

Forgetting Fiction: An Oral History of Reading (centred on interviews in South London, 2014-2015)

Abstract

What do you remember about the first, or the last novel you read? Can you remember the plot, its characters, or even its title? In a project designed to explore what people remember about fiction they have read, 'Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories' (2014-2018), we asked questions like these to members of reading groups in South London (UK)¹, and found that what they usually remembered more than the books themselves is the experience of reading and the context in which books are read: the enjoyment of reading, on a bus or in a library, with a parent or on one's own, for example. Instead of focusing on memories of fiction, then, this article is going to discuss the forgetting of fiction, situating these findings as a development from other literary, historical and cultural studies of reading to consider how reading operates beyond the interpretation of textual meaning. It will investigate the extent to which forgetting fiction can be aligned with the history of 'extensive' reading. In addition, the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews help to illuminate how readers, in their efforts to resist forgetting, keep books and lists of books they have read. I will compare the oral history interviews with autobiographical writing about reading, and the lists with commonplace books. The article will argue that oral history – in conjunction with written narratives – can contribute original insights to the study of reading. It will finally ask what the forgetting of fiction, and the efforts to remember, can tell us about why people read.

Article

Memories of Fiction

In 2014 and 2015, the 'Memories of Fiction' project team carried out 46 oral history interviews with members of library-based reading groups in the London borough of Wandsworth. Most of the 25 readers were interviewed twice.² The group members were typically middle-class women, as is common to most reading groups across Britain, but also included readers with working class backgrounds (especially in the group at Roehampton library), and men (one in each of four groups).³ The project team consisted of oral historians and literary scholars, including Shelley Trower, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Graham Smith.⁴

One of the project's main aims was to create an oral history archive containing readers' memories of fictional texts they had read, from childhood onwards, as part of their life stories. For the interviews we devised a semi-structured interview schedule, asking some key questions but in flexible order, giving room to participants to shape their own narratives. Following the kinds of life story questions characteristic of many contemporary oral history projects ('When were you born?' 'Where did you live?'), the interviews – at some point between the first five minutes and half an hour – began to move into the project's focus on reading fiction. Questions on this topic in the earlier stages of interviews usually concerned parents' reading, reading as a child at home, at school, on holidays, and then attempted to elicit an account of the role of reading throughout peoples' lives and how they ended up in reading groups ('What was the journey that brought you to the reading group?'). At the end of the first interview we asked each narrator to note down any memorable books that come to mind in preparation for the second. In the second interview we were keen to focus more closely on reading, and especially what people remember about fictions they mentioned reading, the key question being: 'What do you remember about that book?'

Before the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews, the project researchers visited the book groups to discuss the project and to provide information for members, so participants were led to expect that we would be asking about such memories. Indeed, the summary information provided on the information sheet left with group members, began with the question: 'What do we remember about the books we have read - from childhood onwards - and why?'⁵ The project title indicated that the focus was on fictional material, and all the participants regularly read novels for their reading groups. Participants therefore seemed well-prepared and they could readily talk about memories of reading from childhood onwards - including trips to the library, reading with parents, reading at school, in bed, on holiday, on buses and trains. In this context, then, when asked key interview questions about what they remembered about books they mentioned reading, it was striking that memories of content were often hard or impossible to retrieve.

The 'Memories of Fiction' project title alluded to memories of fiction in a double sense: both to interviewees' memories of fictional narratives they had read, and to those memories themselves as potentially fictional (for example in remembering plots or characters inaccurately). While the project's initial interest in memories *of* fictional narratives derives from my background as a literary scholar, its interest in memories *as* potentially fictional was reinforced by my work as an oral historian, aware of the emphasis given by many in the field since the 1980s (including the literary scholar-historian Alessandro Portelli) to the

subjectivity and narrativity at least as much as the factuality of what oral history interviewees remember.⁶ Moving away from my preoccupations in these respects with the significance of fictional narratives, I will use the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews to instead observe that readers often forget the fictions they have read. In contrast, the many oral history theories and discussions centering around memory and its subjectivity rarely address forgetting. Where forgetting is discussed it is usually in the sense of silencing or of the repression of traumatic histories; oral historians retrieve the "forgotten histories" of minority groups for example, or have to negotiate the fragmented narratives of those who have survived atrocities.⁷ The forgetting to be observed here is not directly related to any such kind of repression or recovery. To use psychological terminology, when readers are interviewed about their memories of fiction, the type of memory that seems most operational is usually 'episodic' (concerning autobiographical experiences that can be explicitly stated) rather than 'semantic' (encompassing the 'storage of words and meanings').⁸ Readers tend more readily to remember experiences of reading novels, in other words, than the content of the novels themselves.

This article will next situate the 'Memories of Fiction' project in relation to other historical, literary and cultural studies that have involved talking to readers – and audiences more broadly – arguing that its findings are a significant development that can help to connect these fields. It will then discuss the interviews in more detail.

Talking to readers: book history, oral history and cultural studies

Histories of reading almost always rely on written texts - including library catalogues, probate records, print runs, letters, marginalia, and diaries - because reading usually leaves no other kinds of long-lasting, evident traces. 'Reading', as Michel de Certeau put it, 'takes no measures against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself *and* also forgets), it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly'.⁹ Roger Chartier has cited this ephemerality as a challenge for historians who wish to inventory and account for the practice of reading, and other book historians have similarly observed how readers leave few traces of their reading.¹⁰ In recent decades, however, historians have also begun to turn to oral history interviews as a means of documenting and remembering reading. Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksá's pioneering study *Australian Readers Remember* (1992) is a key reference point for later studies, including 'Scottish Readers Remember' directed by Alistair McCleery and David Finkelstein (2006-2009), and our recent 'Memories of Fiction' project. As their titles indicate, each of these projects have set out with an emphasis on memory. While *Australian*

Readers Remember refers to the fragility of memory, to omissions, simplifications and other kinds of misremembering, it discusses for the most part what Australian readers remember about reading (aloud; as children; in libraries, for example) and what they read (including titles of newspapers and novels). For the 'Australian' and 'Scottish Readers Remember' projects, a point of focus is the extent to which interviewees remember reading their respective national literatures.¹¹ 'Memories of Fiction', however, leads me to argue instead for the importance of forgetting in this essay. De Certeau refers to a personal forgetting of oneself and one's reading, which can lead to a historical kind of forgetting due to a corresponding lack of archival traces; in this article I am interested in how oral history can paradoxically capture something of the forgetting done by individual readers.

