READER-RESPONSE THEORIES AND LIFE NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

In the theory of autobiography, attention is paid primarily to the writers of self-life narratives, and on how to read such narratives, but there is a corresponding paucity of studies on readers of autobiographical offerings. Little attention has been paid to individual flesh and blood readers of self-life narratives, the processes they go through while reading, and the effects on them of reading (consuming) narratives of self. Reader-response theories bring readers into focus as active agents in the reading process. I explore how concepts from Reader-response theories, such as reader positions and stances, the implied author, transactional reading, and interpretive communities, offer significant potential for examining the effects on individual readers, of reading life-narratives.
Reader-response Theories and Life Narratives

For as long as I can remember I have been an avid reader of fiction, but after my mother’s sudden death in 2005, I wanted to read about real people’s subjective experiences of grief; of how it felt for them, and how they came to terms with a parent’s death. I devoured memoirs such as Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and Nancy M. Miller’s *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death*, seeking answers and solace and attempting to assuage the grief I was experiencing. This prompted me to write about my mother, study the theory of autobiography, and keep a reflexive research journal in an attempt to meld personal experience, observations of self, and theoretical findings. During this convoluted process of reading, writing, and research, I became aware of a gap in autobiographical theory that was pertinent to my own search for answers in reading memoirs. Why did I turn to others’ memoirs of their parents’ deaths? What was happening to me, as reader, as I followed these writers on their journeys of grief? What did autobiographical theory have to say on the subject of the reader of autobiography?

The answer, I discovered, is that the theory of autobiography has produced little academic study on the actual readers of life writings. The predominant focus of autobiographical theory is on the author – the self who writes - and on deconstructing the text that is produced. For example, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, provide an extensive and informative overview of the history and practice of autographical theory. Having accomplished this overview, they conclude with an entire chapter on ways in which a reader can approach and engage with self-referential texts. This last chapter provides a
“Tool Kit” that offers “Twenty-four Strategies for Reading Life Narratives” including items to consider such as authorship, temporality, audience, memory, narrative plotting, authority, agency, and identity. These read as instructions to the reader on how to interpret life-writings, but do not examine the possible effects of the reading, on the individual reader.

Although there has been little research or theory around flesh and blood readers of autobiography, there has been some scholarly interest in general reading publics, commonly referred to as the history of reading. Historians of reading generally study actual readers in context to determine “the cultural, social, political and economic conditions surrounding the production and reception of books and texts” (Halsey 232). Again, historians of reading are not concerned with the effects or the processes of reading on the individual reader, but are attentive to how particular genres of texts are read and interpreted in historical periods.

Given the apparent paucity of studies of the readers of autobiography, I wondered if Reader-response theories might provide some potential insights into the actual readers of autobiography. How might the constructs of this type of literary theory apply to the reading of autobiography, and of memoir in particular? I thought that these theories might be congruent with the social constructionist lens through which I filter my research. The way readers interpret and understand what they read might fit with the epistemological framework that people construct meaning (cognitively, socially, culturally, geographically, linguistically, historically, physically, psychologically) from their encounters with the world in which they are embedded.

To contemporary readers, it seems self evident that engagement with a text involves personal thought patterns, background knowledge, cultural and reading
contexts, and purposes for the readings. Additionally, as Phelan states, “the very act of reading has an ethical dimension: reading involves doing things such as judging, desiring, emoting, actions that are linked to our values” (“Dual Focalization” 132). As active agents on a quest for meaning, readers endorse, condemn, and question texts. Yet until the development of Reader-response theories in the 1970s, mainstream literary theories ignored the reader, focusing on either the author (Historicism) or the text (New Criticism) as the source of meaning. In contrast, Reader-response researchers and theorists investigate the experience of reading, and the complex interplay of reader/text/context, especially concerning texts that are identified as literary, imaginative, or fictional.

In what follows, I will argue in the context of the theory of autobiography, that life narratives, especially memoirs, can be viewed as texts of prose fiction. With this as the underlying assumption, I will summarize the main thrusts of Reader-response theories and then discuss how several selected concepts such as reader positions and stances, the implied author, and interpretive communities, can be usefully applied to actual readers of autobiography. Excerpts from my reflexive journal will occasionally be included to illustrate and enrich the applicability of the concepts.

**Reader-response theories**

In essence, Reader-response theories reject New Criticism, the dominant literary theory and criticism from the late 1930s through the 1950s. New Criticism assumes that texts are central, and that readers are controlled by the structures, tropes, and language of the written word. For proponents of New Criticism, meaning resides solely in the text, and can be accessed and understood only through the trained eyes of literary critics.
Untrained readers are passive recipients of the texts, and therefore need to learn the 
skills of close, concise, attentive analysis before they are able to glean understanding.

In the 1960s and 1970s, during the heyday of post structuralism, there was a 
paradigm shift in literary theory from viewing the text as authority to viewing the reader 
and the text in a dynamic relationship. In 1980, Jane Tompkins edited the volume 
*Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post Structuralism*. In her introductory 
remarks, she observes, “Reader-Response criticism is not a conceptually unified critical 
position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the 
words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area for investigation” 
(xi). Reader-response investigations that arose in antipathy to New Criticism ushered in 
a radical change in the way critical theorists formulate conversations in disciplines well 
beyond literary theory. Peter Rabinowitz comments that for “semioticians, Marxists, 
feminists, deconstructionists, [and] rhetoricians the turn toward the reader may well be 
the single most profound shift in critical perspective of the post-war years” (“Other 
Reader-oriented Theories” 403). Reader-response theories focus on interpretive 
strategies among different readers, and even though the theories differ in their 
explanations, the net result of the discussions that opened up in the 1960s to the 1980s 
is the contemporary examination of the context of reading, and how factors such as 
gender, race, social class, and history are interwoven with the activity of reading. These 
days, many of the concepts of Reader-response theories are assumed semi-explicitly in 
cultural studies, feminist, performance, post-colonial, and queer theories, and a host of 
other scholarly endeavours.

