

'I loved the stories – they weren't boring': Narrative Gaps, the 'Disnarrated' and the Significance of Style in Prison Reading Groups

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Fiction engages the human mind beyond the cognitive act of reading. Stories provide a means of narrative imagining – a form of thinking before acting, of reflecting on experience (both fictional and real) and 'our chief means of [. . .] predicting, of planning and of explaining'.¹ In this way stories are essential to the human mind. They provide the tools we need to conceptualise experience, and because they are predicated on coherence, they facilitate 'making sense'. As scholars in cognitive linguistics, philosophy and psychology argue,² the mind engages in a vast range of (often unconscious) processing to interpret even the most basic information through strategies often considered 'literary' (for example, narrative, analogy, metaphor and parable). Given that literature 'takes its instruments from the everyday mind',³ literary texts resonate and have meaning for everyone. This is particularly encouraging in prison (and other restricted environments), where lack of or incomplete education is relatively common: 53 per cent of incarcerated women in the Netherlands are poorly educated and 32 per cent have only an average education, whereas 15 per cent are deemed highly educated.⁴ The transformative benefits of reading literature are often noted through participant feedback (I deal with this later), but there remains a critical lacuna in terms of researching the impact of reading in real-world contexts, particularly in challenging environments. Recent research that focuses on real-world readers' experiences had analysed, for example, 'reading group talk',⁵ and Patricia Canning's work on reading in prison goes further, in analysing real-time readers' responses.⁶ More specifically for the present context, a special issue of *Critical Survey* (2011) showcased reading literature in prison as a space for 'radical pedagogy and social transformation'.⁷

Reading groups in various guises exist in criminal justice contexts in Britain and Northern Ireland, such as the Prison Reading Groups project at Roehampton University and the Reader Organisation's Get Into Reading project in Low Newton. In Northern Ireland, the Reading for Life project⁸ and the Reading and Writing for Peace and Reconciliation project made valuable contributions to participants' wellbeing in marginalised communities. While these worthy community projects are gaining recognition from stakeholders for their transformative potential, there is little focus, if any, on *how* literary texts actually 'trigger' or bring about reported changes in reading group participants in terms of, for instance, enhanced critical thinking, the development of empathy, or perspective-taking. There is, however, a growing body of literature that evidences a relationship between reading literary fiction and demonstrating or developing empathy,⁹ between fiction and affect,¹⁰ and between reading fiction and prosocial behaviour.¹¹ Additionally, researchers have linked reading to increased sensitivity¹² by examining the role that different literary genres (romance, science fiction, horror) have on readers. Research into how *style* contributes to more engaging and affective reading experiences through increased 'depth of processing'¹³ examines how foregrounding¹⁴ – the stylistic operation of deviation from some perceived linguistic 'norm' – has a defamiliarising effect and encourages readers to 'think about what is represented in a text in a new and more detailed way than normal'.¹⁵ Such claims have been tested with readers 'who differed considerably in experience with literary texts'.¹⁶ For example, David Miall and Don Kuiken found that foregrounding 'is a predictor of both reading times and readers' judgments of strikingness and affect'.¹⁷ According to their studies, the evocation of feelings in readers' responses to foregrounding 'appeared to be independent of literary competence or experience'.¹⁸

Much of the research noted above has explored the cognitive potential of and affective response to reading fiction by analysing readers' emotional, aesthetic and cognitive/neurological responses to stories. This research has offered illuminating insights into and persuasive evidence for the beneficial effects of reading literary fiction on empathy, sensitivity, personality and perspective-taking. However, its experimental context (readers are almost always academic subjects), post-hoc reporting, the solitariness of the reading experiences, computerised methodological practices (such as under fMRI conditions, or through the use of the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test)¹⁹ compromise the naturalness of the reading experience.²⁰ Yet the findings are extremely encouraging for real-world readers outside the academy. This chapter, therefore, builds on existing research by focusing on the

social *practice* of reading in challenging environments and explores the potential of – and offers empirical evidence for – style and its capacity to function as a catalyst for change in real-world readers. More specifically, it examines key stylistic techniques that act as cognitive 'triggers', leading to the dynamic negotiation (and renegotiation) of meaning and, by extension, increased perspective.

George Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) writes:

There is requisite to the perfection of this art, another manner of exornation, which resteth in the fashioning of our maker's language and style to such purpose as it may delight and allure as well the mind as the ear of the hearers with a certain novelty and strange manner of conveyance.²¹

Writing almost 400 years after Puttenham, Wolfgang Iser alludes to the importance of style in motivating and enriching the reading experience when he refers to the reading process as a 'game of the imagination'.²² He argues that transparent texts, that is, texts in which 'everything is laid out cut and dried before us', invariably lead to 'boredom'.²³ It is worth setting out his point in full:

If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field. . . . A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative.²⁴

Like Puttenham, Iser claims that such creativity is 'steered' in part by 'techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar', which 'forces' readers to reconsider what they previously held to be 'perfectly straightforward'.²⁵ Invoking the concept of 'defamiliarisation',²⁶ Iser is arguing, as I see it, for *style* as fundamental in determining the richness of a text and, by implication, the reading experience. One of the ways in which style functions in Iser's thesis is through the concept of the 'blank'.²⁷ For Iser, the blank or 'unwritten' elements of a text invite the reader to 'actively' provide what is not written, for it is 'only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism'.²⁸ Indeed, the 'inevitability' of narratorial omissions is summed up nicely by Gerald Prince, who writes, 'if I told a friend what I did yesterday, I would most probably not mention that I tied my shoelaces'.²⁹ There is, thus, a presupposition that every text has, at some level, inferential potential and thus requires inferential work on the part of the reader. So, what is an author to write (and not write), and how do these stylistic choices affect readers?

Stories, both personal and fictional, can have particular resonance in criminal justice environments as a vehicle for accessing and expressing a range of often challenging personal situations, events, emotions and histories. Moreover, style is a powerful mediator and can extend the interpretative scope or meaning potential of narratives. This was demonstrably apparent in my prison reading groups in Northern Ireland (held between 2010 and 2014), when I read with incarcerated women housed at a young offenders centre (there is currently no separate prison for women in Northern Ireland); groups were also run for male ex-prisoners in a community setting, discussed later in the chapter. The women met weekly in small groups (between three and twelve participants) in a small, unfurnished room in the education block of the prison for around two hours. As group facilitator, I read aloud short stories or extracts from a longer work (a few chapters each session) or poetry, with frequent breaks in reading to hear comments and facilitate discussion within the group. The women had been convicted of crimes ranging from non-payment of fines to murder. Women on remand also attended. The women had a range of reading abilities and educational histories; some could not read much at all while others had a university education, but all attended voluntarily, some for a few weeks, others a few years.³⁰ After each session I recorded in writing any noteworthy comments, discussion topics and any issue that affected the general running of the project. Often, I wrote down what the women said (I was not allowed to use a recording device) and the comments noted in this chapter come directly from my records unless otherwise stated. Primarily established as a wellbeing initiative, the project provided a unique naturalistic context for an exploration of the significance of style in readerly engagement and as a catalyst for meaningful discussion and debate.

Research in stylistics and cognitive linguistics has shown that when we read, we import our experiential knowledge to the text in the form of knowledge frames and scripts (or schemas) that are largely text-driven.³¹ Moreover, authors use style to ‘control’ attention, often directing readers to arrive at certain inferences while ‘suppressing’ others.³² Where this knowledge is missing, it constitutes a ‘blank’,³³ also known as the ‘unwritten’,³⁴ and later developed by stylisticians and narratologists as the ‘gap’,³⁵ the ‘unnarrated’³⁶ and the ‘narrative gap’,³⁷ or, more generally, as ellipsis. A gap is essentially a part of the story that is not explicitly narrated, either because it is ‘not worth narrating’³⁸, or because it ‘falls below the so-called threshold of narratability (it is not sufficiently unusual or problematic)’,³⁹ or because ‘it transgresses a law’⁴⁰ or is socially inappropriate (for instance, an

advertisement for a Christmas turkey might say that the bird was free-range or organic, but not how, or even that, it was killed).