These oral history projects nevertheless share an interest in non-professional, 'ordinary' readers, in contrast to the university-based literature scholars whose reading has been studied by reader-response critics and theorists especially since the 1970s. Reader-response theories had a crucial role in challenging the New Critical approach which saw the main role of criticism as being to analyse the objective, pre-given meaning of the text in itself, discouraging interest in readers or reading. The emerging interest in processes of interpreting the meaning of texts was key to opening up approaches to reading, but the early theorists, including Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser among the best known, did not engage with 'ordinary' readers so much as take themselves and their academic communities as model readers.¹² In the 1980s and 1990s book historians including Lyons, David Vincent, Robert Darnton and Jonathan Rose in contrast increasingly attended to 'ordinary' or 'common' (non-professional) readers, often by using autobiographical writings, and also, as it became increasingly available and prominent as a method for more recent periods, oral history.¹³

In the 1980s an emerging strand of cultural studies also began to use interviews, as part of a broader turn to ethnographic methods, to investigate reading and audiences more broadly. While reader-response criticism had conceived of reading as an act of textual interpretation, both the book history and cultural studies work tended to shift the focus to historical, national and cultural contexts of reading and viewing, among other kinds of cultural consumption. Work such as Janice Radway's on romance reading along with David Morley's on television viewing, began to identify a great range of non-interpretive forms of engaging with or using books and other media: such as reading to mark out time away from domestic roles; watching television as a means of starting conversations. Radway had reflected in *Reading the Romance* (1984) that it was through her ethnographic work with readers - who 'always responded to my query about their reasons for reading with comments

about the pleasures of the act itself rather than about their liking for the particulars of the romantic plot' - that she learned to give up her 'obsession [as a literary scholar] with textual features and narrative details.'¹⁴ More recently, Elizabeth Long in *Book Clubs* (2003) made a comparable point about her expectations being modified through the process of talking to readers: 'Originally, I had thought of book groups as places where I might have access to members' individual interpretations of books'; ethnographic research led Long to encounter conversations which 'move back and forth between using people's remarks as windows into the text (the primary imperative of literary analysis) and using the text as a window into people's lives or various aspects of the cultural and social lives we live together.'¹⁵ During the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews, we found similarly that our efforts to elicit discussions of textual narratives – in this case memories of those narratives (characters, a line or two, plot twists, endings) – frequently resulted in interviewees discussing their experiences of reading rather than the texts themselves, which seemed in many cases to be forgotten.

Although the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews were with a small number of readers, studies such as Radway's and Long's indicate how assumptions about the importance of textual interpretation and meaning have been brought into question by engaging with readers beyond the academy. Further, going beyond studies of readers, the work by Morley and others indicates the broader limitations of the 'text-centred approach' to other kinds of media and to popular culture, an approach which focuses on analysing the meaning of television programmes/lyrics/films/books, rather than attending 'to those who actually consume the "popular" culture under investigation', as Ian Collinson has commented in his *Everyday Readers* (2009).¹⁶ In the field of cinema history, Annette Kuhn's oral history research found that interviewees' memories of cinema 'revolved far more around the social act of cinemagoing than around the films they saw'; they much more rarely reported memories of any individual films. The source of Kuhn's discovery was a series of interviews in the 1990s about peoples' memories of cinemagoing in the 1930s, and she then tested the validity of her findings with a British Film Institute project involving a much longer period. Kuhn presents her findings as challenging the concerns of both cinema history and film studies, indicating 'a sharp divergence between those aspects of the field concerned with the critical and theoretical analysis of the individual film and those that seek to examine cinema as a social and cultural institution.'¹⁷

I see the prevalence of memories of reading experiences rather than of individual literary texts (like those of cinemagoing rather than of films) as a way of approaching the divergence and connections in this case between literary criticism, book history and cultural

studies of reading. I aim to explain the falling away of the significance of the literary text in readers' memories – a finding that tallies with cultural studies of readers and audiences – in a book historical context: as characteristic of what historians have described as 'extensive reading'. I will go on to use other sources, in this case bibliomemoirs, to tentatively indicate how we can generalise from the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews, while also being careful to observe the often subtle differences between autobiographical writing and oral history, to show how the latter can generate distinctive material and insights. And I will use readers' keeping of books, and of lists of books they have read, along with the history of commonplace books, to consider how readers seek to remember the texts they have read, to attempt to make them mean something in their own narratives: life stories that are now themselves available for textual interpretation.

Forgetting and 'extensive' reading

At the close of the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews, we asked narrators to reflect on the process of being interviewed. Alison Williams (now Barton; born 1963; librarian; facilitator of two book groups at Putney library) was among several who at this point commented that they remembered less than they had 'expected' about the books they had read. Alison describes her reading of 'probably more' than 'one hundred books' for the reading groups alone, but asks 'how many of those can I remember? It's slightly disappointing.' During her interviews she described many reading experiences, including her Dad reading *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1871) to her aloud as a child. Occasionally she briefly referred to content when she had identified with characters who could have independent adventures ('*Thursday's Child* [1970, by Noel Streatfield] is about someone who runs away and lives on a canal boat'). But she also encountered difficulties of remembering the stories themselves and reflected on those difficulties. Fifteen minutes into the first interview, the interviewer, Amy Tooth Murphy, asked Alison about books at school, which she did not remember, and then went on to reflect:

When I was thinking back to things I'd read, it's not so much remembering the book - I will often have quite vague memories of the book - except that I liked it - but it's really linked with what you were doing and where you were and how you were feeling, and I think it's because I had such positive memories of enjoying the experience of reading, rather than the actual books, that has made me love reading all my life. I think, I really

think that's what it's about, because if you asked me for details of any of these books I might be a bit hazy, but ask me where I was or what I was doing or how I felt, and I can tell you a lot more.

It is enjoyable experiences of reading that Alison finds most memorable, indicating that the value of reading can be in such experiences, but there is also the sense that having read a book something of it should be retained, perhaps to enrich us with knowledge or expanded experiences; to forget too much may be 'disappointing'. Alison Waller points out that such forgetting, which occurred in her interviews with participants who were asked to re-read certain childhood books, is not unusual - 'it would be strange if some content had *not* been lost over time' - and that a participant's 'bad feeling' about it can be due in part to a sense of failing the researcher by 'not having enough material to present in her remembering account'.¹⁸ Alison anticipated the researcher's questions, as in this extract just quoted ('If you ask me for details of any of these books I might be a bit hazy, but ask me where I was...'), while she also seems to be guiding the interviewer, encouraging Amy to ask about her experiences of reading, rather than about what she remembers about the books she read. Alison sees the significance of her memories as being the experience of reading as enjoyable, not of the content of the books themselves; it is the enjoyment of reading that has formed her identity as a reader, 'that has made me love reading all my life'. It is not just one or even most books that Alison struggles to remember in any detail: if you ask me, she says, for details of '*any* of these books I might be a bit hazy' (my italics). Following further questions about her memories of books (after a team meeting during which I doggedly urged persistence on this matter), Alison went on to state more plainly, that 'if you're asked to actually remember details you can't... I'm rubbish at remembering plot'.

Such memories of reading as an experience rather than of the content of the books seem characteristic of what book historians have categorised as 'extensive' reading, in contrast to the more traditional kind of 'intensive' reading. John Guillory has characterised the 'lay reader' as being primarily 'motivated by the experience of *pleasure*', and also as reading novels 'extensively' unlike the slow and repeated reading of the clerisy who often aimed for 'verbatim memorization'.¹⁹ Lyons and Taksa's study also observe what Rolf Engelsing has most prominently claimed to be a historical shift between 1750 and 1850 when middle-class reading habits became more extensive, characterised primarily by books becoming much more readily available, relatively everyday objects of consumption at greater speeds, although in their focus on the period between 1890 and 1930 they also find surviving aspects

of intensive reading, involving the reading and rereading of a small number of texts which may be memorized and recited 'almost by heart'.²⁰ According to these characteristics, the 'Memories of Fiction' participants were extensive readers of novels: they read at least one novel per month for their reading groups (in many cases alongside newspapers, memoirs and other kinds of reading material), and I would like to propose that extensive reading may also tend to involve the forgetting of textual content, in contrast to the memorization of an intensively read text. As Lyons and Taksa's study indicates, however, there is no straightforward 'revolution' from one kind of reading style to another.