In order to appreciate the significance of Reader-response theories it is 
necessary to have a reasonable understanding of the primary theorists and the concepts
that congregate in this school of thought, and these are what I will outline next. It is the operational processes of the dynamic author-reader-text relationship that are the bases of the differences among Reader-response theorists, who can be loosely grouped under three umbrellas: experiential (Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss); psychological (Norman Holland, David Bleich); and cultural/social (Stanley Fish).

Reader Response theory was first academically formulated in 1938 by American literary critic Louise Rosenblatt in Literature as Exploration, but was self-styled as Transactional theory. According to Sumara, "Rosenblatt’s understanding of the reading of a work of literature as convergence of reader and text was so antithetical to the New Criticism of the day that it remained largely ignored by literary and curriculum theorists until its reprinting in 1968" (27). Rosenblatt, whose theory emerged from her observations of readers in her university literature classes, declared, "the text is merely an object of paper and ink until some reader responds to the marks on the page as verbal symbols" (The Reader, the Text, the Poem 23). Rosenblatt pointed out that a written work does not have the same meaning for all readers, and that each individual brings background knowledge, beliefs, values, cultural expectations, and reading context to the act of reading (144).

For Rosenblatt, each unique reading event involves a ‘transaction’ between reader and text wherein both reader and text continuously act and are acted upon each other in a spiraling, to and fro, non-linear process. She clearly differentiates transaction, an active layering process, from interaction, which suggests two discrete elements acting on each other (Literature as Exploration 26). For Rosenblatt the reading event is a synergistic relationship between reader and text.
An essential component of Rosenblatt’s transaction theory is the stance of the reader, which is determined by the reader’s purpose. For Rosenblatt, each reading event falls somewhere on a continuum depending upon the adoption of the reader of a “predominantly aesthetic” stance or a “predominantly efferent” stance. The aesthetic stance refers to the reader’s attention to “what is being lived through during the reading event”, whereas the efferent stance refers to what is to be “retained after the reading event” (Writing and Reading 5).

Rosenblatt does not assume that any interpretation is acceptable, but suggests that common criteria of validity of interpretation, developed in a shared cultural milieu, will establish interpretations that are acceptable because they fulfill underlying assumptions that are agreed upon more fully than some other interpretations (Literature as Exploration 151).

Another version of Reader-response theory that considers the interplay of text and reader was postulated in Germany by phenomenologist Wolfgang Iser. He was a member of the University of Constance and, along with Hans Robert Jauss, advocated the study of the reading and reception of literary texts instead of literary methods that emphasize the production of texts or a close examination of texts. The theories that emerged from the Constance School during the late 1960s and early 1970s are generally referred to as Reception Theory.

In 1972, with the publication of The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett, Iser argues that a literary text is an artistic endeavour that is re-experienced by the consciousness of the reader in an act of convergence with the text. The text provides “the materials and determines the boundaries for the creative act of reading” (Dobie 137). Iser theorizes, “The
convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but always must remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader” (*The Implied Reader* 275). Using this explanation, the very meaning of iser’s statement lies in a virtual space between his words and my understanding of them.

Iser posits the existence of two poles in a literary ‘work’, the artistic and the aesthetic. “The artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader.” He then argues that because of this polarity, “the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two” (“The Reading Process” 269). Thus meaning is not contained only in the text, nor is it totally subjectively construed by the reader, but is generated during the process of reading.

The reader’s imagination is stimulated by unwritten parts of the text, which activate participation in creating a “virtual dimension” (284). Iser refers to the unformulated parts in the given structure of a text as “gaps”, which the readers fill by accessing their own experiences (292).

Whereas Iser focuses on the microcosm of response, Hans Robert Jauss, also a member of the Constance School in Germany, concerns himself with the macrocosm of reception. His major focus is the historical dimension of Reader-response theory, rather than the individual reader. He uses the term “horizon of expectations” to describe the set of cultural norms, assumptions, and criteria that shape the way in which readers understand and judge a literary work at a given historical time.

A horizon of expectations is influenced by factors such as the prevailing conventions and definitions of literature, or current moral codes. These historical
‘horizons’ are subject to change, so that subsequent generations of readers attribute a different range of interpretations to the same text, and will reevaluate it according to the cultural environment of the time. For Jauss, any literary text is in a dialogue with the past:

A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read. (23)

In theorizing texts as being in dialogues with the past rather than static entities, Jauss demonstrates the difficulties of interpreting texts from prior eras. Even though reading conventions may not change significantly from generation to generation, interpretation and meaning are inevitably tied to the prevailing cultural environment.

In contrast to the focus by the experiential Reader-response theorists Rosenblatt, Iser and Jauss, on the synergistic relationship between text and reader, so-called subjectivist Reader-response theorists are influenced by psychological and cognitive theories, and place meaning and interpretation solely in the hands of the reader, regardless of the influence of text structures and linguistic codes. Two prominent theorists are Norman Holland (The Dynamics of Literary Response 1968, Poems in Person 1973, 5 Readers Reading 1975), and David Bleich (Subjective Criticism 1978).

With a background in psychoanalysis, Norman Holland builds his Reader-response theory on ego-psychology, according to which a child is imprinted with a primary identity from the mother. Although there will be variations, the adult retains a stable, core personality. Holland maintains that readers’ responses to a text are
emotional, and are influenced by each individual's psychological needs. He claims that readers "draw upon the treasury a literary work provides to re-create [their] own characteristic psychological process[es]" (*5 Readers* 247).

Holland’s “transactive reading” theorizes how literary reading is a process of identity creation by the reader, involving sensing, knowing, and remembering as a series of feedback loops. Holland contends that each reader has a unique “identity theme” and will search for remnants of self in literary texts. The reader will recreate this identity through a process termed DEFT (defence-expectation-fantasy-transformation) (*Unity Identity Self Text* 818). Holland asserts that each reader brings unique expectations, fears, and wishes to the text, will find in a literary text “the kind of thing we characteristically wish or fear the most”, and respond to “recreate from the literary work our characteristic strategies for dealing with those fears and wishes” (817). Having done this, the reader is then able to derive fantasies in the text that yield pleasure, and be transformed by a “total experience of aesthetic, moral, intellectual or social coherence and significance” (818). According to Holland, “the fantasy content we conventionally locate in the literary work is really created by the reader from the literary work to express his own drives” (817). What Holland fails to address here is the possibility of multiple subjectivities, and therefore multiple identities. His theory relies on the notion of a stable, core self, a concept that has been under question during postmodernity. Given his commitment to psychology, the reading process in Holland's model is a purely subjective experience, and no attention is paid to text structures, tropes, or styles.

