

To be a bookeater Literary debate in adolescent reading culture

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Abstract

Today, adolescent fiction readers are increasingly engaged in different forms of 'social reading' in online communities. Through an analysis of Bookeater.dk, a Danish site for adolescent readers, we show how a communal reader identity is constructed via predominant conceptions of reading among the site's users and how this influences literary value assessment. Overall, the article argues that the young readers' adherence to this communal identity creates a culture of consensus rather than opening up space for critical discussion about literary value. Nevertheless, they show critical awareness of the different interests surrounding the publication and promotion of literature.

Keywords

reading; literature; fiction; adolescence; social media; community

Introduction

In recent years, reading cultures have undergone a pervasive socialisation (Collins, 2010; Rutherford et al., 2017), with the introspective activity of reading being accompanied by a range of socially embedded practices. These practices of “social reading” (Vlieghe, Muls, & Rutten, 2016, p. 27) are not limited to digital environments, although their extent would hardly be imaginable without the emergence of Web 2.0, which has radically augmented the potential to organize, share, recommend, discuss and produce literary texts on new media platforms and channels (see e.g. Mackey, 2007; Rutherford, 2009; Gray, 2010; Curwood, 2013; Vlieghe et al., 2016).

In other words, this primarily digital reading culture creates “new social valences of reading” (Nakamura, 2013, p. 238), as like-minded readers are virtually connected to express their reading experiences, negotiate literary value and meaning and construct individual as well as collective identities. Thus, the reading of literature as “an index of intimacy” (Collinson, 2013, p. 57) additionally becomes a tool of self-representation. Arguably, this is especially true of young readers, for whom identity and the social status of reading are particularly precarious issues and whose reading habits are highly influenced by social environmental factors (see e.g. Howard, 2008). Here, Margaret Merga (2014) points to social acceptability as an important precondition, as adolescents’ attitude towards reading is heavily influenced by the way their social environment regards the practice. As reading can be widely discouraged due to a lack of recognition from peers, Merga stresses the importance of young readers’ access to communities of like-minded contemporaries: “[...] a reading community, where they can enter on their own terms, as tentatively or enthusiastically as they like, can help them make connections with peers who have similar interests” (2014, p. 479).

Generally, literature is losing ground to other leisure activities among young audiences. According to national surveys as well as local studies, the number of ardent readers decreases significantly in the transition from childhood to adolescence (Danish Ministry of Culture, 2012; Rutherford et al., 2017). However, as implied by Merga, by participating in online literary fora, combining the ‘old literacy’ of book reading with new digitally and socially oriented literacies (Scharber, 2009), adolescents can obtain a *sense of community* (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Choi & Joo, 2016) that may contribute to the maintenance or intensification of their reading habits as well as the development of social capital (Birr Moje, 2008). This means, correspondingly, that literary online fora offer access for researchers to further our understanding of adolescents’ perceptions of literature and self-perceptions as readers as well as of the significance of literary communities as a social context for these expressions (see also Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo, 2019).

In this article, we present a case study analysis of a review forum for fantasy literature on the Danish site Bookeater.dk (Bookeater, hereafter), an online literary site for adolescent readers administered by Odense Public Library, mainly by one librarian known on the site as “Boris”. In this discourse-oriented study, we analyze the relationship between

community building and users' reader identities. In addition, we discuss how this relationship affects literary literacy in terms of the capacity for literary criticism and debate. Our research question is: *How are reader identities shaped by the community characteristics of Bookeater and what are the implications for literary debate among users?* Here, "reader identity" is conceived as a specific aspect of users' social identity (see e.g. Collinson, 2013, p. 66 ff.), displayed in the discursive conglomerate of users' personal statements on reading and reading experiences. In our case, these utterances fall into two main categories: 1) *modes of reading*, related to the reading activity itself; and 2) *literary assessments* (reviews and recommendations), related to the experience of a given book. Social reading on digital sites provides freedom for individual readers to engage and express themselves among like-minded readers. However, it also implies a framing and co-construction of these practices, as the norms of the community culture (expressed for instance in rules of conduct) may influence how these young readers construct their reader identities. Here, assessments of literary value can be precarious, entailing the risk of a clash of conflicting individual assessments, potentially weakening the social cohesion of the community (Baym, 2000).

We begin with a brief introduction to Bookeater and then present the focus and methodological procedures of data collection and analysis. In the analysis, we address the research question by interpreting how issues of community building, reading norms and literary value are predominantly expressed and related on the site. The analysis is informed by a range of theories on reading and communities, especially Nancy Baym's (2000, 2010; see also Lave & Wenger, 1991) concept of communities of practice and Karin Littau's (2006) work on the pathology of reading (2006). The implications of the empirical findings will be discussed in relation to the issue of literary assessment, before the article's main points are summarized in the conclusion.