Different types of gaps constitute greater or lesser degrees of foregrounding and, as such, require more or less semantic processing, respectively. To offer an example, the negated element in the title of this chapter (from written feedback by one of my nine-year-old readers in the Utrecht International School, Netherlands), '[the stories] *weren't* boring', counters an expectation that they would be. What this shows is that when we are told something that did not happen (Prince's 'disnarration'), it is foregrounded and thus requires a greater 'depth of processing'.⁴¹ Below is a literary example from epistolary fiction, 'Uncle Ifor's Welsh Dresser', by Pat Lacey (which I read with groups both in the prison and in a mental health hospital) that requires readers to make a 'necessary' inference through a gap in narration:

Dear David,

Thank you for yesterday. Meredith and I both adored our walk. [. . .] Meredith sends his love and says he's not really afraid of rabbits. But being a town dog, he'd just never seen one before!⁴²

This is the story's first mention of the walk and the rabbit. The inference drawn here is that Meredith encountered a rabbit while out walking and was 'spooked' by the experience because he is 'a town dog', leading us to infer causation. This is based on situational knowledge that town dogs don't often encounter rabbits, so most readers will be able to make Meredith's reaction to his rabbit encounter cohere. Additionally, the negated or 'disnarrated' clause ('not really afraid'), counters (and mitigates) an expectation that he *was* afraid, which is retrospectively confirmed in the subsequent letter from David, dated the same day as the preceding letter: 'I'm sorry Meredith was frightened by that rather ferocious rabbit'.⁴³ This particular story is characterised by narrative gaps that are retrospectively filled in and as such was considered by one prison group reader as 'a kind of game' (perhaps inadvertently invoking Iser) in which she had to 'work out' that the correspondents were falling in love a bit more with every letter. One incarcerated woman was so engaged by the story's narrative style that she remarked, 'that . . . was like a breath of fresh air! I feel like I've just walked outside', and another commented, 'I feel like I was in there with them'. The prison group's comments and discussion during the reading support the view that style plays a fundamental role in enhancing the level of engagement in the reading process.

During the course of the prison project, we read a short story by Wanda Burnett called 'Sand'.⁴⁴ The story is told in the first person and reflects on the narrator's experience, as a five-year-old, of moving house. The text below is taken from my reading log for that session (I have changed the names for confidentiality, as indicated by asterisks); excerpts from 'Sand' (in italics) have been added for ease of reference:

It was really interesting to see the responses [sic] to the gaps⁴⁵ in the story. For instance, in one recollection the speaker [narrator] talks of going to a shop with her dad for cigars and being brought into the back room by the old male shopkeeper where she sees a big doll and a phonograph.

*'Sometimes I went with my dad to buy cigars, but mostly we just went there to talk. . . . Once, when I went there alone, he [the owner] invited me into his parlor. You just stepped down one step from the store and through an old worn curtain and there you were. He always kept the blinds down half way, he said because the dust didn't show up so much then. I guess he didn't have a wife. But he had a phonograph that blossomed from its small wooden box in the corner like a huge purple morning glory . . . and way back on the bottom shelf lumped over and dirty, there was a doll with a waxy pale face and hair that fell in yellow-brown strings over its eyes. He didn't like me to look at the doll. He got nervous when I went near the cabinet and made me sit in the little brown rocking-chair close by the phonograph. I thought it was fine listening to the record played over and over again and I rocked back and forth waiting for the words, 'Oh, you great big beautiful doll, I'd like to squeeze you, but I'm afraid you'll break.' I rocked closer to the cabinet. Then someone rapped on the counter and the old man slipped through the curtain, up the step, and back into the store. I went home. I told my mother about the doll and the phonograph . . . after that my brother went for the cigars.'*⁴⁶

Nora* thought it was a negative thing that this man had a doll in his house, yet no wife or kids. I suggested that it may signify a remembrance of a child, either gone or dead, but she remained perturbed by the idea. In the story the speaker tells how she told her mum of the doll and phonograph, stating in the next line that 'my brother went for the cigars after that'. Again, we are left to make sense of this, echoing the child's lack of explanation. We talked a lot of how, as kids, we never got the 'whole story', often being chided for sticking our noses into adult business. Nora thought it was weird that the shopkeeper brought the child into the room at all, but Tracy* and Anne* felt that it could have been innocent and friendly. We talked of how we judge people by what goes on in society, and whether we would let our kids be so free as to go into houses by themselves in this day and age. Anne read the last few pages. We never got time for the poem as the staff officer made us leave a bit early.