Like Holland, Bleich also locates meaning in the reader’s mind. For him, there is no knowledge except subjective knowledge, and the text does not exist outside its readers. Bleich asserts that “symbolization” occurs in the initial “perception and
identification of experiences” during the reading process, and is followed by
“resymbolization when the first acts of perception and identification produce in us a
need, desire, or demand for explanation” (39). From this perspective the meaning in a
text is not discovered by the reader, but developed by the reader.

However, Bleich also indicates that knowledge and meaning are situated, in that
each reader negotiates meaning within a community because “resymbolization is
determined not by objective criteria of truth, but rather by the needs of the community
(38-9). Situated and negotiated meanings are subjective, yet governed by the shifting
sands of community constraints. “The final knowledge is only a judgment, whose
authority may grow or diminish depending on how the judgment fares in ever widening
communities” (151). Literary interpretation for Bleich thus goes beyond the purely
subjective and moves into the collaborative territory of intersubjectivity, which links to
cultural contexts, considered the purview of socio-cultural theorists.

The main proponent of socio-cultural Reader-response theory is American literary
thorist Stanley Fish who initially concerned himself with what is happening in the mind
of the reader during the reading act (Surprised by Sin 1972). This early perspective,
termed “affective stylistics”, concentrates on the temporal processes of reading at the
level of each sentence, whether literary or not. As the sentences succeed one another,
the reader responds by making meaning that is nevertheless controlled by the text.
However, Fish posits an “informed” reader who possesses linguistic and literary
competence, not just any reader. He also conflates the experience of the reading and
the understanding of that experience. Meaning is an event that happens to the reader. In
this regard Fish echoes Rosenblatt’s reading process as a transaction between reader
and text, although Fish does not explicitly phrase reading as performative,
In a later work, *Is There a Text in this class?* (1980), Fish introduces the concept of “interpretive communities” within which a reader is situated and constrained. Since these communities adopt a set of assumptions about the stylistic characteristics of the texts and how they can be understood, a reader will start with initial assumptions, which determine what is perceived. With shared interpretive strategies within that social context, a text will have a range of stable meanings. Yet, as Fish is careful to point out, as interpretive communities change, so will the strategies and meanings. The text’s new meanings will become the new stability. “Whatever seems to you to be obvious and inescapable is only so within some institution or conventional structure” (370). Fish does not appear to entertain the possibilities that interpretive communities can overlap, include one another, and be subject to internal rifts.

In summary, Reader-response theories bring the reader into focus. Rosenblatt, Iser and Jauss consider both text and reader, Holland and Bleich direct their energies to the reader’s psychology, and Fish concentrates on the reader within a socio-cultural context. Each theorist provides concepts that can be applied to the readers of autobiography albeit some concepts are more practically useful than others.

Historically, the term autobiography refers to a particular canon of life narratives in the Western world, which “celebrate the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story” (Smith and Watson 3). In the humanist development narrative of the essential, autonomous self, the traditional Western assumption is that the autobiographer understands his (white, privileged, male) separateness from others, acts through the agency of free will, and produces a retrospective reflection of his life which provides some kind of self-understanding.
In the 1960s post modern (post structuralist) theories, courtesy of French critical theorists Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man posited that there is “no inner person, no real pre-linguistic I, no coherent identity that, in sum, is a person. Instead, the self is understood as socially constructed on a moment-to-moment basis through our discourse with others, and with our culture and society” (Randall and McKim 13). Linda Anderson succinctly summarizes the consequence of this view for self-referential representation thus: “Post-structuralism, in particular, by positing language or discourse as both preceding and exceeding the subject, deposed the author from his or her central place as the source of meaning and undermined the unified subject of autobiography” (6).

In contemporary times, given that the autobiographer cannot be relied upon to set out the factual and historical truth of experienced events, readers and theorists accept that “the truth of facts is subordinate to the truth of the man...” (Gusdorf 43) and that autobiographical truth “is less allegiance to a factual record that biographers and historians could check than an allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states...” (Eakin 64). In this contemporary approach, confining the definition of autobiography to Phillipe Lejeune’s “retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality” (qtd. in Smith and Watson 1), severely limits the practice of self narrative. Current understanding of the generic term ‘autobiography’ encompasses many forms of self-referential representation, which are free of specific rules of genre or form.

Given the fracturing of the concept of the unified individual recounting the facts of a life, it can be argued that autobiography is best viewed as a genre of fiction rather than
its traditional classification as non-fiction. Jerome Bruner has consistently made this argument, maintaining, “I persist in thinking that autobiography is an extension of fiction, rather than the reverse, that the shape of life comes first from the imagination rather than from experience” (“Autobiographical Process” 176). Bruner further claims that no autobiographer “is free from questions about which self his autobiography is about, composed from what perspective, for whom. The one we write is only one version, one way of achieving coherence” (“Creation of Self” 8). Reader-response theorists also apply this perspective to the reader. Rosenblatt, in particular, makes the case for a reader having varying responses and interpretations of the same text in different temporal or situated contexts. Each independent reading of a specific text by the same reader is a separate event in much the same way that each version of a life-narrative written by the same person at different times of life, and /or for disparate audiences presents only one variant of many selves. Even Lejeune claims that “the autobiography is necessarily in its deepest sense a special kind of fiction, its self and its truth as much created as (re)discovered realities” (ix). Memoirist and poet Annie Dillard concludes from her own experiences that writing about memories somehow changes and/or creates them. She says, “After I’ve written about an experience, my memories – those elusive, fragmentary patches of colour and feeling – they are gone; they’ve been replaced by the work” (71). Characterized thus, autobiography is both unstable and unreliable, and therefore wide open for readers to interpret as they see fit.