Methodological approach

Analytical selection

Since its launch in 2006, Bookeater has become a significant platform for young fiction readers, hosting to date (November 2018) 6,573 members responsible for more than 120,000 posts. Of course, Bookeater is not the only literary site in Denmark. As elsewhere, Danish literary culture has undergone a pervasive digitalisation, with public, private and commercial agents providing a wide array of sites for user engagement. Most of these sites have a very limited scale, but there are exceptions, mostly on Facebook, where the most popular page for young readers is the publishing house Rosinante's "Unge Læser" ("Young People Read"/"Young Reader") with approximately 5,000 followers. International sites with millions of users, primarily Goodreads and LibraryThing, also appear to be popular among young readers, although we are unable to document exact number of users on these platforms. That being said, Bookeater is currently the largest Danish site for ado-

lescent readers. Furthermore, it is by far the site with the most elaborate structure and moderation in terms of topics as well as social interaction (see more below), making it highly suitable for our study of the relationship between community building and reader identities.

Bookeater provides two arenas for active user participation: 1) 'Book Talks', where 19 topical fora (primarily defined by genre) are dedicated to free communication on anything connected to the literary topic in question; and 2) 'Reviews', where users can post and comment on reviews in 13 different genre fora. Anyone is free to post a review, but the content must meet the demands of the site's review manual (Bookeater, no year). First, we decided to focus on Bookeater's Review section, as it is committed to valuations and discussions of books and reading experiences, whereas Book Talks is dedicated to more casual chats on items that are often only very loosely connected to the topic of reading. This distinction is made explicit by the moderators of the site, who repeatedly encourage users to move off-topic posts to the Book Talks section. Second, the "'Fantasy review'" forum was chosen as the topic for analysis. With currently more than 1,200 'topics' (uploaded book reviews) and over 12,000 'posts' (reviews and comments), it is by far the largest forum in the section (the second largest being the broad category of 'Adolescent books' with 710 topics and approximately 2,500 posts). However, the main point here is not merely the quantity in itself, but how it reflects the status of fantasy literature among the target group. As has been confirmed by previous studies of social online literary fora (Jenkins, 2006; Curwood, 2013), fantasy is a genre with which adolescent readers have a passionate relationship, often manifested in the creation of communities of fandom and fan fiction (Stephan, 2016; Wilkins, 2016). Therefore, the fantasy subsite is an appropriate place to look for examples of engaged readership as well as community-building practices.

As mentioned above, we opted to explore adolescent reading culture through the communicative practices displayed on the Bookeater website. These practices are approached here as discourse in the sense that we base our analysis on the notion that the way people use language when communicating about their reality both reflects and shapes the way they are able to think about and experience that reality. This also means that conventions, norms and identities in a given social context are reiterated and sustained by discourse (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1991; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Papacharissi, 2012). Accordingly, through Bookeater users' discourse on reading experiences, we can trace the construction of both a collective community identity – exemplifying a specific reading culture – and individual identities as they are expressed within the frames of this culture.

Analytical procedure

Inspired by the guidelines of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the data collection and analysis were undertaken via a three-step procedure. First, a sample of the material from the Fantasy review forum (one random year of reviews and comments) was ana-

lyzed in order to heuristically identify recurring themes related to the research topic. This led to the identification of the broad categories 'Literary assessment', 'Reading modes' and 'Community practices'. Second, the scope was expanded to the entire history of the Fantasy review forum (i.e. from 2006 to July 2018), containing just over 1,200 reviews and 12,000 posts. The categories were revised into subcategories and a thematic map of these was produced. Third, the collected utterances were re-analyzed in order to gain a more substantial understanding of their trans-thematic interrelationships. Here, the aim of the study was not to determine the numerical frequency of the themes, but to explore how questions of reading styles and experiences are framed by adolescent readers in the social arena of Bookeater. These are practices that due to their contextual embeddedness and discursive nature are ill-suited to a quantitative approach (Allington & Swann, 2009).

The source and nature of the data used in this study entail some methodological concerns. Social media sites are unstable data sources as they are perpetually changing due to the introduction of new posts. Therefore, the data collection was carried out during one week in June 2018 to provide a stable picture. In order to enable retrieval, references are made to the number and date of the post and the title of the reviewed work, translated from Danish wherever possible and necessary.

As the posts quoted in the analysis are authored by children and adolescents, we have been especially mindful of our obligation to avoid potential ill effects. However, the Bookeater site is publicly available and, because users identify themselves with pseudonyms, no personal information is exposed in our material. More importantly, the Review section is not used as a forum for confidential or intimate communication. Therefore, the posts rarely contain content of a very personal nature and we have avoided including those that do.

Whereas the analyzed material contains very little visual content, as images are rarely used (apart from avatar pictures), emojis are abundant in the posts. However, these emojis are mostly used to illustrate or reinforce statements in the text and we have only included them where they actually contribute to the meaning of the utterances. Finally, the posts have been translated from the original Danish, which posed a challenge as they often contain colloquial expressions and slang. Here, we have tried to convey the tone of the posts as precisely as possible.

The bookeaters

As the Bookeater site is ostensibly for 'young people', adolescence is a requisite part of the shared identity among users. Moreover, based on the information in their user profiles, the large majority of the 234 users in our data material appear to be between 12 and 21 years old. However, such a few years of age difference may have big implications in the development of adolescent life, and the question of maturity plays a prominent role in communication on Bookeater, where younger users are frequently advised and encouraged by moderators and older users. Moreover, mentioning the appropriate age of the

book's target group is also an obligatory part of the reviews. The question of age will be touched upon in the analysis and discussion, but we decided to exclude it as an area of key focus in the analysis for two reasons. First, the resulting complexity of the analysis would exceed the limits of the article at hand; second, because many users do not include age in their profiles, the analysis would be marred by uncertainty.