Stephen Colclough considers diaries and marginalia from individual middle-class readers in the eighteenth-century, observing that 'extensive reading was a possibility' for such readers, but he also cautions against using such individual readers as the basis for more general claims about reading in the period, not least because working-class readers could access far fewer texts.²¹ In any single period multiple kinds of reading exist alongside each other. Even within an individual life a reader is likely to read in different ways. Alison M. Scott's study of Mary Archbald, an early nineteenth-century emigrant from Scotland to New York, for example, discusses how 'she was an intensive reader of poetry and devotional works, and an extensive reader of prose fiction.'²² John Brewer similarly examines the diaries of a single reader, in this case an English middle-class reader, Anna Larpent, from 1773-1783, whose various reading practices leads him to conclude that reading practices might not have become more extensive but rather more diverse.²³ There are also examples of intensive reading in the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews. In these cases there is sometimes a shift in readers' personal histories from intensive reading in childhood and adolescence, to extensive reading later in life, although again patterns of intensive reading can continue alongside rather than being displaced by extensive reading. Audrey Bishop (born 1936; cleaner and playgroup worker, member of Roehampton reading group) recalled being given Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913), which she re-read repeatedly as it was one of very few books in her working-class childhood; she had the ability to quote sections from it. Later in life, however, Audrey became an avid reader of numerous novels, and had more difficulty remembering many of them in the interviews.²⁴

Similarly, Kevin Clancy (born 1954; retired IT consultant; member of two Balham book groups), had few books in his working-class childhood home and in the earlier stages of his interview described books he read as a child and young adult, whereas he later read much more 'extensively' and in the second interview commented that not being able to remember recently read books is 'a bit like Alzheimers, remembering your youth and not remembering

anything more.' This pattern of remembering is typical of the 'reminiscence bump' found in oral history interviews as in life stories more generally, a period of adolescence and early adulthood that people usually remember most vividly in contrast to later life.²⁵ Kevin also speculated that he could remember the earlier books because he did not read so much then, so it may be that his reading was closer to 'intensive' reading whereby books are more memorable, if not necessarily memorised. He had also repeatedly re-read many of the books encountered when younger, especially nineteenth-century novels by authors ranging from Jane Austen to George Eliot and Thomas Hardy.

The 'Memories of Fiction' project focuses primarily on remembering novels, seeking out interviewees in reading groups – which almost always discuss novels – but I would not want to suggest that patterns of intensive/extensive reading and remembering/forgetting in working/middle-class childhood and adulthood apply equally to other genres. Interviewees referred to other kinds of reading material, including Kevin who described reading “boys” and “girls” comics in childhood which he describes generically (such as characters in both kinds of comics having ‘adventures’, while boys’ comics tended to be about war and football) rather than singling out any individual, remembered issue. In contrast to the more singular reading of specific novels in childhood, Kevin recalled having ‘piles’ of superhero comics. The pattern of reading and remembering intensively in a working-class childhood can certainly not be generalised to all kinds of reading.²⁶ And in adulthood, many of the interviewees occasionally read and remembered poetry, for example, amongst the many more “hazily” remembered novels. As critiques of Engelsing’s ‘revolution’ have made clear, we cannot relegate all reading after a certain historical period (the eighteenth century) to the extensive mode; and neither is all reading in an avid novel-reader’s adulthood necessarily extensive and the content unmemorable.²⁷ Nevertheless, as the next sections will continue to illustrate, the ‘Memories of Fiction’ interviewees did seem to remember experiences and scenes of reading – and also the materiality of the books themselves – far more than the linguistic content inside the books.

Remembering material books

The ‘Memories of Fiction’ interviews often elicited memories of scenes of reading in which the book’s content was forgotten, but its look or feel as a material object was not. An interview with Sandra Newnham (born 1953; retired head-teacher; member of Balham library

book group) was quite typical in this respect, as when she described her memory of looking at a board book on a bus. Early in her second interview, she recalled the scene in some detail, but could not remember the book's title and says nothing about its content:

Shelley: Do you remember any of those very early encounters with words?

Sandra: I can particularly remember sitting on a bus with my nana, on the seat that used to be inside the door, so you got on the bus and there was a long seat [...] and I can remember sitting on one of those long seats with my nana, and she got a book out of her shopping bag and I sat and read it. I was very tiny then, I think about two, I actually wasn't reading it. I'd heard it so many times that I knew it, and I also knew when you turned the page, so I sat there on the bus, looking like I was reading, and everybody getting on and off, telling my nana what a clever little girl I was, but I know I wasn't reading. I'd memorised the story.

Shelley: So it was a favourite.

Sandra: Obviously.

Shelley: You can't remember which book?

Sandra: No. No. But I can remember it was one of those that had hard covers. I can feel it in my hand, those board covers.

Sandra's reported age at the time ('about two') indicates that this memory may not be entirely firsthand²⁸, but could for example be mingled with later memories of her nana retelling the story of her grandchild's precocious "reading" to family and friends. It is nevertheless experienced very vividly, as though in the present: 'I can feel it in my hand, those board covers.' Many of the readers we talked to seemed to vividly remember such scenes of reading (or in this case pretending to read), and also the sense of the materiality of books and their covers, without being able to recall the contents or even titles of those books when further questioned. Sandra here presents a memory of remembering - the small child had 'heard it so many times', or experienced it so intensively, that she had 'memorised the story' - but she was presumably too young to store that in long-term memory; when further questioned it becomes clear that she had forgotten what the book was: 'You can't remember which book? No. No.'

Following this account of the board book on the bus, I continued to question Sandra about her memories of books:

Shelley: Do you have a book that you remember the title of, or author of, or much about?

Sandra: No. I can only remember that I used to read Enid Blyton and those people who were around in those days, and I started reading adult fiction really when I was about ten or eleven. But I honestly, I, since you were here before, I have tried to think. I cannot summon anything, to say yes, I read this, I read this, I read this.

Shelley: You did mention *The Faraway Tree* [...] do you remember anything about that book - any particular scene, or world, or -

Sandra: No.

Shelley: child or -

Sandra: No.

Shelley: character, nothing about

Sandra: No.

Shelley: the cover [laughs]? The pictures?

Sandra: Well, there were no pictures in it. I can re - well, books, they all looked the same because they were usually hardbacks, they had a detachable fly leaf on them. No, *The Magic Faraway Tree* was a plain green almost cloth kind of cover.

So again the questions elicited a repeated 'No', and again Sandra went on to remember the book's cover but not its contents (although this time she has previously recalled a title).

Unlike Alison, and more like Audrey, with her working-class background Sandra had very few books in her childhood home. She was nevertheless an extensive reader, frequently borrowing books from the library. At the time of the interview, Sandra similarly had very few books in her home, while she continued to read many books. She claimed to read around eight novels a week, and was the exception among the project narrators in keeping almost no books at all. She described getting rid of them at a charity event about 25 years previously, when she had run out of space and got 'fed up with them.' Whereas most of the narrators resisted eReaders like the Kindle due to their attachment to material books, Sandra reads many books on the Kindle and also deletes them afterwards. 'Most people are odd about their books', she commented, and 'some people can tell you more because the books are there in their house.'

As Sandra suggests, some of the project's narrators were able to say more about their reading experiences, and even in some cases to recount elements of plot and character as well as titles, due to their keeping of books. Kevin similarly had few books as a child in his working-class household, but reported a particular attachment to one of the two fictions he remembered in his childhood home, *Dark Legend*²⁹, which he 'would never throw away

because it had children's scrawlings on.' He was able to relate aspects of the plot – although interspersed with comments that he 'can't remember' other aspects, such as the gender of certain characters – probably because he had intensively read it, and kept his copy and looked at it in more recent years.