Similarly, John Paul Eakin, argues that individuals perceive, comprehend and interpret their experiences narratively, and that through the daily stories they tell about themselves, they create “discourse[s] of identity” (Eakin, 4). He argues that autobiographers create their truths, rather than discover them: “…autobiographical truth
is not a fixed, but evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation" (3). What readers encounter in an autobiography is therefore not only one way of rewriting memory, but also an account of multiple selves (subjectivities) that alter and shift in an account of a life. Equally, some Reader-response theories account for readers’ abilities to alter and shift as they develop and discover meaning in a text. Rosenblatt’s transaction allows for this dynamic, as does Iser’s virtual dimension, Jauss’s horizon of expectation, and Fish’s affective stylistics.

Bruner further argues that the “‘rightness’ of any autobiographical version is relative to the intention and conventions that govern its construction or its interpretation” [and that these “roughly correspond to a genre in fiction” (163). In this statement Bruner appears to attribute a great deal of agency to the reader in creating meaning in a text. In present times, the conventions that govern the construction of life narratives appear to be proliferating. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson list and describe “fifty-two genres of life narrative” (183-207) that encompass various versions of the “historically situated practice of self-representation [in which] narrators selectively engage their lived experience through personal storytelling” (14). Nested within these types of self-narrative is memoir, for which I have a personal preference.

Memoir is a version of self-representation that tends to frame a specific time, place, person or theme in an author’s life. Smith and Watson, although conceding that contemporarily “autobiography and memoir are used interchangeably” (198), nevertheless avow that memoir “directs the attention more to the lives and actions of others than to the narrator” (198). For Smith and Watson the important factor that makes memoir distinct from other modes of life-narrative is that memoir situates the subject socially as observer and/or participant, in addition to situating the subject historically
I do not think that defining memoir is as simple as Smith and Watson state, since many modes of life-writing intersect.

William Zinsser, himself a consummate memoir writer, paints memoir with a much wider brush than do Smith and Watson. In *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, he captures the essence of memoir thus:

Memoir is a portion of a life. Unlike autobiography, which moves in dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense - childhood, for instance - or that was framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that isn't possible in autobiography; memoir is a window into a life. (21)

Zinsser's metaphors of lens and window are telling. Both involve the framing of a subject, and are indicative of a number of aspects of memoir – the writer chooses what to include in the photograph or what can be seen through the window, the distance from the subject, the angle from which to view it, and what to have clearly in focus and what to blur. Each memoir writer will draw borders around the events, people, time periods and emotions to include, and what to exclude. Because of the narrowed lens, the memoir writer is free to employ the methods of the fictional writer – vivid descriptions, detailed story telling, and careful characterization.

As a reader of numerous memoirs, I come to each text with an opening expectation. I want to be enticed into entering this life, seduced as if I am a confidante. I want to be compelled to read more, to be unable to put down the text. I want to be so engrossed that I read all night, as I would a really good novel. But, at the same time, I
bring to the reading a highly developed skepticism. Liz Stanley captures this reading process aptly. “We may be textually persuaded, cajoled, misled; but we can, and we do, scrutinize and analyze, puzzle and ponder, resist and reject” (131). This is no different from the critical and skeptical process that I apply when reading a novel.

I assume that a life narrative will be based on events that actually occurred, in the same manner as I would assume that an historical novel is based on events that can be fact checked. I am fascinated by myriad subjectivities, how personal experiences are interpreted, how others have lived, how culture, history and place contribute to the formation of an individual, and how I am similar to or different from both the protagonist and the narrator of the text. The specific aspects that unfailingly draw me to memoir are the uniqueness of each narrative and the hope that I might get to know this narrator regardless of how carefully crafted the self-representation might be. Additionally, I am curious to find out what kind of reader the text asks me to be - sympathetic and forgiving, friendly and eliciting, receiving of confession or secret or learning. What kind of reader might I become as I read the memoir? What does the reading create, uncover or demolish in my subjectivities? What mode of reading does this memoir require of me and what may be demanded of my reading self?

Some of these questions can potentially be answered through the application of a number of constructs from Reader-response theories. Of particular significance are various reader positions such as the “implied reader” proposed by Iser, or the “informed reader” that Fish suggests. Additionally, reader positions can be linked to Rosenblatt’s reader stances, which can in turn be influenced by Fish’s interpretive communities. Another construct that deserves discussion is the purported implied author, and how it may (or may not) be congruent with the narrator of a life-narrative.
With the move away from New Criticism where the text is theorized as an object in which the meaning lies independently of author and reader, Reader-response theories generated much theoretical debate on the nature of the reader. They also brought the author back into the picture, albeit with the caveat that once published, a text is no longer within the author’s control. Reader-response theories spawned a plethora of other readers besides the flesh and blood, actual reader. These readers are variously theorized as constructed by the text, or invoked by the author. There is the mock reader (Gibson 1950), the implied reader (Booth 1961; Iser 1974), the inscribed reader and the ideal reader (Culler 1980), the informed reader and the hypothetical reader (Fish 1967), the resisting reader (Fetterley 1978), and the caring reader (Schweikart 1990), as well as numerous other labels. Rather than dissect the differences between and among these assorted ‘readers’, I consider it pertinent to explore Peter J. Rabinowitz’s model of audience, because it takes into account most of the theoretical reading positions that have been postulated in Reader-response theory. This model of audience has been applied productively to literature for thirty-five years since *Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences* first appeared in print in 1977. As I outline Rabinowitz’s model of audience, I will also explore some ways in which this model may be gainfully applied to the reading of memoir.

Rabinowitz proposes four main audiences or readers. Approaching the act of reading a narrative text with this four-part perspective is instructive, as it provides a tool for teasing apart the nature of reading positions that can be activated in fiction, and hence, I argue, in memoir and other life-narratives.