Analysis

Construction of a reading culture

Since the publication of Howard Rheingold's (1993) classic book on 'virtual communities', the term has become an integrated part of the "public consciousness" of the Internet (Parks, 2011, p. 105) and the emergence of social media has turned virtual communities into omnipresent fields of communication and social interaction, including that of social reading. However, the Fantasy review forum of Bookeater is not a 'social community' in a strict sense, as it is not fueled by interpersonal relationships. Whereas previous studies of communities based on cultural consumption (Long, 1992; Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Baym, 2000) have shown that social interaction and personal bonding can be an equally important reason for participation, signs of friendship and the sharing of personal issues are few and far between in our material. Thus, the users appear to be what Vivian Howard labels "detached communal readers", whose approach to social reading stimulates them to "actively seek other, more distant, opportunities for peer support for their reading" (2008, p. 113). The site is not about the maintenance and/or development of social relations, but about engagement in dialogue with other users on the basis of a shared, pre-defined topic of interest. Here, our study is mainly inspired by Nancy Baym's (2000) use of Lave & Wenger's (1991) notion of a "community of practice" (Baym, 2000, p. 2), whereby the community is organised and perpetually constituted by the habitualised communicative practices of the participants. Indeed, "[t]he focus is on how networks and texts are transformed into meaningful fields of interaction through interaction that is ongoing and patterned in subtle yet community-constituting ways" (Baym, 2000, p. 5).

This definition allows for a pragmatic conception of community "without the warm and fuzzy connotations" (Baym, 2000, p. 22) and which considers communicative practices instead of media context as the constitutive factor. Certainly, although the medium has created unique conditions of communication, it only partially explains the singular development of social life in particular communities. Thus, other decisive components must be considered: the participants, the common topic and, first and foremost, the common *purpose* that guides interactions on the site (Baym, 2000). In the following, the connectedness and inherent conflicts of the purposes of the Fantasy review forum will serve as a main guideline for the analysis.

Reading as sharing and identifying

When looking at the types of communicative practices on the Bookeater forum (which are comparable to other online literary sites; see Vlieghe et al., 2014), opinions on books as well as displays of reading activities are expressed very frequently. The largest category, however, consists of sharing practices, where users provide and ask for information on book and authorships, be it quality, preferred reading age, genre, adaptations, or future volumes in series. This corresponds with the forum's explicit main purpose: the sharing of knowledge, where users inspire and qualify each other's reading choices through reviews and recommendations. Communication on Bookeater clearly indicates a strong social impact on adolescents' reading patterns (Merga, 2014), as they seek and rely heavily on recommendations and inspiration from other readers when making book choices. Although parents, friends, siblings, bloggers and teachers are occasionally mentioned, the adolescent users of Bookeater predominantly rely on reading advice from their peers on the site, reflecting a high degree of trust in the "information quality", i.e. the relevance and reliability of information provided by their fellow bookeaters (Choi & Joo, 2016, p. 3023). This trust is constantly confirmed in the posts: Users applaud the reviewers' coverage and judgements and express how the reviews have informed their expectations or even changed their minds on books they previously disliked.

The communication is characterised by a friendly tone, with most posts being overtly appreciative in nature, praising the reviews' informational and inspirational value and recognising the reviewers' efforts:

You are a fantastic reviewer. Actually, I am pretty proud of knowing you xD. (2010/*Morgenvandrerens rejse [The Voyage of the Dawntreader]*/P5) /
 Sounds like a book I should get my hands on. Wonderful with so many good recommendations on the site (2008/*Hemmelige kræfter [A Great and Terrible Beauty]*/P2)

The appreciative tone, it could be argued, contributes to the *implicit purpose of creating a sense of community* by encouraging an inclusive, egalitarian environment. The purpose is implied in the site's rules of conduct as they are manifested on (the rare) occasions where a post is overtly and harshly criticised by another user for flawed language or for not meeting the required informational standards. In such cases, other users or the library moderators of the site correct the critics, reminding them of the social rules and values of the site. The corrections often stress the importance of a positive tone in terms of encouraging new (and often younger) reviewers to continue their engagement in the community (Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Vlieghe et al., 2016):

Hey, we have no fixed rules for how to make a review in here, please try to use a kinder tone towards new and unexperienced users! Would be a shame to scare them away before they have even found out how things work in here. (2008/*Kildens datter*/P3)

Here, Boris – the main administrator – plays an especially prominent part. Apart from using his librarian skills to enrich the informational quality of the site (by providing information on access to titles, additional reviews or other paratexts etc.), Boris positions himself as a fellow reader, displaying his likes and dislikes as well as seeking and taking advice on new reading experiences:

Sounds like a book I should have read already. Thanks for the tip – and welcome to the bookeaters' paradise... (2007/Ravneporten [*Raven's Gate*]/P2)

Many of Boris' posts are aimed at improving the social climate and strengthening the sense of community on the site. Here (as in the quotation above), the term 'bookeater' is frequently promoted as a common label of identity, for example in the brief caricature of a book summary that is presented in the site's review manual: "*The secret of the Bookeaters* is a real book. It is about these strange Bookeaters who blah blah" (Bookeater, no year). This use of the 'bookeater' term is a clear example of how a communal identity is reflected and shaped linguistically by "meta-communicative contextualization cues" (Baym, 2000, p. 23) that create a community-specific social coding of the communication by making "use of a structured set of distinctive communicative means from among its resources in culturally conventionalized and culture-specific ways" (Bauman in Baym, 2000, p. 23).