Many of the narrators refused or were at least very reluctant to throw or give away their books, despite running out of space on and for shelves. When asked if he ever gets rid of books, Geoffrey Jackson (born 1936; retired lecturer; member of Putney library group), responded with 'Never! Never!', although his wife would like him to and there is no more room in the house for them. Ferelith Hordon (born 1947; retired children's librarian; Battersea library book group facilitator) is another such extensive reader who described her 'enormous difficulty getting rid of books' in her attempt to downsize. Ferelith acknowledged the potential for her books to help her remember, after observing that she could not remember much of what she read in her 30s and 40s: 'I would probably have to stand in front of my bookshelves, and say "this is what I was reading, oh yes I remember reading that then."' She described how she can remember her connection to books: they are 'a way of retaining the past... they are my link to the past'.

The difficulty with being parted from books is also a theme in some bibliomemoirs, and is indeed at the heart of Linda Grant's account of her preparations for moving into a smaller home, *I Murdered My Library* (2014). Grant's vast amount of books had included childhood favourites, and a whole shelf of Dickens's writings, which she studied for an MA and which are scribbled in and worn from multiple rereadings. Like Kevin's attachment to *Dark Legend*, she valued these and other books precisely for carrying the marks of her past. Having parted from her books, Grant felt she had destroyed the connection to her younger self:

The little girl who lay in bed, a circle of illumination on the sheets from her toadstool nightlight, afraid to go to sleep because her *Struwwelpeter* picture book lay next to her in the dark confinement of the ottoman with her toys, frightened of the scissor man who cuts off the thumbs of children who suck them... I have damaged my connection to the little girl frightened of her *Struwwelpeter* book.³⁰

Among the 'Memories of Fiction' narrators who describe their difficulties in getting rid of books, Johanna Williams (born 1951; doctor; member of Putney library group) explained that she had to lose some when she moved house, but still kept books of special sentimental value, including *Struwwelpeter* (Heinrich Hoffman, 1845). Despite never liking this 'horrible' book,

which came from her great aunt, Johanna had kept it and got it out during the interview. Reversing the usual direction in which interviewers' questions prompted the narrators, browsing through Johanna's book with its gruesome illustrations triggered a sudden memory in Amy, who then recounted one of the book's moral tales: of the boy who will not eat his soup and starves to death. It is the material book that enabled both Amy and Johanna in this interview to refer to characters and plots—although the emphasis is on their experiences of reading the book: in this case unpleasant experiences.

Books, then, are often remembered as material objects, and material books can also aid memory. Researchers have investigated various ways in which readers engage with books as objects, such as Leah Price whose *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012) challenges the primacy given to the interpretation of textual content in reader-response theories. Price considers how Victorian readers used books for example as barriers or bridges between themselves and others. More in line with my own investigation here, Waller's *Rereading Childhood Books* (2019) considers the role of books in memory: how readers sometimes remember book covers, illustrations and other paratextual elements 'as much as – or more than – they recall textual content'.³¹ Further, Waller also discusses how books can prompt memories. She uses interviews, as we have seen, but also autobiographical writing, including Marcel Proust's semi-autobiographical *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27), in which the narrator describes how his encounter with a book in adulthood brings back memories of a childhood town—rather than of the book's textual content.

Waller's research can begin to indicate that the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews may be representative of more widespread patterns of remembering reading. Lyons and Taksa's *Australian Readers Remember* also discuss Proust's work, but they do not observe his writings about reading; they focus instead on the well-known scene in which the *madeleine* triggers an almighty act of recall, to convey how oral history interviewees' memories take on narrative form. They emphasise the 'novel-like quality' of oral histories.³² The next section will in contrast use Proust's work along with bibliomemoirs to lead into a discussion of how oral history narratives are comparable to but also differ from written texts, providing new perspectives on reading, before I return more fully to the question of extensive reading.

Bibliomemoirs

In the first novel of Proust's *Remembrance* series, shortly before the *madeleine* scene, the narrator describes his memory of his mother reading a novel aloud to him: George Sand's

Francois le Champi (1847). He later encounters this novel as an adult when staying with a friend, and it acts much as the *madeleine* does in prompting a long-lost multitude of memories, as described in the final volume of *Remembrance*: 'this book which my mother had read aloud to me in Combray until it was almost morning had retained for me all the wonder of that night. [...] and now a thousand insignificant details from Combray, unglimped for a very long time, came tumbling helter-skelter of their own accord.'³³ The operation of books as a memory trigger is also characteristic of bibliomemoirs and their precursors by Walter Benjamin and others later in the century--created by authors who keep many books. As in Proust's novel, books similarly trigger memories of places in Benjamin's essay, 'Unpacking my Library' (1931), an account of how material books bring back memories of their acquisition and housings: 'Memories of the cities in which I found so many things [...]; memories [...] finally of my boyhood room.'³⁴ More recently, Alberto Manguel's *Packing my Library* (2018) similarly describes how his books reminded him of childhood: 'Many years later, memories of my childhood drifted back whenever I turned the yellow pages.'³⁵ In all such cases, as in the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews, the narrators describe remembering feelings and places and periods in which those books were experienced, more than the content of their pages.

Previous to *Remembrance*, Proust had written his essay, 'On Reading' (1906), to preface a French translation of John Ruskin's treatise on reading, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). In this essay, he elaborated extensively on the potential for remembering reading - and the places and people and all else surrounding that reading - rather than what the books themselves were about. In the opening paragraph of this essay, Proust described childhood days 'spent with a favourite book' when the world outside is perceived as an intrusion - a friend wanting to play; a 'bothersome bee or sunbeam'; a demand to come home for dinner. It is nevertheless the world outside the book that we remember, claimed Proust: 'memories much more valuable to us now than what we were reading with such passion at the time.'³⁶ He went on to recall his days of reading in tremendously vivid detail, in the style he most famously developed in *Remembrance*. After a few pages of such recollection, Proust returned to the observation he made in his first paragraph:

Doubtless I have shown only too well, by the length and the character of the preceding pages, what I asserted at the start: that what our childhood reading leaves behind in us is above all the image of the places and days where and when we engaged in it. I have not

escaped its sorcery: intending to speak about reading I have spoken of everything but books, because it is not of books that the reading itself has spoken to me.³⁷

Like Proust, who as Waller points out, 'provides an example of the tendency for bibliomemoirists to write "of everything but books"'³⁸, many of the 'Memories of Fiction' narrators intended to speak about reading, and spoke much less of books than they had expected. This article's first example from the interviews was from Alison, who 'remembered less [about books] than I expected', and I will requote from her extract again here (in case our own memories of textual content have faded): 'if you asked me for details of any of these books I might be a bit hazy, but ask me where I was or what I was doing or how I felt, and I can tell you a lot more.' As all these autobiographical narrators are avid readers, we might speculate both that remembering experiences of reading rather than the content of the books themselves is characteristic of extensive reading, and that keeping books is a way of trying to keep hold of those experiences and their content against the onset of forgetting. Alison was typical in this respect, too: following her 'very strong memory' of her Dad dramatically reading the *Alice* books early in the first interview, after being asked if she remembers the material books themselves, she said: 'I do, and I've still got them [...] I made sure that I definitely definitely got those to keep', and went on to describe them as 'hardbound and very beautiful' objects. Alison's references to being asked questions ('if you asked me...'), however, also indicates some important differences between these different kinds of sources.