Rabinowitz’s *actual audience* is the flesh and blood reader, the individual who physically does the reading and “is the only audience which is entirely ‘real’, and the
only one over which the author has no guaranteed control” (*Truth* 126). This audience needs no further comment.

His second audience is what he terms the *authorial audience*. This is the specific hypothetical audience for which the author rhetorically designs the text. Rabinowitz explains that an author “cannot write without making certain assumptions about his reader’s beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions. His artistic choices are based on these assumptions, conscious or unconscious, and to a certain extent, his artistic success will depend on their accuracy” (126). In many respects this authorial audience is similar to the informed reader that Fish proposes – a reader with semantic knowledge and literary competence.

The concept of authorial audience in Rabinowitz’s model is particularly helpful for the reading of memoir, because it opens the door for actual readers to orient themselves to the author’s terrain by * provisionally * adopting a set of beliefs, expectations, experiences, and needs that are publicly available social practice. This does not mean that disbelief is suspended, or that the narrator of the text is naively believed. Rather, in reading authorially, actual readers ‘play’ the authorial audience by “applying as best [they] can, the knowledge of texts and the world that the author seems to be inviting [them] to apply” (*Playing the Double Game* 11). Obviously the degree to which actual readers are able to play this game will vary according to each individual.

There will always be a gap between the actual audience and the authorial audience, and readers must attempt to bridge that gap if they are to appreciate the text. According to Rabinowitz, the readers’ degree of challenge is related to the distance (geographically, culturally, chronologically) between the author and the readers. “If historically or culturally distant texts are hard to understand, it is often precisely because
we do not possess the knowledge required to join the authorial audience. Topical allusions, in particular, lose their clarity over time” (*Truth* 127). The inability to bridge the gap between actual audience and authorial audience is evident in one of my reflective research journal entries concerning the memoir *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death* by Nancy K. Miller. I was culturally unable to join her authorial audience, even though I share her geography (North America), historical period (late twentieth century), and gender:

I chose to read, and then reread this memoir in the hopes that I might find some comfort and/or understanding of the pain and grief that I experienced at the deaths of my parents within five years of each other. However, although I find Miller’s *Bequest and Betrayal* interesting and provocative, there is little in her material that I can relate to personally. This is primarily because Miller writes from a strong inner-city, Jewish-American identity that is completely foreign to me. Even though I reread *Bequest and Betrayal* when I was nursing my terminally ill father, and should therefore have found numerous parallels, I could not relate to Miller’s public focus on the intimate details of the bodies of both her mother and her father. This discussion is the betrayal of the memoir’s title, and Miller does investigate the ethics of revealing personal family information. Despite her explanations, I could still find no justification for writing publicly about scatological details. I, too, bathed my own father’s emaciated body, cleaned up his vomit and excreta, endured his black depressions, and tried to please. But I did this with a strange mix of love and familial obligation; wishing to *shield* his loss of dignity from the public gaze, not expose it for
public voyeuristic pleasure. Perhaps what is at issue here is a matter of enculturation – my primarily British (prudish?) attitudes and values juxtaposed to Miller’s Jewish-American mind-set.

Because I was not able to relate to Miller’s culture and values, does not mean that I did not gain valuable insights into the death of a parent, or that I was not able to appreciate Miller’s storytelling and critical observations. The gap did, however, produce an emotional distance between the narrator and myself as reader, and this can be explicated by Rabinowitz’s third reading position, the narrative audience.

Rabinowitz describes the narrative audience, as the audience within the work whom the narrator addresses, and who also possesses particular knowledge. The actual reader “must therefore pretend to be a member of the imaginary audience for which the narrator is writing” (127). Rabinowitz suggests that to identify the narrative audience the actual reader should ask the question, “What sort of person would I have to pretend to be – what would I have to know and believe – if I wanted to take this work of fiction as real?” (128). This is especially a requirement of actual readers of science fiction and fantasy. “The narrative audience accepts what the authorial audience knows to be false scientific doctrine” (128). Although Rabinowitz acknowledges that joining the narrative audience is akin to the willing suspension of disbelief, he argues that the actual reader both suspends disbelief and does not suspend disbelief at the same time (128). To illustrate his point, Rabinowitz states that the narrative audience of Cinderella accepts the existence of fairy godmothers while the authorial audience does not. The actual reader can hold both beliefs simultaneously.

In my reading of Bequest and Betrayal, I found that I was not able to join Miller’s narrative audience by pretending to be a sympathetic and understanding reader.
Although I was able to ‘play’ the authorial audience by accepting the descriptions and explanations of the beliefs and values that Miller propounded, I was not able to engage with them emotionally nor pretend to be a sympathetic audience. Rabinowitz explains that the distance between the authorial and narrative audiences in a text determines the degree to which the text convinces, and I found myself singularly unconvinced by *Bequest and Betrayal*.

The *ideal narrative audience* is the final reader position in Rabinowitz’s model and is defined as “the audience for which the narrator wishes he were writing” (134). This audience “believes the narrator, accepts his judgments, sympathizes with his plight,” and even laughs at his jokes when they are bad. This audience is ideal from the narrator’s point of view. In terms of life-narratives, the ideal narrative audience is the narrator’s desired audience. An example of ideal audience occurs in *Memoirs From Away* by Helen Buss, when the narrator confesses her eagerness for audience identification and approval:

> I want you to read with the total identification that I often find myself caught in as reader. I want you to read with the distance of literary appreciation, alert for the subtle inside the simple. I want you to read as my mother, my sister, my friend. I want you to be every kind of reader, a multitude of readers. I want you to admire me, I want you to love me, I want you to read me. (9)

The comment on this statement in my reflexive research journal is unsurprising. “This is a tall order. I wonder if this is supposed to be ironic, or in jest, or an allusion to western canonical autobiography. Can she really be serious? Surely her readers will be a relatively select group.” Rabinowitz explains that the “ideal narrative audience agrees
with the narrator that certain events are good or that a particular analysis is correct, while the narrative audience is called upon to judge him” (135). Clearly, from my journal comments, I must conclude that I played the narrative audience in this case because I judged Buss’s narrator harshly.