The construction of 'bookeaters' as a strange species sharing a secret society is augmented by the use of *naming* as a community-building device. Apart from choosing a username and, in most cases, an avatar as visual identity, users on Bookeater are given titles according to the number of uploaded posts. The titles and their frequency in our study are as follows (translated into English):

- Book Midget (fewer than 50 posts): 114
- Book Eater (50–300 posts): 65
- Supreme Book Eater (300–500 posts): 11
- Exquisite Supreme Book Eater (500–700 posts): 13
- Book Fanatic (700–1,000 post): 8
- Book Freak (1,100–1,400 posts): 10
- Book Dreamer (1,400–1,800 posts): 4
- Book Equilibrist (1,800–2,100 posts): 4
- Book Vampire (2,100–2,500 posts): 2
- Book Magician (2,500–3,000 posts): 2
- Book Titan (5,000–7,000 posts): 1

The distribution reflects a general pattern of contribution on social media sites, with an uneven distribution between a large majority of low-intensity contributors and a small group of very active users (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Vlieghe et al., 2016). The naming system differentiates the community of users into a hierarchy, supposedly intending to

motivate active contribution. However, the playful use of names also enforces a sense of community in two ways. First, the humorous references to iconic characters from the segment's favourite literature (e.g. the magician, the vampire) downplay the competitive aspect and affirm the common passion of fantasy literature as a grand equaliser. Second, the use of names like "dreamer", "fanatic" and "supreme book eater" emphasises a conception of irrational, compulsive book consumption as a general trait uniting the users.

Reading as bookeating: Appetite and addiction

In expressing their reading habits and modes, the bookeaters reveal a high degree of identification with the interpellation as bookeater, as they describe themselves self-consciously as (members of) a community of geeky outsiders who are highly – if not manically – dedicated to the devouring of fantasy literature: "Ooh, sounds exciting.... My Bookeater fingers are itching" (2007/*Ravneporten [Raven's Gate]*/P2). Moreover, the eating analogy is frequently used to describe users' reading practices in a number of creative variants, where book consumption becomes not only book eating, but book chewing, swallowing and nibbling:

I am a big fan of Tamora Pierce's books, so I swallowed this series in one mouthful! [sic] (2009/*Sonea [The Magicians' Guild]*/P8)

It should be swallowed quickly, as you let yourself get absorbed by the plot without thinking too much about the language. (2010/*Vølvens datter*/P1)

[Y]ou gladly stuff yourself with the whole thing and hunger after more [sic]. (2015/*Arena* 13/P1)

The eating-as-reading analogy is closely related to an ideal of quantity: to be a bookeater is generally to read fast and to read a lot. Furthermore, the bookeaters are proud of their literary appetite and constantly proclaim themselves as extensive readers, thereby discursively elevating extensive book consumption to a sign of excellence in the Bookeater community (for similar findings, see Radway, 1991; Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Baym, 2000).

This norm can also be discerned in the abundant mentioning of personal reading lists on the forum. It is of course quite common to keep a list of books to be read as a useful device to organise one's reading life. What makes the reading list a striking feature is its role as a marker of reading identity. However, the bookeater's reading list is not just a practical tool, but a promotional marker of reader identity as "a spatialized record of reading in a way similar to that of a trophy cabinet" (Collinson, 2013, p. 75; see also Hagen, 2015). It is a common short-hand mode of expressing the inspirational value of recommendations, but also of highlighting the endless appetite of the bookeater:

Maybe I can find the time for it. But only maybe. I have so many books to read (2007/*Sabriel*/P61)

Article: To be a book eater

Sounds really good... must be put on the list (even though it's become long again) (2007/*Joanna - rådetts leder*/P10).

The analogy between eating and reading has a long history in discourses on literature and reading, where it has been mostly used to make condescending comparisons between the consumption of popular culture and the biological processes of food digestion (Radway, 1986). Integral to this comparison is the normative opposition between extensive and intensive reading, where popular culture is consumed superficially and extensively, in contrast to more serious works demanding intensive, interpretive modes of reading. Nevertheless, as Karin Littau (2006) points out, the digestive analogy is not merely a metaphor, but also speaks to an essential but neglected aspect of the literary experience: that reading is 'eating', i.e. a bodily, affective practice, involving the submission to strong sensations (p. 41 ff.). The juxtaposition of reading and eating raises questions about agency, as reading is considered to have a strong impact that goes beyond the readers' cognitive control, where for instance novels become "a substance taken into the body, there to work an effect beyond the reader's control" (Littau, 2006, p. 41). This is reflected in the book eaters' descriptions of their reading experiences, where the roles of agent and object, eater and meal, appear highly reversible:

Immerse yourself in Angie Sage's fabulous, funny and fantastical universe. But be careful, because the book sinks a hook in you and doesn't let go until you've turned the last page. I want more, more, moooooore... (2007/*Flyveri [Flyte]*/P1)
I virtually swallowed the book. It caught me in the first chapter and spat me out gaping on the last page [sic]. (2015/*Vandflammens saga [Waterfire Saga]*/P1)

Here, literature is a "unit of force which acts and enforces itself upon the reader" (Littau, 2006, p. 86). The immersive experience is repeatedly described by the book eaters as a compulsory state of pseudo-pathological proportions, where the 'hook' of the book is making the users victims of their own lust for reading. This mania may even turn reading into an anti-social behaviour, as it collides with the obligations of everyday life and causes conflicts with authorities such as parents:

I read the book a month ago and could hardly put it away! My mum was about to freak out because I was awake all night. (2007/*Regnbuestenen*/P32)
I could have finished it yesterday but my mum told me to put it aside to spend time with my family. Too bad! (2007/*Alanna*/P11)

However, the mania discourse is generally accompanied by a strong meta-communicative undercurrent. Being subject to a reading compulsion is also to blatantly inscribe oneself into the community's in-group norm of devoted book eating. Moreover, as an activity performed in solitary confinement and often not appreciated by one's surroundings (see also Radway, 1991; Harrington & Bielby, 1995), the discourse serves to display the heroic individualism of the reader as well as to emphasise Book eater's identity as a community

of outsiders. The leisure reader, being embedded in a socially regulated, quotidian world and “subject to cultural economies of time and space” (Collinson, 2013, p. 32), has to carve out the time required for reading. Here, manic reading becomes a mark of honour for the bookeaters, as a silent act of subversion towards authorities and conventions by “stealing time” for oneself (Radway, 1991, p. 91).

In tune with the digestive metaphor, addiction to written material is frequently equated with drug addiction: “When you first get started you cannot stop. You almost get addicted (just not to drugs, but to books)” (2010/*Blækjherte [Inkheart]*/P2). The drug analogy is a common feature of fans’ self-descriptions (Radway, 1991; Harrington & Bielby, 1995) and refers to the addictive mode of consumption as well as to the ‘druggy’ state of reading. Indeed, it is an intense mode of immersive escapism broadly conceived as “an abandonment of the here and now” (Usherwood, 2007, p. 35), in sharp contrast to and in conflict with prosaic everyday life.

Concerns about the “pathology of reading”, such as the “novel-reading disease” (Littau, 2006, p. 4ff), constitute a recurring phenomenon. Here, a common symptom is an excessive immersion accompanied by “uncontrollable weeping, inflamed passions, and irrational terror” (Littau, 2006, p. 5). A state often depicted by the bookeaters as the experiential intensity of immersion is foregrounded as a common ideal on the forum:

[I]t is my absolutely favourite book and finishing the series made me so sad that I cried for a month. (2010/*Ravkikkerten [The Amber Spyglass]*/P6)

Yikes how I cried when I finished it! For months! I cry every time I re-read it. Have to read it again. It was the first book that made me cry. I simply could not help it. I really love this series! (2011/*Ravkikkerten [The Amber Spyglass]*/P27)

According to Marie-Laure Ryan, immersion relies on the text as a world-builder, i.e. the linguistic construct of the text appears as a transparent window into a consistent, extra-linguistic universe into which the reader can project him- or herself (Ryan, 2004). Here, the fantasy genre is “setting driven” (Wilkins, 2016, p. 202) instead of plot- or character-driven, as the construction of highly elaborated, virtually unlimited, secondary worlds is a distinguishing trait of the genre. This trait facilitates a high degree of escapist immersion, which is amply illustrated on the Bookeater forum, where the bookeaters exchange their fascination with transporting themselves (Gerrig, 1993) into the enchanted worlds of fantasy.

However, readers do not always become hooked. Sometimes the window of fiction is experienced as bullet-proof glass and reading becomes a slow, tiresome process:

Big words, long descriptions. Distanced, you never get close, like in other books. And then the language he has invented and the world with all its strange names. You never get properly into it. There is thick glass you are looking through. (2008/*Eragon*/P234)

At times, extensive works of fantasy, with their minute descriptions and meticulous world-building, present a challenge to readers' patience and resources. What is striking, however, is the general reaction to these experiences, because dislike of and/or disinterest in a given book are met with encouragement from other users to persist in spite of the tedious reading process. Here, the activity of reading is also depicted as an endeavour, a task to be accomplished. To be a true bookeater not only involves the pleasure of immersive divulgence in universes of fiction; it also requires a high degree of stamina. Thus, if you muster the stamina, you will eventually be rewarded when the book's full experiential potential is manifested:

Fight through it [sic]! It gets better eventually. (2008/*Eragon*/P260)

Also thought the first one was difficult to get started with, but when I finally got into it I couldn't leave it for very long. (2008/*Physik*/P18)

This reward is not always achieved, as some books remain tedious and entire novels or volumes of series are deemed flawed by the bookeaters. However, for some readers this seems scarcely relevant, as the mere act of completion is a question of principle and a personal triumph that carries the reward in itself, regardless of (the lack of) reading pleasure.