Most of the interviewees described themselves as avid readers of numerous, mostly forgotten novels, which takes considerable time out of their everyday lives, including, in the case of Alison, on holidays. Proust was also such an avid reader, and he assumed this of his own readers, asking: 'Who does not remember, as I do, this vacation-time reading that you tried to tuck away into one hour of the day after another, into every moment inviolable enough to give it refuge.'³⁹ Proust's question here is rhetorical; his assumption is that all his readers will remember enthusiastically devouring childhood books. Proust used his own reading experiences as instances that can be generalized to all his readers. The oral history interviews instead highlight the experiences and memories of diverse readers, including those who had far fewer books and may be less likely to write bibliomemoirs. Alison's childhood reading was closer to Proust's, but her questioning was in contrast interspersed with the interviewer's questions, reflecting the interview situation, and leading her to acknowledge the forgetting that characterises extensive reading. She anticipated and encouraged certain

questions, and expressed disappointment in response to her own question regarding the hundred or so books she had read for the reading groups, 'how many of those can I remember?' Despite the similarities between Proust's and Alison's narratives - in how both 'speak [...] of everything but books' - the collaborative production of the oral history interview differed from the authorship of the written narrative. The interviewers asked questions which seem to have pushed the 'Memories of Fiction' narrators to explicitly acknowledge forgetting in a way Proust does not. As Waller has similarly considered regarding her work with rereaders of childhood books, 'in contrast to published memoirs, these interviews could be used to actively guide rereaders to examine some of the more unstable elements of remembering and rereading transformed texts.'⁴⁰

Proust indicated that books are not remembered so well as the places in which they are read, but did not explicitly reflect on the phenomenon of forgetting them. Indeed, after lengthy descriptions of his childhood scenes of reading and reading habits, Proust came to refer to a title and an author of an actual book, *Captain Fracasse* by Theophile Gautier (1863), and even to reproduce a sentence from it, which he then admits to fictionalising: 'In truth, this sentence will not be found in *Captain Fracasse*, at least not in this form. [...] I have permitted myself to fuse these several beauties together into one to make the example more striking for the reader.'⁴¹ Proust's detailed engagement with sentences from the text in this footnote indicates that he had the text in front of him, whereas participants in 'Memories of Fiction' for the most part did not. These narrators were instead prompted primarily by questions, which elicited declarations of forgetting, as where Alison referred to her memories as 'quite vague' and 'a bit hazy', and went on to state that 'if you're asked to actually remember details you can't [...] I'm rubbish at remembering plot'. The dialogue that makes up interviews, involving questions and answers, can reveal what is forgotten as much as remembered. The extracts from Sandra's interview provide another illustration, when Sandra repeatedly responded to the interviewer's questions about whether she remembers books with 'No'. We can no longer ask Proust anything, while it has been possible to detail the methodology for the authoring of the oral history interviews; to consider the production as well as the reception of texts.

Different kinds of prompts, in other words, help to shape the oral history interviews and autobiographical writing about reading. Oral history narrators inevitably respond to questions, while bibliomemoirists and their precursors more typically respond directly to the presence of kept books. Another key factor is the process of selection and thus who the narrators are: oral history narrators are approached by researchers rather than being self-

selected authors. A tendency to keep books, which can enable memory and connections with earlier selves, is shared across many of the interviews and across bibliomemoirs, but there are differences, too, stemming in part from the fact that the memoirists are published writers, whereas in most cases the oral history narrators are not.⁴² Writers' memories of reading are likely to be shaped by their occupation, as seems evident in many of the 'Authors' Lives' oral histories (archived at the British Library) in which narrators talk about how essential reading is for a life of writing. Being interviewed for the 'Authors' Lives' collection, Grant (whose *I Murdered My Library* is discussed above) talked for instance about her delight in the transition from reader to writer, and how the books she read influenced her own work. Grant's accounts of her reading are bound up with her life as a writer.⁴³ The 'Memories of Fiction' participants were in contrast selected because of their membership of reading groups rather than any written publications, and these interviews can thus provide narratives about remembering reading that would probably never be written and that have different life story trajectories. Bibliomemoirists are likely to be those who keep many books, and perhaps other kinds of records such as reading diaries or lists; they are self-selected single narrators confident enough about their memories of reading and books to embark on book-length accounts of such. Those who volunteered to be interviewed for our project may also be more likely to have such traces of their reading histories than those who did not, but Sandra is illustrative of how not every extensive reader necessarily keeps books, or any kind of record of reading. Further, bibliomemoirists are less likely to write or to speak about things they do not feel are significant or have forgotten, because they are not prompted by questions in the way that the 'Memories of Fiction' narrators were.

Lists as memory aids

Along with the interview questions, and occasionally the books themselves, lists of read books shaped many of the 'Memories of Fiction' narratives. At the end of the first interview, we asked each person to note down any books that came to mind to help serve as a prompt in the second. Sandra referred to such preparation in the extract above, which indicates that she had difficulty coming up with a list of titles: 'since you were here before, I have tried to think. I cannot summon anything, to say yes, I read this, I read this, I read this'. In contrast other participants did turn up with lists of book titles they remembered reading, either in preparation for the interview, or which they had kept for many years previously--along with

their keeping of books. Despite these lists, these participants again tended to remember scenes of reading and book covers far more frequently than any content. For some, it was indeed an awareness of their tendency to forget what they had read that motivated their list-keeping. In this section I will discuss how the oral history narrators discussed lists of books they had read, and will go on to consider these alongside comparable written documents studied by historians of reading, including a further bibliomemoir, and also, in the next section, eighteenth-century commonplace books. In an era of increasingly extensive reading, some commonplace books similarly served as memory aids, and to register their authors' sense of self-development as readers.

Alison referred to books on a list she had prepared for her first interview, without being asked. Questions about the content of those books, in this case of A. A. Milnes's work, prompted memories of people and places, and of the pleasure of reading:

Amy: you've written lots of things down there - is there any particular childrens' ones you wanted to mention? You mentioned *Winnie the Pooh* - what particularly captivated you about Milnes's work?

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

What else have I got? My Grandma, my Mum's Mother and my Grandpa lived in this enormous great big house, and in the enormous great big house was an enormous great big attic, which was like a kind of um, it was like a childrens' playroom really. There was a great big old like a travel chest thing, full of fancy dress, and there were lots and lots of shelves of books, very old books, things like the flower fairy books, and Beatrix Potter, and there were lots of really old books, and there were some books up there that were fairy story books, and I can only remember them by the covers and the names, but I can still remember really enjoying them, and it's because of the memories they bring back not because of the books themselves. I remember the room really clearly, and that was the Andrew Laing fairy story books, the purple fairy stories, and the green fairy stories and yellow and gold and silver I think there was. I loved them and they were all up there so I wrote those down.

Again Alison's memories seem Proustian in this detailed description of the place of reading rather than of the content of the books. In contrast to Sandra, who was also an extensive reader but returned most of the books she read to the library, as a middle-class child Alison

could revisit and reread the same books with her parents and in her grandparents' house, which is likely why as an adult in her 50s she could readily add them to her list.

Other narrators already had lists of books they read, which they brought to or just mentioned in the interview. These are lists started in adulthood (the oldest during university) and added to soon after the reading of each book, rather than created from distant memories, but the motivation for creating them was similarly to enhance faded, fragmentary memories. In both cases the lists served as memory prompts in the interview situation. Kevin mentioned in his second interview how he had kept a list for about five years of 'all the books that I read now, going to the book groups and reading a lot of books, but a lot of the books that I read don't make a huge impression, or some of them I can't really remember what they're about at all.' He responded to Amy's question by reflecting on his difficulties in remembering what he had been reading in social situations:

Amy: What's your motivation for keeping that diary?