Rabinowitz’s model of audiences has some complementary parallels in the arena of the theory of autobiography. A recurring discussion concerns the nature of the autobiographical “I”. Traditionally, critics have considered the difference between the subject and object positions of the author, distinguishing the narrating-I who speaks in the present from the narrated-I who is spoken about in the past. Dubbed the “autobiographical gap”, this reflective space is said to provide new insights and understanding of a coherent self (Charon 70). As Smith and Watson point out, however, such differentiation assumes a stable present and a retrospective isolatable past (58), which may not be appropriate for narratives of shifting identities and fragmentation. Smith and Watson propose a more differentiated four part “I” framework: the historical-I (the verifiable person in records, archives, and family albums), the narrating-I (the narrator telling the self referential story), the narrated-I (the protagonist of the narrative), and the ideological-I (the cultural, historical and ideological concept of personhood available to the narrator) (58-63).

I propose that the counterpart to Rabinowitz’s actual audience, is Smith and Watson’s historical I. Both are ontological beings. The historical-I, the flesh and blood author writes for an actual audience, the flesh and blood reader. The narrating-I tells the self-narrative to a narrative audience who tries to understand, but may judge, whereas the narrated-I expects to be believed and accepted by the ideal audience. The
ideological-I of the narrative is writing for the authorial audience since both are historically and culturally situated.

Interestingly, Rabinowitz (at least in 1977) would disagree with my proposal. He argues that “at the extreme end of realism, narrative and authorial audiences are so close as to be almost indistinguishable…[and] when the distinction between the two disappears entirely, we have autobiography or history” (*Truth* 131). I suggest that with the postmodern focus in autobiographical theory on multiple subjectivities, fragmented identities, and shifting narrating and narrated Is, there is scope to apply to self-narratives all three narrative audience positions in the Rabinowitz model.

Another narratological concept that is useful for thinking about the readers of memoir is that of the implied author, defined by James Phelan as “a version of the actual author - or, in cases of hoaxes or other deceptions such as fraudulent memoirs, the purported author - and the agent responsible for the multiple choices that make the text the way it is and not some other way” (“Implied Author” 119). Traditionally attributed to Wayne Booth, (1961) the term implied author is a controversial concept in literary theory, and as Susan Lanser indicates in “The Implied Author: An Agnostic Manifesto” it is a concept that one must either believe in, or not (155). I happen to be a believer.

Various theoretical positions posit the implied author as an intention of the author, a textual construction, or an inference by the reader. Reader-response theories generally posit the implied author as a combination of a persona that is both textually inferred and constructed by the actual reader from personal knowledge and experience. Lanser maintains, “the implied author is neither the historical ("flesh-and-blood") author of a text, nor a narrator, nor any other textually identifiable persona.” It follows, argues Lanser, that since the implied author “has no material or textual identity, it is necessarily
a reading effect. It is something that happens rather than something that is, and it happens in the wake of reading rather than prior to it” (154). Here Lanser echoes the reading event that is a major feature of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory – that the reader will transact with the text to create meaning from the marks on the page. Rosenblatt’s theory easily encompasses an implied author. Although I agree that an implied author is a reading effect, there are additional factors that contribute to an actual reader’s formulation of an implied author. These are items such as the surroundings of the text provided by the editors, printers and publishers (termed the paratext by Genette), as well as the life experiences, background and general knowledge of the individual reader.

Most readers approach the reading of a text with some prior knowledge of the author - a book jacket includes the title of the text, the author’s name (from which gender can be inferred even if there is not a photograph of the author), and a brief biography. Within the first few pages the publisher and date of publication are included, and often a foreword. All these features that are taken for granted allow the reader to make inferences about the author. Then, during the reading process, characteristics of the text such as style, thematic concerns, and implicit or explicit values and opinions combine to convey an overall impression of the author. Also, familiarity with other texts of a particular author as well as factual information about the author get worked into the notion that the reader creates of the author. And that impression may change with the reading of further texts and newly acquired information. Clearly, each actual reader’s impression of the same historical author is likely to differ, depending upon textual, paratextual and contextual factors. In consequence, each actual reader will create a unique implied author.
Even if it is assumed that an author consciously and intentionally creates an implied author, and strives to present a persona within what is written, there is little likelihood that actual readers will interpret what the real author intended. The flesh and blood reader cannot have direct access to the flesh and blood author's ideologies and intentions. However, it is likely that there will be an unconsciously implied author who is socially and psychologically imposed by the historical and cultural conventions and expectations at the time of writing.

Applied to memoir (and other life-narratives), the implied author is a useful concept for understanding the self-fashionings in the text that emerge for individual actual readers during the reading process. As Phelan notes, “In fiction, the implied author is ontologically distinct from the narrating-I and the experiencing-I, while in non-fiction there is ontological continuity from one to the others” (“Implied Author,” 131). Phelan argues that if the real author is ultimately unknowable and the narrating-I has multiple voices, an “implied authorial-I would be the agent responsible for choosing which of the multiple voices of the narrating-I to employ at which points in the narration” (120). A point to consider here is that the implied authorial-I is not necessarily a conscious creation by the actual author, but rather a creation of the actual reader.

The concept of implied author is also relevant to Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact” when reading self-narratives. For Lejeune, there is a contract or pact between the writer and the reader of a life narrative wherein there is “identity of name between the author…, the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about” (“Pact” 12). When an actual reader sets out to read a self-narrative, that reader assumes that the story told will reveal the historical author, yet there is no guarantee that this will occur. What the reader encounters is his/her version of the author, in other words the
implied author. Seen in this light, the autobiographical pact confers identity among the implied author, the narrator, and the protagonist.

In addition to the concepts of audience positions and the implied reader, there is the issue of reader purpose, which is rarely discussed by Reader-response theorists and appears sometimes to be downright disregarded. When examining the question of what is happening when a reader reads a text, something that is invariably missing in many studies is a focus on why the reader is reading a particular text. Literary theories have tended to revolve around that elusive term ‘literature’, and many examples employed by the theories are drawn from the classical canon. In the early days of Reader-response theories, ‘literary’ frequently referred to prose fiction, poetry and essays, and theorized the reader’s responses as primarily aesthetic and pleasurable.