To summarise, the practices of the Bookeater forum support both an explicit *informational* purpose of sharing literary knowledge and a more implicit *social* purpose of building a safe, inclusive community of adolescent fantasy readers. The Bookeater Fantasy review forum is constructed as an appreciative reading community of outsiders, where the delimiting identification is reflected in the users' often hyperbolic self-promotion and mutual praise as extensive, devoted readers. Thus, an 'in-group norm' concerning reader identities is fostered.

In addition, however, the forum contains a more discrete *educational* purpose. While Bookeater's review manual emphasises the informational standards to be met, it equally requires a personal, evaluating style: "Personal descriptions of characters and plot / What I like about the book/What I do not like about the book" (Bookeater, no year). Thus, apart from their informational and advisory purpose, the reviews are clearly meant to encourage and train young readers in articulating their literary opinions. This is affirmed by numerous examples of moderators and veteran users offering feedback to reviewers, urging them to express their personal assessments. A community's values entail certain types of capital by which the individual user can gain status (Bourdieu, 1991; Baym, 2000). Apart from generic knowledge and performative linguistic abilities, the mere extent of reading is a key source of social capital in this forum. But how might this be connected to the issue of taste, a central but also precarious indicator of capital?

Literary criticism and debate among bookeaters

Critical distinctions: School and industry

In the construction of community identity on Bookeater's Fantasy forum, external factors also play a significant role, as the bookeaters position themselves in relation to other cultural domains. Following Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) field logic, the social identity of a certain group is constituted by the practices of distinctions towards comparable social fields. In the case of Bookeater, two such distinctions can be discerned from the discourse of the fantasy readers.

First, a sharp distinction is made towards the school system and the practice of school-reading (see also Rutherford et al., 2017). In fact, quite a few users have been introduced to fantasy books at school, but reading them was ruined by the analytical, intensive reading mode of the education system, which disrupts reading flow and is incompatible with the immersive literary experience to which the users are devoted. This exchange is emblematic:

- I hate when you have to work with every chapter that way instead of just reading the book. (2008/Skammerserien [The Shamer Chronicles]/P10)
- Totally agree. It just sucks when you have to 'subject every chapter to scrutiny'. A book is a book. (2008/Skammerserien [The Shamer Chronicles]/P11)
- Unfortunately, my Danish teacher would choose this book that we analyzed and read through so much that I nearly grew tired of it. Have never understood why teachers would do such a thing? (2008/Skammerserien [The Shamer Chronicles]/P12)

Thus, a *norm of presence* that favours immediate identification with and projection into the world of fiction is heralded, while other more formalistic approaches are widely dismissed.

A more subtle distinction concerns the popular culture industry, in which the fantasy genre is predominantly embedded. Although the users by no means take an elitist stance, it is an integral part of the bookeater identity to distinguish oneself from the 'money machine' of the market. Here, the bookeaters display a strong awareness of the mechanisms of this market, for instance how bestsellers engender a range of literary spin-off products. This is not a problem in itself for the bookeaters, for whom genre limits are generally paramount and innovation is only acceptable if it is compatible with the "megatext" of fantasy (Stephan, 2016, p. 7). However, they still show considerable sensibility towards cases of excessive imitation, where literary standards and originality are completely neglected in favour of a commercial spin-off:

- It seems like they could not come up with their own idea, so let's just take *Twilight* and change it a little. Bullshit. (2010/Evermore/P11)

[T]hose kinds of images taken directly from TV give me a bad taste of 'milked money machine' in my mouth [sic] [...] As a book geek it makes me angry and sad. (2010/*Bakugan*/P4)

Here, describing oneself as a "book geek" suggests that distancing also implies a demarcation from other fantasy readers:

On the other hand, many people are not like us, they do not read and when they finally do because everybody says READ *TWILIGHT* and they get into it, then it is good for them. (2010/*Bree Tanners korte liv efter døden* [*The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner*]/P13)

Thus, owing to their devotion and experience, the bookeaters position themselves as an expert field of authentic devotion separated from the mass of 'amateur' readers who are susceptible to the fashion of the day. However, how do the young readers themselves approach the issue of literary quality? Moreover, even more importantly, how are disagreements in taste addressed in ways that do not undermine mutual trust and that are compatible with the community's social norms and reading ideals?

Points of consensus

The majority of assessments on the forum take a pragmatic approach: the book may be flawed, but if you belong to the target group, it provides an acceptable read. This is partly due to the site's purpose of guiding fellow readers to new reading experiences, but it also illustrates a general *norm of positivity* that permeates the discourse on Bookeater.