The ellipsis in the last line of the source text is foregrounded both graphically and semantically and invites the readers, in this case Nora, Tracy and Anne, to provide the unwritten text. It is in this gap that causality resides that will explain why the brother took over the shop run. If we consider that it might be less unusual for children to be invited into homes where other children live, than to be invited into a house where there is neither mother nor children, Nora's observation that the man had 'no wife or kids' may have led her to interpret ominously what Tracy and Anne suggested might merely be a 'friendly' gesture in taking the child into the parlour. The discussion continued on why the man had a doll, why he played the song 'over and over' and even raised questions about the lyrics. All of these factors – the text-driven (ellipsis) and the situational (that it is more unusual for five-year-olds to be invited into homes where there is no mother and no children; that men are kind to children; that the man may be in mourning) – contributed to the varied interpretations collectively worked out during the reading process. Noting the 'dynamism' afforded by such textual 'omissions', Iser writes that a text is 'potentially capable of fulfilling several different realisations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill the gaps in his own way'.⁴⁷

Gaps, therefore, arguably provide a creative space for readers to do the cognitive work necessary to reach a (not 'the') coherent interpretation. Additionally, the prison group's comments suggest that gaps function to invite ethical judgements by seeking motivation for the un-narrated, a kind of 'reading between the lines' that amounts to ethical positioning. In our reading of 'Sand', the ellipsis implies something unpalatable, and the women's discussion exhibits an attempt to narrate it by 'filling in' (the brother is going from now on because the shopkeeper is sinister, or the mother believes he is sinister). It is, according to Mosher, the act of non-narration that precipitates this move, where the reader is 'manoeuvred into' adopting a 'stance' on what is not said.⁴⁸

Attendance at the prison reading group was often inconsistent due to a combination of the women's personal circumstances and staff shortages, so it was difficult to read a full-length novel with the women. However, as the group grew in confidence we selected Lucy Caldwell's *All The Beggars Riding*,⁴⁹ in which the narrator, Lara, attends a creative writing class in order to write her history into coherence: 'I wanted to tell my story in the hope that I'd understand something – understand my parents, understand us – and in the hope that things would be put in order, put right, laid to rest'.⁵⁰

Lara's father seems to have a story other than that narrated in the text-world in the early part of the novel, and it becomes clear later that he has in fact two families, two sets of children. His other family lives in Belfast (Lara's home is in London) and he, a surgeon, is needed in Belfast at the height of the 'Troubles' in the 1980s. Early in the novel we are told that the images Lara had of Belfast were what she saw on the news: 'snarling dogs and faceless policemen in riot gear, the blackened, mangled remains of a bus or shop or a car, the balaclavas and guns, the loose-faced, glazed-eyed families of the victims'.⁵¹ However, she goes on: 'Behind it was a whole layer of other lives, lives like ours. We mentioned none of it in our house, ever, and so I thought about it for days on end, sometimes.'⁵² At this point, the women commented on the disnarrated element – 'We mentioned none of it' – which, they felt, foregrounded an unwritten reason why they did not speak of it. This led to a discussion in which motivation was sought for the 'not speaking': perhaps the mother hated Belfast because it took her husband away, or something bad happened while he was there, and so on. The disnarration prompted Kay* to speak of the fear and suspicion that not knowing generates by mapping the text-world situation on to her real-world situation of being in prison. Referring to the prison officers stationed on the cell landings, she said: 'sometimes we don't know who's on outside our cells at night and we have to tune our senses to pick up what we can't physically see'. She went on: 'Sometimes, I can't go to sleep because I feel so vulnerable with not knowing who's walking up and down outside that door. If only they'd tell you or say hello. It's not much to ask for a decent bit of peace at night.' As Kay's comments show, narrative gaps are encountered in real, lived experience, and have a similar function as that in the literary stories – they foreground the unnarrated, inviting deeper cognitive processing as we seek to make sense (both of our own lives and of the fictional story) through inference, mapping or analogical reasoning. We talked more of the vulnerability that potentially comes with 'half a story' and the discussion returned to the text-world and the mother's quiet, self-absorbed behaviour as she waits for Lara's father to join them on their Spanish holiday. Lara states, 'I think we were scared of her [mother], then, the big brown circles under her eyes; the way she'd crumble her croissant with her fingers into piles of greasy flakes'.⁵³ Margaret* said she felt that 'the kids are in tune with this sadness, they know their mum has clearly been crying, but they don't know why' (and neither does the reader). A few pages later, when dad returns bearing gifts (t-shirts from another part of Spain), the gap-filling takes on a new direction as one of the prisoners exclaimed

'He's off having his own bloody holiday – he's with someone else and has come to them after he's had his own fun!', which indeed turns out to be the case.