But surely the reader’s purpose for reading will influence how the text is read, what is attended to in the reading, and how the reader interprets what is read. All this will also be determined by the historical and cultural context of the reader, as Jauss has explained, and his/her cognitive and emotional state at the time of the reading, areas specifically targeted by Holland and Bleich. I started my investigations of Reader-response theories with Louise Rosenblatt, and I find myself returning to her repeatedly. Her down to earth theory takes into account my personal reading experiences, as well as my observations of students in my English language classrooms, and my long involvement in western school systems. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory covers all these bases. She accounts for the text (and therefore the author), the purpose of the reader, the subjective state of the reader, and both the socio-historical context and the situated context of the act of the reading.

For Rosenblatt, reading is an event, “a transaction involving a particular reader
and a particular configuration of marks on a page, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context" (*Writing*, 4). Borrowing from William James, Rosenblatt maintains that as the individual reads, he/she pays “selective attention” (James, 1890 1:284) in a “dynamic centering on areas or aspects of the contents of consciousness” (*Writing*, 4). The elements that the reader’s selective attention picks out are then synthesized or blended “into what constitutes ‘meaning’. The ‘meaning’ does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader, but happens during the transaction between reader and text” (4). For Rosenblatt reading is a performative act, and the reader will bring to that event, a variety of purposes and expectations.

An essential component of Rosenblatt’s transaction theory is the “stance” of the reader, which “reflects the reader’s purpose” (5). For Rosenblatt, each reading event falls somewhere on a continuum depending upon the adoption of the reader of a “predominantly aesthetic” stance or a “predominantly efferent” stance. The aesthetic stance refers to the reader’s attention to “what is being lived through during the reading event”, whereas the efferent stance refers to what is to be “retained after the reading event” (5). In the efferent stance the focus is on “abstracting-out and analytic structuring of the ideas, information, directions, conclusions to be retained, used, or acted upon after the reading event” (5). Here the emphasis is on “factual” material such as that in a newspaper, legal brief, textbook, recipe, and so on. The aesthetic stance, on the other pole of the continuum, occurs when the reader pays selective attention to sensations, images, feelings, and ideas. The aesthetic reader thus experiences and:

...savors the qualities of the structured ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, emotions called forth, participating in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions as they unfold. This lived-through meaning is felt to
correspond to the text. This meaning evoked during the aesthetic transaction constitutes "the literary work," the poem, story, or play. This evocation, and not the text, is the object of the reader's "response" and "interpretation" both during and after the reading event. (5)

Interestingly, in theorizing these stances, Rosenblatt does not refer to the nature of the texts that are being read. It is tempting to think of the two stances as being usefully applied to reading facts (efferent) versus fiction (aesthetic), however Rosenblatt does not use these terms, and is very clear that she is referring to a reader’s attitude towards what is being read, not to the characteristics or the genre of a text.

In various academic summaries of Rosenblatt’s work, I have encountered a tendency for the continuum to be ignored; yet this concept is vital to Rosenblatt’s ideas concerning readers’ stances. Rosenblatt maintains that a reader’s stance will fit somewhere on the continuum between the twin poles of aesthetic and efferent reading, depending upon the purposes and the make-up of the reader. She points out that most readings will fall towards the centre of the continuum, where there will be a mix of both efferent and aesthetic stances:

Within a particular aesthetic reading, attention may turn from the experiential synthesis to efferent analysis, as some technical strategy is recognized or literary judgment is passed. Similarly, in an efferent reading, a general idea may be illustrated or reinforced by an aesthetically lived-through illustration or example… the two dominant stances are clearly distinguishable: Someone else can read a text efferently for us, and acceptably paraphrase it. No one else can read aesthetically, that is, experience the evocation of, a literary work of art for us. (5-6)
Applied to the reading of memoir, this continuum can account for times when the actual reader may appreciate the craft of the writing, and enjoy the tale being woven, yet be critical and/or skeptical of the specifics of the narrative for any number of reasons. This continuum can also take into account the manner in which a real reader may approach a memoir. If reading for factual information, the literary nature of the text may be missed. If reading for the pleasure of the self-narrative the critical perspective may be eschewed. At one moment the reader may be engrossed in the story, reading for enjoyment. At the next moment, the reader may be reading to find out information, or to learn about a specific topic that is embedded in the narrative. The fluidity of the stance continuum can effectively accommodate a reader in flux from moment to moment as purpose changes.

It is significant that Rosenblatt’s theory can take into account any written text, which is quite different to most literary theories, which concentrate on ‘literature’, generally fiction, and attempt to determine what constitutes the ‘literary’ as opposed to what can be considered non-literary.

In addition to Rosenblatt’s continuum of reader stances, Stanley Fish’s concept of interpretive communities provides another valuable prism through which to view the flesh and blood reader of memoir, since both constructs concentrate on the purposes and attitudes of the reader that come into play during the reading of a particular text.

Stanley Fish first conceived the term interpretive communities in his 1976 essay “Interpreting the Variorum” and modified his explanation over time. Fish defines the term using vague language that has been open to multiple interpretations and criticisms; the following is representative of his definitions:

If the understandings of the people in question are informed by the same
notions of what counts as a fact, of what is central, peripheral, and worthy of being noticed - in short, by the same interpretive principles - the agreement between them will be assured, and its source will not be a text that enforces its own perception but a way of perceiving that results on the emergence to those who share it. (Text 337)

Given this imprecise explanation, I am obliged to fill in the gaps, as per Iser, if I am to create meaning. Accordingly, I understand Fish’s concept to mean that a group influences what, how and why its members read and create meaning. And in this sense each interpretive community will hold interpretive power. Viewed in this manner, an interpretive community bears a strong resemblance to Foucault’s conception of a discourse community, a complex network of relationships among individuals, texts, ideas and institutions, each impacting each other. For Foucault, since knowledge/truth is intersubjective, a product of the shared meaning, conventions, and social practices operating within and between discourses, the members of a discourse community share a recognized body of truth statements that follow a set of discursive rules. Following from this, “an individual’s constructions of meaning are not idiosyncratic, but are inextricably linked to existing discursive networks of power/knowledge” (Leckie et al. 68).