Correspondingly, the users show great cautiousness towards criticism. Opinions on the quality of reading experiences are typically confined to the realm of subjectivity by the users themselves in order not to appear as arbiters of taste. Furthermore, even though there are a lot of critical remarks on books and reading experiences on the site, they are virtually always concluded by encouragements to other users to read the book and make their own impression. Thus, the norm of positivity can be interpreted as an *ethos of reading*: it is always better to read than not to read and reading should therefore never be discouraged. This is illustrated in the exchange below, where the first and last posts are written by the same user, who starts by giving the book a relatively negative assessment, but ends up revising her evaluation and recommending the book:

- I felt the same way. It was pretty good, but quickly became a bit boring. Especially because it's quite long and it takes them [the characters] forever to complete their mission.
- Is it worth reading? Thinking about it.
- A hundred percent! If you like fantasy then you have to read dystopia [sic; refers to the book title] which when it came out was one of the bestselling fantasies that year.
- Yes, I think you should. Even if it's a bit long-winded it's worth it. (2008/*Dystopia*/P10-14)

Here, the significance of the social norm of trust in the community is emphasised by how the personal reading experience is frequently modified – or even annulled – by

other readers' recommendations. The moderator Boris sometimes enforces this cultural norm: "Hmmm... abandoned the first in the series again, didn't really get hooked by the world. Have thought about giving it another chance since then as several users here, who I respect, have recommended it" (2007/*Artemis Fowl*/P4). Moreover, negative reading experiences are often presented apologetically, as if the users lament their own inability to capture the magic experienced by other readers: "I have tried twice to get through *Sabriel*. For some reason, I didn't think it was very good, which is a deep shame" (2008/*Abhorsen*-trilogien [*Abhorsen* trilogy]/P24). Thus, the Book eater review forum is caught in a paradox common to many communities built around cultural taste: "[I]t is in the points of disagreement that friendliness is most challenged. However, at the same time [...] the group is, first and foremost, in the business of maximizing interpretations, a process that inevitably leads to disagreements" (Baym, 2000, p. 123).

On Book eater's Fantasy forum, expressions of disagreement rarely lead to direct confrontation and, when this does occur, the consensual norm of social inclusion normally overrules the otherwise often intense sympathies and antipathies towards the book or author in question. Apart from the moderators' and older users' critique of harsh comments (see above), the book eaters make use of a range of disagreement-managing strategies (see also Baym, 2000) to ultimately guide the dissensus to a point of consensus, as the following exchange illustrates:

- Now I've read it, and it's not among my favourite books. Don't like the fairytale-ish way she writes. And really hope there is a sequel because if not, it ends really, really badly.
- True :) it's a bit fairytale-like, but that was one of the things I liked best :)
- Think a lot of people like the fairytale-like way.
- Yep, but everybody to their own taste :)
- Yes, exactly. And fortunately so. It would be boring to talk about books if everybody agreed. (2011/*Reckless*/P12-16)

In this strategy of *building affiliation* (Baym, 2000, p. 124 ff.), the potential argument is dissolved through mutual respect for one another's position, by partly accepting the opponent's position in order to create a common ground of agreement. Here, "everybody to their own taste" is the most common strategy and the phrase is used so frequently that a book eater at one point humorously deems it overused: "Maybe it is time for us to find another expression to use excessively." (2007/*Artemis Fowl*/P38). The use of the phrase is often accompanied by a celebration of dissensus as not only a condition, but the *raison d'être* of the forum. This displays conflicting community values as the support for "talking books" as a form of debate is contradicted by social norms that limit the extent and character of such talk. Thus, the phrase "everybody to their taste" is paradoxically promoted as a marker for exchanges of literary opinions while it actually works as a closure of these exchanges: "Everybody to their taste. It would also be a bit boring if we all liked the same

books and had the same opinions. Then Bookeater might as well close. And we don't want that." (2010/*Evermore*/P99)

Another common strategy is *retreat*, where the user partly or wholly renounces his or her position by turning it into a result of personal insufficiencies, thereby enforcing the opponent's authority by downplaying one's own. Below, a positive review is challenged by a user criticising the novel's lack of realism. The reviewer's reaction is to partly agree with the critique, pointing to the author's inexperience – and her own insufficient language skills – as mitigating factors:

True, true. It's probably a minor fault [...]. But I read it in English and maybe I didn't catch some things [...] But when you think about the fact that it's Becca Fitzpatrick's first novel, I think she did really well! (2010/*Hush, Hush*/P7).

There are many examples of this common apologetic attitude, which bears witness to an experience of precariousness and the high personal and social stakes of engaging in a literary argument.

Intertextuality and genre expectations

The bookeaters use intertextual references to a considerable extent. In this, they adhere to a well-known literary promotion strategy, where a book is recommended due to its similarity with another, more commonly known title (Saricks & Brown, 1997). However, intertexts are used for several different purposes on Bookeater. Often it is to recommend books, of course, but it is also common to use these references for negative critique. This is done in two ways: As negative difference where a book is deemed as not living up to the standard of the referenced title (the secondary text), and as negative similarity, where, corresponding with the aforementioned ambivalence towards the cultural industry, excessively overt resemblance is regarded as epigonism (second-rate imitation).