During this time, I also established a reading group for male ex-prisoners at the Helping Hands centre in Belfast. One of the first stories we read was 'Sunday in the Park' by Bel Kaufman,⁵⁴ about a married couple, the 'city-pale' Morton, who works in a 'factorylike university',⁵⁵ his wife (who is unnamed throughout) and their son, Larry. The family's afternoon in the park is disturbed first by Larry's encounter with a 'husky little boy, with none of Larry's quickness and sensitivity',⁵⁶ and then an altercation with the child's father, in which Morton's logical reasoning fails to deflect the physical threat of violence:

Slowly the other man stood up. He took a couple of steps toward Morton, then stopped. He flexed his great arms, waiting. She [Morton's wife] pressed her trembling knees together. *Would there be violence, fighting? How dreadful, how incredible. . . . She must do something, stop them, call for help.* She wanted to put her hand on her husband's sleeve, to pull him down, but for some reason she didn't. [My italics]⁵⁷

Here, the mode of narration (i.e. the third person) shifts to free indirect thought (italicised),⁵⁸ which has the effect of blurring the boundary between the narrator's and the character's point of view. When I reached this point in the reading, one of the ex-prisoners, Alan*, commented on the wife's reaction: 'If she really wanted him to walk away, she wouldn't think it a bit "incredible" – she's exhilarated by the possibility of her husband getting into a fight here. Secretly she wants him to.' The gap⁵⁹ signalled by the ellipsis generated discussion which elaborated on Alan's response and centred on the disnarrated element ('for some reason she didn't') as being 'a clue' to the wife's 'secret' desire to have the husband 'knock him out'. Furthermore, the discussion reflected the men's attempt to extrapolate a personality for Morton based on cues ('he's weak', 'he probably doesn't ever stand up for her', 'he's let her down in the past', and so on). Morton chooses not to engage in violence, however, and a few lines later the fight is avoided when Morton 'turned his back on the man and said quietly, "Come on, let's get out of here". He walked awkwardly, almost limping with self-consciousness, to the sandbox.'⁶⁰ The ex-prisoners' group collectively interpreted the wife's 'desire' for violence as signifying an underlying dissatisfaction with her marriage to the 'city-pale' Morton, which they later 'filled in' by referring to the adverbs used at the beginning of the story as an indicator of this dissatisfaction:

'How good *this is*, she thought, and *almost* smiled at her sense of well-being' (my italics).⁶¹ They read the disnarrated (that she did not smile) as indicating that the wife is 'dying for a bit of excitement in her life', and continued their interpretation with 'she's disappointed' at her husband taking what the ex-prisoners acknowledged was the 'moral high ground' (for instance, Frank* commented that 'it's much harder [for Morton and for them] to walk away' yet both he and Alan agreed 'it's the right thing here').

Over the course of nine months I read Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* with a group of male ex-prisoners in the Helping Hands centre in Belfast. The novel is narrated by the character Christopher Boone, a fifteen-year-old boy with Asperger's syndrome (although his condition is not explicitly reported in the novel). Christopher believes (along with readers of the novel) that his mother is dead following an unexpected hospital visit two years previously during which it was 'discovered' she had a heart condition. Christopher lives with his father, and the novel begins with the former discovering the neighbour's dog, Wellington, has been killed, and he decides to write a detective novel to solve Wellington's murder. Christopher's father does not want his son to pursue his investigation for reasons that become clear later in the novel. The following conversation occurs between Christopher and his father after Christopher divulges his suspicions about the 'Prime Suspect' for the dog's murder, which Christopher believes is Mr Shears, the neighbour and ex-husband of the dog's owner:

'[Father] shouted, 'I will not have that man's name mentioned in my house.'

I asked, 'Why not?'

And he said, 'That man is evil.'

And I said, 'Does that mean he might have killed Wellington?'

Father put this head in his hands and said, 'Jesus wept.'

I could see that Father was angry with me, so I said, 'I know you told me not to get involved in other people's business but Mrs Shears is a friend of ours.'

And Father said, 'Well she's not a friend any more.'⁶²

The men in my ex-prisoners' group reacted to this section by working together to try to establish motivation for Father's dislike of Mr Shears. Alan* suggested that 'something isn't right about the way he [Father] found out about her [Christopher's mother] ending up in hospital before she died, so maybe she had an affair with Mr Shears and was with him when she [the mother] was admitted [to hospital]'.