Kevin: Because I can't remember what I read. [Both laugh.] It's strange, but if somebody, sometimes people say, 'What have you been reading?' I can't remember. It just isn't there.

Despite the extensive reading of his later life, as a result of looking at his list before the interview, Kevin is able to report reading books in the last five years by authors including Philip Roth and Fyodor Dostoevsky among others. Having been unable to respond socially to questions about what he had been reading, Kevin started his list which then served as a memory prompt in the interview, allowing him to give an account of his recent reading. Such social situations also lie behind Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (2007), which includes a chapter on 'Books You Have Forgotten' with an account of Montaigne's method of scribbling notes in his books to 'compensate a little for the treachery and weakness of my memory'.⁴⁴ Such records are not only a personal archive of a reading life, but are oriented towards to a potential conversation about reading. Alison similarly referred to her list in the interview, which served to help her remember both childhood and recent titles.

Ferelith most extensively kept both books and lists, and other forms of textual memories of fiction, and will provide the final case study for this essay. Like the other narrators, Ferelith talked about forgetting much of what she read, and brought to the interview her lists of books she had read, which she began in 2000 following Aiden Chambers's recommendation to do so in a talk.⁴⁵ Looking at the lists, some of the titles 'leap out' at her, which she would otherwise have forgotten, while others 'I don't remember at all.'

Part of her motivation for keeping these lists, and also books, is her awareness of forgetting due to her extensive reading, as it is for Kevin (and others, including Paul Elliot⁴⁶): 'It's quite horrific how quickly you forget what you've read if you're reading a lot, if I don't write it down. Which is why now I also often put things on my emails, what I'm reading, so I can go back, my signature, you'll see it when I send you an email.' The latest such signature is from an email I received on 6th January 2018: '*I am reading, Naondel (Turtschaninoff), The Midnight Mayor (Griffin) The Bread of Angels (Saldana), The Book of Dust (Pullman), and ongoing project... Les Miserables (Hugo) but in English!*' Ferelith's methods of remembering fiction through writing also include her children's book reviews for *Books for Keeps*⁴⁷, and her records of all the books read in the reading group since 2000, along with letters and newsletters that she writes for the book group members for which she 'tries to remember what happened to recap the discussion'. As a result of such methods, Ferelith's memories of titles was exceptional: she remembered 129 titles and could also relate the content of some books.

Ferelith's lists themselves take the form of handmade books; she went on a bookmaking course just before starting her record-keeping. These books of books have become part of her vast collection of books, both at home and also as custodian of an early children's literature archive, and allowed Ferelith to narrate an extensive life of reading populated by books she had read. It is such a 'book of books' that also features in a recent bibliomemoir, Pamela Paul's *My Life With Bob* [acronym for book of books] (2017). Much as material books served to prompt memories in some of the oral history interviews and in bibliomemoirs (such as Manguel's and Grant's), Paul's list of authors and titles, read since high school in 1988, underpins the narrative of her reading life. Once again it prompts memories of reading experiences and of the places of reading as much as of the books themselves. She describes how 'Bob may not always seal into memory the identities of individual characters--much of that is still lost in the cavern [...]. Each entry conjures a memory that may have otherwise gotten lost or blurred with time. Opening Bob, I remember lying in a dormitory in Mauriac, an unspectacular hamlet in central France where I was installed on an American Field service program, when I wrote my first entry.'⁴⁸

Lists, then, as well as books, for both this bibliomemoirist and the oral history narrators, help to prompt memories and to enable narratives about reading and books to take shape. The oral histories indicate that keeping such lists is a more widespread activity than the singular memoir, *My Life With Bob*, might suggest. As well as individual narrators such as those discussed above (and in Waller's research⁴⁹), all the members of the Roehampton reading group kept notebooks of their reading in order to remember and to then discuss those

books with others in the group. (In this group each member read what they liked, reporting back and making recommendations at their meetings, rather than following the more typical one-book-per-month method.) In a group interview following the individual interviews (involving an additional six participants), some of the members explained their reason for doing so in similar terms to Kevin, Ferelith and others, including Jean Wynn (born 1955; office worker and teaching assistant): 'we've all got books that we write down in, yeah, otherwise we forget [laughter]'.

Paul's list was also motivated in part by a tendency to forget books: 'It's my way of keeping track. Because if I didn't write it all down, I worry (naturally), I would forget it.'⁵⁰ The attempts to resist forgetting through the keeping of lists and books could indicate that many readers want reading to provide them with something more than a pleasurable but fleeting experience; for reading to be to gather knowledge, to be improved or enriched in some way.

Commonplace books

As David Allan points out, in his history of commonplace books in Georgian England, 'That reading's greatest benefit might be that it confers possession of the wisdom lying latent within texts is an idea almost as old as writing itself'.⁵¹ It may be such perceptions of the value of reading that not only encouraged people to keep the commonplace books that proliferated in the eighteenth century, but also the keeping of lists of read books in the twenty-first century. The lists serve a comparable function to commonplace books in so far as these were concerned with making encounters with texts more permanent and memorable. According to Allan, 'the connection between a reader's fleeting cognitive engagement with certain texts and the permanent instantiation of those momentary episodes through a process of rigorous and regular commonplacing was neither arbitrary nor remotely accidental'.⁵² Eighteenth-century commentators recommended commonplacing both for purposes of organising and for remembering what is read, such as J. E. Gambier in his elaboration of John Locke's discussions of note-taking: by recording one's reflections and 'what appears excellent either in stile, or reasonings, of those Writers with whom we are conversant, we aid the memory, which alone affords us but a precarious dependance; and also lay up a field of knowledge'.⁵³ Such an interest in commonplace books as memory enhancing complements Ann Blair's discussion of various forms of note-taking – including commonplacing – in the pre-modern

period, as a way of negotiating concerns with an overabundance of books and aiding memory, which she compares to more recent concerns with and methods of managing information overload.⁵⁴

A key difference between commonplace books and the interviewees' lists, is that the former consist of quotations and information selected from printed texts, whereas the lists consist for the most part of book titles and authors alone. In addition, commonplace books did not incorporate novels, which commonplacers deemed for the most part an inferior genre, whereas the lists consist almost exclusively of the titles of novels--perhaps a reflection of the increased status of this genre since the nineteenth-century.⁵⁵ If the commonplace book provided a way of engaging closely with genres of high standing such as the lyric and essay - then the contemporary lists may be a way of attempting to manage the vast quantities of novels consumed more 'extensively'. Novels signalled a new era of mass production and circulation associated with such reading, and Price has observed that late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anthologies attempted to regain an 'intensive' engagement with texts by encouraging the rereading and memorizing of selected parts. However, such attempts could also merely save a few fragments from the rule of forgetting, as Price puts it: 'By reproducing scattered fragments while excising much longer stretches [anthologists] marked the moments of intensive reading that they invited as the exception rather than the rule. [...] Within each source, they distinguished some passages to be read once and immediately forgotten from others to be quoted, memorized, republished, and re-read.'⁵⁶ This distinction between the parts of books that are to be remembered and forgotten is also applicable to commonplace books. Blair's discussion of commonplacing as a form of note-taking considers its uses both for intensive memorization and as a memory aid for more extensive reading. In the case of the latter, Jeremias Drexel observed, 'No one has such a good memory as to embrace and retain everything he reads', and he therefore recommended copying excerpts and keeping indexes to enable one to retrieve those passages that one might not remember having excerpted.⁵⁷ The lists, in contrast, which include just the novel titles and authors rather than highlighting any passages for remembering, are for the purpose of remembering that each book in its entirety was read. Nevertheless, both the commonplace books and the contemporary lists, as personal *aides-mémoire*, written by the readers themselves, could arise from comparable interests in retaining the potential wisdom or knowledge or enriching experiences gained through their own reading, and also for the purpose of recording that reading as a chronicle of self-development.

