomas Munck’s observation from his social history of the enlightenment becomes particularly pertinent when considering the gradual emergence of subscription libraries in rural Scotland. The paper focuses on one such appropriation of the enlightenment. It looks at the emergence history of Westerkirk Parish Library, established in January 1793 under the aegis of Westerhall Mining Company. To avoid the miners’ prolonged exposure to the toxic antimony, its owners provided them with a set of twenty- three books as a way of entertainment while they waited to resume work on the mine. Out of this gift sprung the initiative among the miners to start a subscription library, toward which each member was to contribute five shillings. The Minute Book recording the appointment of a committee and the purchasing decisions and transactions offers valuable insight into the reading habits and expectations of this group of workers.

Factoring in assumptions about the enlightenment reading curriculum, the paper reflects on the importance of inventories like this one to trace the reading interests of individuals outside the sphere of influence of intellectual centers like Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, and London. As a document that recorded the collective deliberations of readers about the choice of books and the mode of obtaining and maintaining them, the Minute Book is here advanced as an object of study complementary to period anthologies. It not only shows

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

what are otherwise considered “ideal” texts (Price 2006, 10) from their physical side, i.e., their price, appearance, and material composition. It also features their “social lives” as they pass through the hands of reading workers.

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Bio Note: Rebeca Araya Acosta is a post-doc at the English department of the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Her dissertation entitled “Compilation and Eighteenth-Century English Literature. Making Sense Beyond Genre and Discourse” is currently being prepared for publication. Rebeca is also working on a second project tying together British solidarity with Latin America during the Cold War and the critical implications for the discourse of literary realism.

Birte Christ (Gießen): Creating a Post-War West German Reading Community – RO-RO-RO and British Authors in Translation

Abstract: From 1946 to 1949, the publisher Rowohlt provided the German public with its first reading material after the war by printing novels in an economical newspaper format, dubbed “Rowohlts Rotations-Romane” (RO-RO-RO). Rowohlt’s explicit mission was to enable German readers to acquaint themselves with important works of German and world literature in order to intellectually and politically integrate into a democratic Europe. Among the twenty-five works published between December 1946 and October 1949 were nineteen novels in translation, of which six were translated from American and four from British English. All novels are introduced to German readers by lengthy afterwards, composed by German writers and journalists. While Rowohlt’s ability to create a coherent literary program was heavily circumscribed by re-education policies and difficulties in securing international rights, this paper suggests that, nevertheless, Rowohlt targeted a clearly envisioned German reading community, and thus helped construct such a reading community as one of the pillars of a democratic re-birth of the country. This is particularly evident in the afterwards, which focus only on aspects of the texts and of the author’s lives and works which can be harnessed in order to construct such an ideal post-war German reading community.

The proposed paper focuses on the four British novels in translation, Joseph Conrad’s *Taifun* (December 1946 [1902]), Gilbert Keith Chesterton’s *Das Fliegende Wirtshaus* (August 1949 [*Flying Inn*, 1914]), and Graham Greene’s *Das Herz aller Dinge* (October 1949 [*The Heart of the Matter*, 1948]) and *Die Kraft und die Herrlichkeit* (December 1949 [*The Power and the Glory*, 1940]). Based on archival work at Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, the paper shows

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

how the editorial framing of the novels in the afterwords construct, on the one hand, a European reading community via an emphasis on shared values of German readers and British writers, and, on the other, how the authors, as persons, function as models of “good” reading and citizenship.

Bio Note: Birte Christ is stand-in professor of British and American Literature and Culture at Justus-Liebig-University Gießen. Her research and teaching has included the study of early twentieth-century middlebrow reading communities, especially as interpellated through serial novels in women’s magazines, as well as practices of reading in the digital age. Her current project – from which the proposed paper is a spin-off – focuses on the construction of a German post-war reading culture through American novels in translation in the programs of the publisher Rowohlt, Bertelsmann Lesering, and Reader’s Digest Auswahlbücher.

Hanne Roth (Tübingen): Tobias Smollett and the Scene of Sociable Reading

Abstract: It is an open secret among Smollett scholars that the Scottish eighteenth-century novelist’s forte was the creation of brilliant episodes – even if Smollett’s novels suffer from structural as well as generic indecisiveness (see McKillop 1956, Boucé 1976, Skinner 1996, Beasley 1998, Blackwell 2011, Jones 2018). Recent developments in the history of reading, have made it possible to make sense of this seemingly problematic aspect of Smollett’s fiction in the context of eighteenth-century reading practices. Thus, the last ten years have seen a new appreciation of Smollett’s episodic style, which is now recognisable as acting hand in glove with readers that were “eager to consume novels in pieces” (Blackwell 435). This talk proposes to take this recent focus on Smollett’s fragmented fictions one step further by testing the novels’ disconnected scenes as to their suitability for *sociable reading*. Once analysed under the twin spotlights of the *ramble novel* – a form of fiction “using a skeletal plot and a rudimentary central character to unify a string of broad comic incidents” (Dickie 102) – and sociable reading, the aspects of Smollett’s fiction which hamper readerly pleasures in the twenty-first century, can be seen to have been particularly conducive to the pleasures of reading together.