This particular narrative gap becomes foregrounded later, in the following exchange between Christopher and Mrs Alexander (another neighbour), when, in the latter's response to his questions about Mr Shears, Mrs Alexander divulges more by what she does *not* say:

She sucked in a big breath and said, 'Perhaps it would be best not to talk about these things, Christopher.'

And I asked, 'Why not?'

And she said, 'Because.' Then she stopped and decided to start saying a different sentence. . . .

Then she sucked in another big breath and said, 'Because . . . because I think you know why your father doesn't like Mr Shears very much.'

Then I asked, 'Did Mr Shears kill Mother?'⁶³

At this point, attention is drawn to the ellipsis marks and the repeated 'because', which acts as a kind of pro-ellipsis and thus further foregrounds the gap. Alan suggested here that Mrs Alexander is reluctant to tell him something: 'She's thinking what to say here'. This gives rise to discussions about what it is she thinks he should know, whose place it is to tell him (both Alan and Frank claimed she is 'being kind' but is 'caught between a rock and a hard place') and why they are 'not on the same track' with their understanding of each other. This latter point could be explained by considering interpretative 'frames'.⁶⁴ In the text-world, Christopher interprets the 'unnarrated' or unspoken as fitting a 'death' frame; in other words, his 'knowledge' of his mother's death prompts him to make a causal link between it and his father's dislike of Mr Shears, so that he misinterprets Mrs Alexander's advice ('Did Mr Shears kill Mother?'). However, Mrs Alexander does not 'know' about the mother's 'death' and so her unnarrated information is predicated on an 'affair' frame. In trying to fill the gap, Mrs Alexander creates a greater lacuna, which she acknowledges when she says, 'I shouldn't have said what I said. And if I don't explain, you'll carry on wondering what I meant. And you might ask your father. . . . So I'm going to explain why I said what I said.' In so doing, the two 'tracks' or frames that are activated in the interaction are reduced to one, both for Christopher and the readers.⁶⁵

Literary fiction provides ways of seeing, thinking and saying, and may offer one of the most effective ways of developing critical thinking, explained by Tony Anderson and Rebecca Soden as 'identifying assumptions, identifying and dealing with equivocation, making value judgements, analyzing arguments, asking and answering questions of clarification or challenge', and specifically 'the ability to . . . propose opinions alternative to one's own and to know what

evidence would support these'.⁶⁶ Their work and the work of others⁶⁷ show that peer interaction is 'potentially useful' for 'inculcating critical thinking skills', and indicate that results are better in academic exercises using peer interaction with students if they are consistently applied over time.

There are obvious parallels here with between 'peer interaction' and the reading group discussions in prison (and elsewhere). The latter demonstrate that our readers frequently adopted a range of alternative perspectives when the texts are read aloud in small groups than if they read the same texts alone (as some of the women did with the Caldwell novel, and who later made comments such as 'I did not get that when I read it myself!', 'Wow! I wouldn't have thought of that'). Moreover, the more stylistically rich the literature is, the more cognitive work the readers must do in order to achieve a coherent interpretation. This work often involves establishing causal relationships (as in 'Sand' and *The Curious Incident*), establishing motivation for and filling narrative gaps, as well as considering alternative stories. As one prisoner put it, reading such fiction aloud in groups 'helps me to understand people in the stories because I understand what they're experiencing. I see myself in [them].' Alan, from the ex-prisoner group, told me that this is a cyclical process because 'you have to get into their [the character's] mind and then use situations like hers [Christopher's mother's] to put yourself into situations and use that experience [in deciding how to act in the real world]'. Such comments evidence the invocation of knowledge frames and the process of situation-mapping by readers in order to understand what characters and (indeed) people are experiencing. Reading in groups, then, may offer a way of formulating 'emotional schemas'⁶⁸ which involve planning, conceptualising and strategising emotional responses. Moreover, reading together and discussing fictional events and states may well help readers to 'normalise' rather than 'pathologise' their own and others' emotions.⁶⁹ While there is common ground among general-knowledge frames, stylistically rich literary fiction has the capacity to extend, disrupt and invigorate existing knowledge structures as well as establish new ones through a range of stylistic devices, including priming, binding, foregrounding and script or schema deviation and schema reinforcement.⁷⁰ These are skills that can be – and are – applied in real life. By sharing the reading experience and their personal connections to the literature in read-aloud groups, readers can collectively negotiate these schemas or frames in order to make the fictional stories – and their own narratives – 'make sense'. As Alan contends, 'listening to other opinions helps me work out the meaning [and] lets me see