Allan finds an increasing slippage in the Georgian period between commonplace books and autobiographical writing, especially where diary-like entries can be found amongst the quotations and reflections of reading. Commonplace books become increasingly blended with life writing, and the reader-authors are increasingly found at the centre of the narrative, through which they create and maintain their sense of identity. We might imagine the bibliomemoir as a later version of this development, whereas the lists discussed in the oral history interviews did not usually contain any such autobiographical writing. Kevin did refer to his record of reading as a 'diary' however, and reported sometimes writing down what he thought of the books he read. These lists may also be a way for their authors to maintain a sense of their identity as readers, that can be sustained over time regardless of forgetting. Now that novels are judged more highly, these lists could be a way of recording progress and achievement as a reader, providing evidence that reading has indeed been done, whether or not it is remembered. Through re-reading his list, Kevin reported a sense of his progressive development as a reader: 'I was looking at the list of stuff that I've been reading in the last five years, you know. I've read a few books by Philip Roth, and more by Hemingway, more by Dostoevsky. One, *Fathers and Sons* by Turgenev. So I'm reading more different literature now, grown up literature.' Paul Elliott (born 1949; retired civil servant; member of Balham and Battersea book groups), who had kept his list of the books for the longest (since 1964), explained that 'it was sort of a way of, certainly at university, of reassuring myself that I'd actually put in the hard hours, as it were, that I'd actually done something, and, yeah, I mean, every time you read a book, there was a sort of sense of, great, I've finished that one, you know, so I'll record the fact'. These lists may potentially serve as a kind of bare life writing (possibly even resembling the list-form of a CV), while the oral history interviews encouraged readers to elaborate much more fully on their reading lives.

Having completed the interviews, then, the 'Memories of Fiction' archive consists, in the end, of two kinds of accounts of peoples' reading lives: (1) written lists of books read, and (2) oral histories consisting predominantly of memories of reading—and in some cases also informed by the lists of books read.

What can oral history contribute to reading studies?

This article has considered how oral histories can elicit, from 'ordinary' readers, narratives that would never have been written, and also how the interviewer has an active role in the

production of the interview.⁵⁸ 'Memories of Fiction' included narrators with working-class backgrounds, like Audrey, Sandra, and Kevin, who as children had very few books in their home and would thus be less likely than the typical bibliomemoirist to be able to narrate their childhood through remembered books, although they may remember a select few in a way I have briefly characterised as 'intensive'. Middle-class readers such as Alison engaged with many more childhood books owned and kept in family homes, which are more typically remembered in terms of how they were experienced and where they were read. In both cases the interviewers' questions prompt accounts of forgetting that do not feature in the same way in bibliomemoirs, and which may help to further characterise 'extensive' reading than has previously been possible. Oral history, in other words, can elicit narratives about reading, remembering and forgetting that differ from autobiographical writing both because of who the narrators are, and how the narratives are produced. In addition, the 'Memories of Fiction' interviews highlight how another form of writing - that of lists of read books - can document reading lives.

Bypassing written texts as the means of investigation, oral history can allow us to approach written texts in another way. Oral history can not only elicit accounts of everyday reading and forgetting from narrators who would not usually write down such experiences; it can also elicit spoken reflections on written texts, including the use of lists as memory aids in and beyond interviews. Interviews can bring such texts to attention, that would not in themselves reveal their purpose. If found in a written archive, the reading group members' lists would seem to reveal *what* people read. What the oral histories affirm, however, is that these lists are created because what has been read is for the most part unmemorable.

I have identified points of correlation as well as differences between oral history interviews and bibliomemoirs, in which books and lists prompt memories and support the narration of reading lives. Together, these oral and written sources indicate what of a certain kind of reading - perhaps traditionally middle-class, extensive kind of fiction reading in twentieth- to twenty-first century Western Europe - is typically remembered, and forgotten. An oral history archive that provides accompanying documents, at the least providing copies of documents provided and discussed in interviews - in this case the lists, but also potentially photographs of bookshelves, and references to comparable documents such as bibliomemoirs, for example - could provide a rich resource for further analysis. Equally, an archive of written lists would be inadequate without the oral accounts of when and why those lists were created.

The oral histories and the lists may indicate why many people read fiction. They raise questions about what its perceived value can be if books are forgotten. They draw attention to

the importance of experiences of reading - as Alison articulated so well in her interview ('I think it's because I had such positive memories of enjoying the experience of reading, rather than the actual books, that has made me love reading all my life') - which literary critics by definition are less likely to consider in their focus on textual content and form. Intensive reading and rereading is a necessary part of most critics' work as both researchers and teachers, and they can turn that practice towards analyses of oral history interviews and written autobiographical texts narrated by extensive readers, who are themselves less likely to routinely engage so closely and repetitively to single, memorable sentences or passages.⁵⁹ As Radway has commented, through a process of talking to readers she learned to shift her attention away from the 'textual features and narrative details' of the books they read, and could thereby privilege the purpose and value of reading experiences over the text. As an experience and an activity, reading helps people live their lives: to mark out time for themselves away from the 'pressures and tensions' of daily life, for example, or in the case of Sandra, to keep herself occupied and calm.⁶⁰ The attempts to resist forgetting through the use of lists (and keeping books), however, also indicate that many readers want more from reading than the passing experience of it; that they also want to gain experience and knowledge or wisdom, for their self-development as readers to be documented. It could be interesting in future research to investigate whether extensive readers are motivated by a sense of their tendency to forget to create other kinds of records, such as on Goodreads, and to see how these contribute to readers' life stories.⁶¹

Reader-response criticism from its early stages addressed the temporality of the reading process, a well-known example being Fish's analyses of how readers interpret *Paradise Lost* in the duration of reading it,⁶² while this essay has considered how experiences of reading and books are remembered and forgotten after the books are closed. The temporal duration of reading is alluded to, however, by historians of intensive and extensive reading: the former usually being characterised as a slow and repeated process; the latter as more fleeting. Reading quickly in other contexts has also been associated with superficiality, as in Richard Hoggart's early ethnographic study of working-class reading, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). Hoggart's criticism of popular literature, such as 'cheap romances', masses of which are both produced and consumed with great rapidity, includes the claim that reading at speed is 'useless for worthwhile reading', that popular publications 'offer nothing which can really grip the brain or head'⁶³—and so they are presumably eminently forgettable. For Hoggart, there is nothing of value 'in the habit of reading for itself', whereas much recent research investigates the more intrinsic benefits of reading, for example to mental health and

communities.⁶⁴ Another direction for future research could be to investigate whether, as Hoggart would suggest, canonical classics are remembered more frequently than, say, romance fiction—bearing in mind that any such memorability could result from a book’s recordable status as much as any unique kind of literary quality it possesses, and/or the slow intensiveness with which it was read.⁶⁵ In the interviews I have discussed here, children’s classics such as the *Alice* books seem no better remembered than Enid Blyton’s mass productions. It would be interesting to further consider whether and how a range of canonical texts stand out from the crowd, while acknowledging that the fact of reading Dostoevsky or novels at university may be especially likely to be recorded as part of one’s self-development as a reader, to survive forgetting—to become itself readable.