If, as Abigail Williams argues in *The Social Life of Books* (2017), eighteenth-century readers habitually consumed novels together, read out loud, and in “discrete narrative chunks” (76), then Smollett’s novels, by virtue of their predictable, loosely connected episodes, would seem to lend themselves particularly well to this kind of reading. In order to put this thesis to the test, this talk takes a closer look at three key works in Smollett’s oeuvre: *Roderick Random* (1748), *Gil Blas* (1749), and *Sir Launcelot Greaves* (1760-61). Building on Simon Dickie’s recent work on the ramble novel two features of Smollett’s rambling fictions will be singled out to test the thesis of Smollett’s work being “eminently suitable for reading in short bursts” (Williams 231): namely ramble novels’ reliance on disconnected episodes, and the repetitiveness and derivativeness of these episodes. By way of analysing individual scenes

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

from three different works by Smollett, it will be demonstrated that these discrete narrative chunks can indeed be understood and enjoyed by readers unfamiliar with Smollett's work.

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Bio Note: Hanne Roth is a PhD candidate at the University of Tübingen. In 2021, she organised the workshop *Novel Histories: New Approaches to Eighteenth-Century Fiction*. Her research project looks at eccentric uncles and alternative family-making in Tobias Smollett's novels.

Gero Bauer (Tübingen): Metafictional Materialities – Fictional Reading Communities After the Turn to Reconstruction

Abstract: Metafiction is still most readily associated with postmodern irony and deconstruction. However, some recent examples of metafictional texts after what Irmtraud Huber has called the 'turn to reconstruction' in 21st-century fiction employ metafictional techniques to tell a sincere story about the value of reading for mutual understanding and community building in a fragmented world. More crucially, these works also offer a

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

commentary on the place of literary texts as material objects in the age of digitalization.

In this paper, I argue that several prominent examples of contemporary metafictional novels negotiate the significance of reading and readerly interaction via the exchange of texts as physical artefacts both on the level of form and on the level of content. I propose that these novels do not represent a simplistic rejection of the digital sphere and its implications for the book market and for society and culture at large, but open up provocative spaces in which the material status of books as objects makes a claim for ongoing significance.

By way of example, I will consider two novels in detail. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) successfully combines metafictional play with a sincere humanist message. The novel's metaleptic structure, in which each of the six nested stories and their respective protagonists take on significance for the next both as virtual reverberance or memory and in the form of actual, physical artefacts which other characters then read and reappropriate, creates a sense of intimate connection through the act of reading. The characters literally read and reconstruct each other's stories, and the reader of the novel gets implicated in this process of material recovery and communal reconstruction. *S.* (2013) by Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams takes a similar idea a step further: the book is both a story within a story, in which characters forge connections by commenting on and entering into a conversation about the book's mysteries on different diegetic levels, and an object which, with its facsimile presentation and accompanying objects (postcards, napkins, letters), itself insists on being handled as a material artefact in a space of physical human encounters.

Bio Note: PD Dr. Gero Bauer teaches English Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Tübingen, and is the managing director of the university's Center for Gender and Diversity Research. In the winter semester 23/24, he holds a position as interim professor of English Literature at the University of Dortmund. He has published books and essays on early modern natural philosophy, Victorian masculinities, twenty-first-century queer fiction and film, camp aesthetics, and queer pedagogies and politics, and has been a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge and King's College London, and a visiting professor at the University of Maryland, College Park.

David Walther (Greifswald): "What should we do, chat?" – Interactive Play-Reading in the Age of Twitch

Abstract: With 22.8 billion hours of content consumed in 2021 and 73% of viewers falling into the age bracket of 16-34 (cf. Iqbal 2023), the streaming platform Twitch has become an indelible aspect of today's web and youth culture. Twitch allows creators to show activities while verbally interacting through their chat. These interactions are instantaneous and often reciprocal, suggesting an orality/literacy interface not found in other means of digital sociality, such as forums or blogs. Consequently, the social sciences have been quick in taking up the

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

study of Twitch, identifying its role in “fostering participatory communities” (Hamilton et al., 2014), the ways it impacts social behavior (cf. Seering et al 2017; Diwanji et al 2020), or indeed – coming from a linguistic perspective – how Twitch has provided a platform for multimodal broadcasting and communication (cf. Recktenwald 2017).