how the person works – and it gives *me* mental power to work it out'.⁷¹ Furthermore, the sharing of personal narratives is anchored to the fictional stories; thus, the literary texts provide a 'distancing buffer'⁷² for prisoners' own contributions, making the project a 'safe' environment in which to engage, assess and reflect on readers' own often chaotic experiential histories. Indeed, perspective-taking was central to the women's (self-recorded) accounts⁷³ of the benefits they gained from the reading experiences: 'things I thought were strange are actually not as it is [sic] shared by others'; 'Other people's views can help to understand some things better'; 'I enjoy listening to other people and can understand other people and most of all I WANT TO ENJOY & UNDERSTAND VIEWS now' (capitals in original).

When writing this chapter, I met again with Alan in March 2018, the ex-prisoner who had read *The Curious Incident* in my reading group four years earlier. While discussing the novel together, Alan characterised the father character as a 'controller', saying 'If he saw a cup out of place he'd probably go and fix it'. I asked him why he thought that when it is not narrated and he replied 'But you have to read between the lines'. Speaking about the benefits of reading together, he said 'This [reading-aloud model] should be taught in school from age five – I learnt more in this group than I did in the thirty-six years before it'. When I asked him to elaborate, he said, 'It's because you learn so many opinions'. He then alluded to the dynamism of narrative gaps: 'In jail, I had to learn to read people but [the] 'Reading For Life' [group] was good because what you saw in the story was not how it was' (he was referring to the way the reading process and the lack of transparency allowed time to consider alternative or unnarrated stories, whereas in prison he had to be decisive – and quick – in reading others). He concluded by saying 'It makes you re-evaluate, focus more. It gives you social skills, debating skills, confidence, and coming to the meaning [of narratives] lets you see how other people's minds work.' Alan's comments typify what my experience of working with readers in restrictive environments has shown: which is that fiction is not merely a pleasurable activity – it is *necessary*. It offers a safe space to engage with contextually relevant or analogical 'stories', the impact of which is enhanced dynamically by real-time reading and group discussion, and the totality of both leaves an emotional and cognitive imprint on readers, extending well beyond the life (or lives) of the reading sessions.

Notes

1. Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 4–5.
2. For example, Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3:2 (1972), pp. 279–99; Michael Burke, 'Literature as Parable', in Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen (eds), *Cognitive Poetics in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 115–28; Michael Burke, *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion: An Exploration of the Oceanic Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Keith Oatley, 'Why Fiction May Be Twice as True as Fact: Fiction as Cognitive and Emotional Simulation', *Review of General Psychology*, 3:2 (1999), pp. 101–17; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Anthony J. Sanford and Catherine Emmott, *Mind, Brain, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
3. Turner, *The Literary Mind*, p. 26.
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19. Simon Baron-Cohen, Sally Wheelwright, Jacqueline Hill, Yogini Raste and Ian Plumb, 'The "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" Test Revised Version: A Study with Normal Adults, and Adults with Asperger Syndrome or High-functioning Autism', *Journal of Child Psychiatry*, 42:2 (2001), pp. 241–51.