The secondary texts are predominantly the classics and mega-bestsellers of the genre, primarily the *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* series, which have created their own "big worlds" (Mackey, 2007), including a number of derivative titles by other authors. It is often these publications that are criticised for not distancing themselves sufficiently from the original. The users' awareness of target audiences and marketing strategies is also demonstrated, as they frequently complain about the way publishers tend to market books through dubious comparisons:

On the back of the book it says that the books about Septimus have been compared, with good reason, to *Harry Potter*, but I don't agree with that comparison. The books are good – no doubt about it – but *Harry Potter* is in a completely different league. (2012/*Mørkhed [Darkness]*/P1)

It is clear that to dedicated readers of this genre, these kinds of comparisons can have a negative effect on their evaluation of books. In general, bookeaters display a keen aware-

ness of genre limitations and expectations. The transportation of immersion relies for most users on a balance between first generic intimacy and recognition and second a degree of unpredictability and originality, tickling the desire of the site's fantasy connoisseurs:

Just want to say that I love this book [...] It has some surprising and different elements which means that it differs quite a lot from many of the other fantasy books currently on the market (2013/*Ønskekræmmerens datter [Daughter of Smoke & Bone]*/P2)
Hush, Hush is a lot like *Twilight* at the beginning, because it starts with this mysterious biology partner, but that is the only thing [...]. The story is original and it's a breath of fresh air in the wave of vampire books which have been typical lately. (2010/*Hush, Hush*/P1)
 The users appreciate variations on well-known themes and psychological and moral nuances: 'What is good and what is evil? It's hard to figure out. [The book] makes you think about what's good and evil' (2010/*Farligt blod [Ink Exchange]*/P1). Because of this, they are critical of the use of too many genre clichés, including book series which (re)use the same plots and effects, or are prolonged excessively in order to exploit its success.

However, the strong relativistic current in the book eaters' assessments should not only be ascribed to an evasion of dissensus, but also to an expression of the site's informational purpose of sharing relevant knowledge. Thus, the book eaters generally have a strong awareness of differences between and within genres and display a perception of different books demanding different modes of reading. Concurrently, a distinction is often made between what could be called "fast books" to "swallow" and "great books" that require time and effort:

All in all, it's a good book and you get through it quickly, but if you want something heavy or deeper it's probably not this book. If you're looking for a couple of hours in the paranormal world, well, then just go ahead. (2010/*I Pandoras æske*/P1)

There is a differential notion of quality at play here, where "fast books" are forgiven for a lack of depth and complexity as long as they serve the purpose of short-lived immersion. In contrast, "great books" involve a different, "intensive-extensive" reading mode, where the same works of fiction are re-read several times in order to relive a cherished reading experience:

I think it is a great book. I have read it several times now. (2008/*Sikkas fortælling*/P8)
 You definitely have something to look forward to. Personally, I think they get better each time I read them. (2013/28/ (2006/*Alanna*/P25)

Which books are thus appropriate for re-reading? It is primarily a small group of canonical fantasy texts and authorships (e.g. Philip Pullman, J.J.R. Tolkien, John Flanagan), which due to their extraordinary qualities transcend the relativism of age and can be read and re-read in different periods of the users' (adolescent) lives. Thus, many of the books seem to have had a long and deep impact on many users' reading careers and their reviews often

stimulate extended exchanges of praise and memories. In this way, users also deviate from the “book swallowing” values constructed by the community by appreciating the pleasures of slow reading. These are not books to be swallowed, but savoured.

Conclusion

Our study has focused exclusively on the online discursive practices of a particular group of fantasy enthusiasts, but there are several ways through which we might broaden and deepen understanding of adolescents’ reading practices in future research. One might be to carry out a comparative study of adolescents’ online “book talk” and actual offline reading practices. Such a study could address the significance of context and the roles of peers and educators in these contexts. This would mean investigating more closely how literary authority is established and negotiated in the age of social media. Furthermore, the available data on users’ age could be studied for a temporal analysis of “reading careers”, focusing on the development of reader identity, taste and modes of expressions of specific adolescent readers.

In the introduction, we asked a two-part question: *How are reader identities shaped by the community characteristics of Bookeater and what are the implications for literary debate among users?* Our analysis shows that the discourse on the Bookeater Fantasy forum emphasises certain values attached to the practice of being a reader. Adhering to the quality inherent in the name of the site, the users identify themselves as ‘bookeaters’, articulating their reading approach with digestive metaphors such as ‘devouring’ and ‘swallowing’ and praising pace and frequency as reading ideals. To the young readers, the reading experience is – or should be – immersive rather than discerning, which resonates with a historically grounded conception of reading as an affective bodily practice, in explicit contrast to an analytical reading mode experienced in the educational system.

The community of bookeaters encourages and validates each other’s opinions on literature based on this ethos of reading, and there is a quite strong inclination towards seeking consensus in relation to book reviews. This means that opinion exchanges on the site rarely involve the building of dissenting arguments. The bookeaters display “a general reluctance to voice disagreement” (Baym, 2000, p. 118) and discussions are resolved by means of various communicative strategies before they develop into debates. This suggests that the site’s combination of a social purpose of providing an appreciative environment for avid young readers and a more educational purpose of encouraging and guiding these readers to express their literary assessments does not necessarily produce a culture of genuine literary debate. However, users do practice criticism in other ways, especially by relying on a strong sense of genre conventions and the commercial strategies of book publishing. In these ways, our analysis presents these adolescent readers as savvy popular culture consumers with a critical awareness of the external conditions of literature.

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