Given the proliferation of such analyses, literary studies should therefore not lack behind in asking how this form of digital social interaction relates to the experience of narrative and the practice of reading. As most streams on Twitch involve gaming, the question thus becomes how the interaction afforded by Twitch intersects with specific gaming worlds which, on account of their focus on textuality, most closely approximate the experience of reading. Moreover, this opens up the question of how the intersection of digital reading and narrative adventure games furthers collaborative communication between viewers and creator by virtue of the interactive ‘choose-your-own-adventure’ format having become a mainstay in the genre (cf. Mallon & Webb 2005; Tyndale & Ramsomair 2016).

My contribution will thus focus on Twitch streams concerning *Disco Elysium* (2019) and *Pentiment* (2022), as the text- and choice-driven nature of these games enable me to show how Twitch interacts with textuality and social reading, that is, how viewers and content creator read simultaneously before entering into an exchange, and how such interactions lead to a community effort in determining narrative progression while contextualizing what has been read, both within the creator-viewer, but also the viewer-viewer relationship.

Bio Note: David Walther studied English and German at Greifswald University and the University of Manitoba. He is currently working on his dissertation concerning the grotesque in Salman Rushdie’s works. He recently contributed multiple entries to DIGITENS, an encyclopedia of British sociability, and held talks on Solarpunk and Indian English literature.

Stephan Karschay (Berlin): Public Virtue and Private Vice? Social Reading and the *Pamela* Controversy

Abstract: Samuel Richardson’s novel-in-letters *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) marked a watershed moment in the development of the European novel as a serious literary form, and its protagonist’s private trials and tribulations were consumed in a conspicuously communal fashion, even culminating in the ringing of church bells after a public reading in Slough. The immediate success of the novel was such that it spawned a veritable consumer craze for ‘all things Pamela’: ‘Pamela’ tea sets and ‘Pamela’ fans, ‘Pamela’ playing cards and ‘Pamela’ prints further expanded and bound together a social community of readers. Yet Richardson’s novel was not met with unanimous praise from all quarters. In fact, the literary field seemed to have split into two broad factions that one contemporary commentator labelled the ‘Pamelists’ and the ‘Antipamelists’. The latter group, comprising such prominent voices as that of the novelist Henry Fielding, satirised Richardson’s novel as the sensation-seeking brainchild of a mere tradesman – a socially transgressive text that should destroy the author’s reputation rather

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

than bolster it. The moral flawlessness of the heroine was here interpreted as virtue-signalling pure and simple, an insincere gesture designed to disavow the novel's quasi-pornographic appeal. Richardson started self-censoring his novel almost instantly in reaction to these accusations, for instance by elevating his heroine's demotic style to align with the standards of eighteenth-century decorum. But how could one and the same novel receive such divergent readings on its first publication? What are the representational strategies that allow *Pamela* to be perceived as both pleasingly sentimental and scandalously sensational? How does this sentimental novel flaunt its moral message while unsettling the proprieties of 'polite' fiction? I want to highlight *Pamela's* peculiar welding of a somatic language of feeling with an aesthetic of voyeurism and performance to account for this easy slippage between the sentimental and the scandalous, the proper and the pornographic. It is this mix that allowed the canny printer-author Richardson to cater to the voyeuristic enjoyment of his readers while permitting them to hide their pleasure in *Pamela's* seductive appeal behind the protection of a social community joined in publicly enacted rituals of sympathetic reading.

Bio Note: Stephan Karschay is Interim Professor of Anglophone and Comparative Literature at the Peter-Szondi-Institute of Freie Universität Berlin and Associate Professor (*Juniorprofessor*) of British Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Hamburg. His main research interests are the relationship between literature and science in the nineteenth century, the late-Victorian and modernist novel, as well as crime and detective fiction. He is the author of *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and his current book project examines 'Scandals, Censorship and the Visual Imagination in Britain from 1740 to 1960'.

Heidi Lucja Liedke (Frankfurt): Reading Characters – Reparation Through Reading in Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021)

Abstract: What is the value of reading, especially of reading longer texts, in the digital age? Academic teachers know that it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince students to read (and enjoy), for instance, intricate Victorian novels. Anything that does not contain pictures or is longer than a TikTok video becomes work, something not immediately associated with pleasure. These are only tendencies, of course (see also David Shields' *Reality Hunger* [2011]). At the same time, precisely because of these developments, to read – consciously and deliberately – becomes a specific marker for social status, for cultural capital and may reveal something about readers themselves.