20. Canning's work on real-world readers' real-time reading responses marks a shift away from the experimental context. See Canning 'Text World Theory'. See also Whiteley, 'Text World Theory'.
21. George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, ed. Frank Wigham and Wayne E. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 221.
22. Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3:2 (1972), pp. 279–99 (p. 280).
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27. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
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29. Gerald Prince, 'The Disnarrated', *Style*, 22:1 (1998), pp. 1–8 (p. 1).
30. The project began as the Get Into Reading programme commissioned by The Reader Organisation based in Liverpool, whose aims include 'improving wellbeing, reducing social isolation and building stronger communities'. See <<https://www.thereader.org.uk/about-us/our-research>> (accessed 13 December 2019). When funding ended, I developed the project with funding from the prison authorities, along with several new projects across Northern Ireland funded by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.
31. Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977); Deborah Tannen, 'What's in a Frame? Surface Evidence for Underlying Expectations', in Deborah Tannen (ed.), *Framing in Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 14–56; Deborah Tannen and Cynthia Wallat, 'Interactive Frames and Knowledge Schemas in Interaction: Examples from a Medical Examination/Interview', in Tannen (ed.), *Framing in Discourse*, pp. 57–76.
32. Sanford and Emmott, *Mind, Brain, and Narrative*, pp. 5, 17, 73.
33. Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 107.
34. Iser, 'The Reading Process', p. 280.
35. Millicent Bell, 'Narrative Gaps/Narrative Meaning', *Raritan*, 6:1 (1986), pp. 84–102.
36. Prince, 'The Disnarrated'; Harold F. Mosher, 'The Narrated and Its Negatives: The Nonnarrated and the Disnarrated in Joyce's *Dubliners*', *Style*, 27 (1993), pp. 407–27.
37. Donald E. Hardy, 'Towards a Stylistic Typology of Narrative Gaps: Knowledge Gapping in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction', *Language and Literature*, 14:4 (2005), pp. 363–75.
38. Prince, 'The Disnarrated', p. 1.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

40. Ibid., p. 1.
41. Sanford and Emmott, *Mind, Brain, and Narrative*.
42. Pat Lacey, 'Uncle Ifor's Welsh Dresser', in Steve Bowles (ed.), *Stench of Kerosene and Other Short Stories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 70–1.
43. Ibid., p. 71.
44. Wanda Burnett, 'Sand', in Whitt Burnett and M. Foley (eds), *A Story Anthology: Thirty-Three Selections from the European Years of the 'Story'* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), pp. 228–9.
45. Incidentally, I had not been thinking about 'gaps' in the sense of 'narrative gaps' and their impact at the time either of reading this story or of writing the observation notes.
46. Burnett, 'Sand'.
47. Iser, 'The Reading Process', p. 285.
48. Mosher, 'The Narrated and Its Negatives', p. 415.
49. Lucy Caldwell, *All the Beggars Riding* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013).
50. Ibid., p. 123.
51. Ibid., p. 48.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., p. 47.
54. Bel Kaufman, 'Sunday in the Park', in Bowles (ed.), *Stench of Kerosene*, pp. 105–8.
55. Ibid., p. 105.
56. Ibid., p. 106.
57. Ibid., p. 107.
58. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, 2nd edition (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007).
59. When ellipses are signalled (as they are here with a series of dots) they draw readers' attention more explicitly to the unwritten than an implicit gap. In this way, I argue that 'disnarration' works not only on a semantic or cognitive level, but on a graphological one.
60. Kaufman, 'Sunday in the Park', p. 107.
61. Ibid., p. 105.
62. Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 63.
63. Ibid., p. 73.
64. Tannen and Wallat, 'Interactive Frames', p. 58.
65. I have written elsewhere (Canning, 'Poetic Justice') about Alan's* response to the mother's letters, which themselves constitute gap-filling. Alan's reaction constitutes a powerful emotional shift in perspective – having previously considered the mother to be 'a bitch' for most of the novel (for leaving her son), his response to her letters indicated that he subsequently experienced an empathic turnaround: he said, 'she sacrificed the most important thing in her life [her son] to give him a better life'.

66. Tony Anderson and Rebecca Soden, 'Peer Interaction and the Learning of Critical Thinking', *Psychology Learning and Teaching*, 1:1 (2001), pp. 34–7 (p. 37).
67. For example, Deanna Kuhn, Victoria Shaw and Mark Felton, 'Effects of Dyadic Interaction on Argumentative Reasoning', *Cognition and Instruction*, 15:3 (1997), pp. 287–316.
68. Robert L. Leahy, 'A Model of Emotional Schemas', *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 9 (2002), pp. 177–90.
69. Ibid., p. 180. See also the discussion of Mary* in Canning, 'Text World Theory'.
70. Lesley Jeffries, 'Schema Affirmation and White Asparagus: Cultural Multilingualism Among Readers of Texts', *Language and Literature*, 10:4 (2001), pp. 325–43.
71. Author's interview record, 2018.
72. Alexis McNay, 'Diaries of the Reader Organisation', *The Reader*, 40 (2010), pp. 104–5.
73. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. In the thirty-eight collected responses to a five-point self-assessment Likert scale of wellbeing (on which 0 = disagree 5 = strongly agree), the highest mean score (4.4) on any of the six key wellbeing criteria was for 'understanding others' views'.