Applying the concept of interpretive communities/discourse communities to the reading of memoir, the social context of interpretation and discussion will matter to the actual reader. Members of a community book-club will have a different set of shared conventions and social practices when discussing a specific text compared to an academic community infused with the theory of autobiography that discusses the same text. For example, the local book-club to which I belong, recently read and discussed Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, a semi-fictional memoir of his Sri Lankan
childhood, and quest for ancestral understanding. In the discussion, club members took no issue with the magic-realism of the text, and spoke about how the author constructed fictional anecdotes about his grandparents that colourfully illustrate their personalities. Members of the club were not concerned with the factual accuracy of this memoir; instead they appreciated Ondaatje’s evocative depiction of the culture, climate, and geography of Sri Lanka. Many of them were also familiar with Ondaatje’s fiction and poetry, and accepted the memoir as one more offering from a brilliant and engaging Canadian writer.

Since I am steeped in autobiographical theory, I read Running in the Family with a different set of interpretive conventions. I was looking for gaps, contradictions, silences, multiple voices/subjectivities, authenticity claims, and evidence of discourses of history and culture. I read with a skeptical stance to identify frame, form, time, plot, desire, and awareness of audience. And I took little at face value. But I was also able to read aesthetically, and had no trouble oscillating between the two disparate interpretive communities, each with its own set of distinct social practices and conventions.

Discussion of interpretive communities inevitably leads back to concerns of genre and the literary canon, since critics and scholars form interpretive communities. As Rabinowitz points out “canons are always ideological at base, not only in terms of their treatment of content, but even more in their treatment of form, since the reading strategies to which they owe their existence always have ideological implications” (Before Reading 212-13). This is of particular significance for autobiography, since the genre is supposedly based on truth-telling, and as soon as fictive events are claimed as historical occurrences, the ire of critics and writers is aroused, as in the case of James Frey’s A Million Little Pieces. Yet, despite Oprah’s public flaying of Frey on national
television, “A Million Little Pieces sold 4.5 million copies and kept selling even after the affair lost its steam” (Kolhatkar 78 – 80). The financial success of Frey’s story of drug abuse and of young adult angst can be explained in two very different ways. Either the narrative continues to compel readers who do not take issue with Frey’s disregard for Lejeune’s autobiographical pact or, expecting that memoir should adhere to facts, readers attempt to identify Frey’s fictitious insertions. Although it is academic interpretive communities that decree the boundaries and nature of genres, as Bruner states, “autobiography can be written in one genre and interpreted by its readers in another” (Process of Autobiography 163). It is thus the performance and interpretation of each reader that determines genre, since “the same text can be subject to different genre explanations without compromising its integrity” (Barwash 22) and the choice of genre will be dependent upon the interpretive communities to which a reader belongs.

To conclude, I return to my initial questions about reading memoir, and summarize the range of answers contained in the Reader-response theories that I have discussed. The first question, “How might I get to know this narrator?” finds a plausible answer in the concept of an implied author as the persona in the text with whom I engage. As reader, I bring all my prior knowledge and experiences to bear on the text, and in the process of encountering the text’s style, themes, tropes, values, and opinions, I create for myself a personal version of the author.

Next, Rabinowit’s authorial audience can provide a potential response to “What kind of reader does this text ask me to be?” in that I must provisionally enter the world that is structured within the text. As well, Iser’s concept of the liminal space between the text and the actual reader, that indeterminate gap that is filled by the reader from personal experience and imagination, provides another potential answer. Jauss also
adds an historical twist to consider, since my horizon of expectations may need adjustment, depending on the time period in which the text was written.

Also, Rabinowitz’s further audience positions of narrative audience and ideal narrative audience offer possible answers to the question “What kind of reader might I become during the reading process?” As a member of the narrative audience I can pretend to be a sympathetic and understanding reader, yet I can also judge and evaluate. However, as a member of the ideal narrative audience, I believe, accept, and sympathize with the narrator.

Furthermore, Rosenblatt’s conception of reading as a dynamic transaction between text and reader addresses the query, “What does this reading create, uncover or demolish in my subjectivities?” Rosenblatt theorizes the reading process as experiential and performative. To what I therefore pay selective attention will vary according to the situated context of the reading, my emotional and mental state at the time, and the macro environment of my socio-cultural and historical context. Holland’s identity theme may also apply, as I will likely find in a text my own wishes and fears and therefore create corresponding personal fantasies that are transformative.

In addition, Rosenblatt’s stance continuum can account for “What mode of reading does this text require of me?” My purposes change as I read, and are also influenced by the structures of the text. I am constantly in flux on the continuum between efferent and aesthetic reading.

Finally, the concept of interpretive communities, as conceived by Fish, supplies a partial explanation that addresses the question “What might I demand in reading this text?” Each group of people under whose auspices I read a text will inform how and why I read and create meaning. Both Rosenblatt and Bleich also offer versions of interpretive
communities – Rosenblatt’s is couched in terms of common criteria of validity of interpretation in shared cultural milieux, whereas Bleich argues that resymbolization (meaning) is determined by the needs of a given community.

All the Reader-response theories that I have discussed offer insights regarding the reading process, and can be productively applied to the readers of life-narratives. In particular, the transactional reading theory developed by Louise Rosenblatt has the broadest range of concepts, and comes closest to a unified theory of the reading process. Her ideas, which were revolutionary in the 1930s, and expanded by others in the 1970s, underpin much of the scholarly work undertaken in the Humanities and Social Sciences in present times. Although interest in Reader-response theories has waned, there are numerous concepts in those theories that offer fertile ground for the examination of life-narratives. With the proliferation of on-line personas in blogs, personal websites, twitter postings, interactive virtual realities, social media sites, YouTube videos, and other digital media, there is fresh soil to be tilled by reinvigorating Reader-response theories.
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