The Irish writer Sally Rooney's novels are populated by such readers. Her stories take place in a microcosm of educated 20–30-year-olds, all of whom are readers and some of them aspiring writers. Rooney's characters are eloquent 'overthinkers', they know their -isms and theories. Yet, her novels do not merely present self-indulgent fictions about the vanities of the literary business and love relationships but feature forms of reading in the digital age as

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

organic processes of connection in modern life. In this paper I want to argue that especially Rooney's latest novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021) presents reading, in particular of emails and text messages, as a reparative practice, as conceptualized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay is About You" (2002). More precisely, I argue that it is in their emails – and in reading those emails – that the friends Alice Kelleher and Eileen Lydon create a space in which they do not have to perform being knowledgeable but rather come to cherish the value of friendship, thus engaging in practices of (self-)care.

In exchanging those emails while being apart, the famous novelist Alice and the editor Eileen also create a 21st-century version of Susan Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's idea of a literary sisterhood (1979). The reparative process of knowing as unraveled in writing and reading strips the performance of being 'knowledgeable' and witty, as practices the characters engage in outside of their written communication, of its artificiality and instead turns knowing into a texture of hope. Reading, thus, becomes the process to unlock this texture.

Bio Note: Heidi Lucja Liedke is Professor of English literature at Goethe-University Frankfurt. From 2018-2020 she was Humboldt Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London. She is the author of *Livecasting in Twenty-First-Century British Theatre. Spectacle, Materiality, Engagement* (Bloomsbury, 2023). Other recent articles and research interests include topics such as queer ethics, feeling spectators and idling in Modernist and Victorian writing and have been published or are forthcoming in *Performance Matters, The Routledge Companion to Literary Urban Studies* and *The Handbook of Literary Ethics*.

Hannah Pardey (Hanover): "Grounded in Real Human Feeling" – Emotional Middle-Class Self-Fashioning on BookTube

Abstract: Arguably, promoting "books as a tool for readers to develop ideas about their membership of larger communities" (Driscoll 42) is no invention of Goodreads, YouTube and the like. A brief glance at scholarly conceptions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary communities suffices to realise that socially oriented reading practices have a long-standing relation with trade and commerce, evoking a history of capitalism that has fostered the socio-economic and affective superiority of the middle classes all along (Anderson; Barker-Benfield; Berlant; Habermas; Williams). But then again, Web 2.0 companies and their socio-technical means of creating and preserving literary communities on the Internet redefine the social interaction with and emotional exchange about books on an unprecedented scale. Adopting distant reading perspectives on digital literary consumption (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo; Moretti; Rauscher), my paper interrogates the "novelty of social reading" (Birke 151) online through a specific set of BookTube reviewers and with computerised methods derived from corpus linguistics. It proposes a range of computational and reproducible approaches that

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

serve to analyse the social and emotional reading practices of a community of 330 BookTubers which formed around Nigerian diasporic novels until August 2019, i.e. the cut-off date of data collection. Employing AntConc, a corpus analysis software, I illustrate how the application of digital humanities tools facilitates the systematic study of the BookTubers' emotional language use. The discussion puts particular emphasis on the BookTubers' opposing desire to establish intimacy with and distinction from their fellow readers. Irrespective of their remarkable creativity in updating and appropriating social reading practices for digital environments, the BookTubers' patterns of affective response may well be positioned within a transhistorical bourgeois emotional culture in which "bookish self-fashioning" still constitutes "a multifaceted and ambivalent practice" (Birke 158).

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Bio Note: Dr. des. Hannah Pardey is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Hanover. She teaches British literatures and cultures from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century with a strong focus on Anglophone postcolonial literatures, especially Nigerian and Indian diasporic fiction, and theories and methods of literary and cultural studies. She has published articles and chapters on middlebrow and postcolonial studies, digital reception studies and the history of emotions. Her book *Middlebrow 2.0 and the Digital Affect* is under contract with Liverpool

Section: Social Reading and Reading Communities in Diachronic Perspective

Dorothee Birke (Innsbruck), Anne Korfmacher (Cologne), Helga Schwalm (Berlin)

University Press and investigates the material conditions of producing, distributing and consuming the new Nigerian novel online. Her project, "Wuthering Waters: Maritime Working-Class Movements across the Atlantic, 1800-1900," examines fictional and non-fictional texts to reconstruct the everyday practices of resistance of the nineteenth-century transatlantic working classes.