¹ 'Memories of Fiction' is an Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) funded project (2014-2018). Further information about methodology and other aspects of the project will follow in the article. Information about the project more generally can be found on the project website, www.memoriesoffiction.org, and some of the interviews themselves can be found on the archive pages: www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research-Centres/Memories-of-Fiction/, accessed 16 July 2018.

² With the exception of two who were interviewed once, and four who were interviewed in pairs three times. The readers were from seven reading groups (based in Putney, Battersea, Balham, and Roehampton libraries).

³ Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey's survey of 350 UK reading groups found that all-female groups accounted for 69% (4% men's groups and the rest mixed), and of all group members 88% had higher education qualifications, in Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, 2002-2003 edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.173-4. Elizabeth Long similarly found that 64% of groups in Houston (US) were women's groups (3% men's), in *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.xiii. The 'Memories of Fiction' group members were mostly white women aged 50+ but also included black readers who attended the 'Seasons' group at Balham which discussed books written by African and Caribbean authors.

⁴ Trower (Principal Investigator) and Tooth Murphy (Research Assistant) have worked and published both as oral historians and as literary scholars (working on community oral history projects as well as teaching in literature departments for example), while Graham Smith (Co-Investigator) is a long-standing oral historian. Sarah Pyke (PhD researcher) carried out additional interviews with 10 LGBTQ readers across Britain (again interviewing most participants twice).

⁵ For this leaflet see <https://memoriesoffiction.org/resources/resources-for-partners/project-outline-for-rgs/>, accessed 10 August 2018.

⁶ A pioneering article in this vein is Portelli's 'What Makes Oral History Different?', a chapter in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), an earlier version of which was published in Italian in 1979 and in *History Workshop Journal* in 1981. It is reprinted in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd edn., eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York, 2006), pp.32-42.

⁷ See, for example, Judith Zur, 'Remembering and forgetting: Guatemalan war widows' forbidden memories', in *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives*, eds. Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, and Graham Dawson (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.45-59.

⁸ Michael Burke, *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion: An Exploration of the Oceanic Mind* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p.13.

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trns. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984), p.174.

¹⁰ Roger Chartier, 'Laborers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader', *Diacritics* 22: 2 (1992), 49-61. See also Trower, Graham Smith and Amy Tooth Murphy, Introduction to 'Interviews and Reading', Themed Section of *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 16: 1 (2019), p.3, forthcoming.

¹¹ See Trower, 'Memories of Fiction: Oral Histories of Reading Experiences', Memory and Narration issue of *Words and Silences* (2019), <https://www.ioha.org/journal/>, forthcoming.

¹² There are various critics of this tendency, going back to De Certeau who observed that the work on reading had depended 'on the experience of literary people [...] It has not ventured very far into the fields of history and ethnology, because of the lack of traces left behind by a practice that slips through all sorts of "writings" that have yet to be clearly determined [...] Investigations of ordinary reading are more common in sociology, but generally statistical in type', *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp.169-170. See also Trower, Smith, and Tooth Murphy, Introduction to 'Interviews and Reading'.

¹³ Following *Australian Readers Remember*, Lyons used oral history in addition to life writing to expand on the statistical information that he provides in *Reading Culture and Writing Practices in Nineteenth-Century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Jonathan Rose reused an oral history archive, 'The Edwardians: Family Life and Work Experience', for *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2001).

¹⁴ Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.87. Although Radway did not originally set out in the field of cultural studies, she later noted the parallels, in her retrospective introduction of 1991, pp.1-18. For discussion of the work of Morley and others in reading and audience studies, see Trower, Smith and Tooth Murphy, 'Interviews and Reaading', pp.10-11.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2003), p.144, 145.

¹⁶ Collinson, *Everyday Readers: Reading and Popular Culture* (London & Oakville: Equinox, 2009), p.10.

¹⁷ Kuhn, 'What to do with Cinema Memory?', in eds. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers, *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (London: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 85-97 (p.85).

¹⁸ Waller, *Rereading Childhood Books: A Poetics* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp.183 & 184.

¹⁹ Guillory, 'The Ethical Practice of Modernity', in eds. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *The Turn to Ethics* (New York & London, 2000), pp.29-46: describes lay reading as motivated by pleasure, and professional reading as vigilant (p.32); Guillory in 'How Scholars Read' describes lay reading as extensive, *ADE Bulletin* 146 (2008), 8-17 (10).

²⁰ Lyons and Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember*, pp. 29 & 35. They refer to Rolf Engelsing, *Der Burger als Leser. Lesergeschichte in Deutschland, 1500-1800* (Stuttgart, 2014), and Robert Darnton, First Steps Toward a History of Reading', *Australian Journal of French Studies* 23: 1 (1986), 5-30.

²¹ Stephen Colclough, 'Readers: Books and Biography', in eds. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, *A Companion to the History of the Book* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp.50-62 (p.59).

²² Scott, "'The Cultivated Mind": Reading and Identity in a Nineteenth-Century Reader', in ed. Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas, *Reading Acts: U. S. Readers' Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 29-52 (p.31).

²³ Brewer, 'Reconstructing the Reader: Prescriptions, Texts and Strategies in Anna Larpent's Reading', in *The Practice and Representations of Reading in England*, ed. by James Raven et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.226-245 (p.244).

²⁴ Audrey has a remarkable memory for the details of many plots but in the second interview, especially, she was also quite frequently unable to remember particular books and referred to how she would need to check her reading notebook to remember. (I will discuss such records of reading below.)

²⁵ See, for example, Dorthe Kirkegaard Thomsen and Dorthe Berntsen, 'The cultural life script and life story chapters contribute to the reminiscence bump', *Memory* 16: 4 (2008), 420-435; Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 4th edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), in Chapter 7: 'Evidence', Kindle edn.

²⁶ In another article I have coauthored with Graham Smith and Amy Tooth Murphy, we write about how working-class as well as middle-class interviewees in the 1980s recalled their reading experiences and their experiences of family members reading both novels and newspapers, again rather than recalling any particular novel or issue: "“Me mum likes a book, me dad’s a newspaper man”": Reading, gender and domestic life in “100 Families”", *Participations* 16: 1 (2019), forthcoming.

²⁷ See, for example, Guillory, 'How Scholars Read', p.10

²⁸ For discussion of how first memories do not extend that far back see for example Douwe Draaisma, *Forgetting: Myths, Perils and Compensations* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), Chapter 1: 'First Memories', Kindle edn.

²⁹ I have been unable to trace this book partly because at least one other book with this title has been published since Kevin's childhood.

³⁰ Linda Grant, *I Murdered My Library* (published as a 'Kindle Single', 2014).

³¹ Waller, *Rereading Childhood Books*, p.165.

³² Lyons and Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember*, p.15.

³³ Marcel Proust, *Finding Time Again* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp.192-3.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting', in *Illuminations* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1973), pp59-67 (67).

³⁵ Alberto Manguel, *Packing My Library: An Elegy and Ten Digressions* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), Chapter 1, Kindle edn.

³⁶ Marcel Proust, 'On Reading', in *Marcel Proust and John Ruskin on reading*, ed. and trans. Damion Searls (London: Hesperus Press, 2011), p.3-43 (4).

³⁷ Proust, 'On Reading', p.18.

³⁸ Waller, *Rereading*, p.32.

³⁹ Proust, 'On Reading', p.5.

⁴⁰ Waller, *Rereading*, p.163.

⁴¹ Proust, 'On Reading', p.22. Waller also discusses this scene in *Rereading*, pp.39-40.

⁴² Three or four of the interviewees, including Katherine Highley and Angela Phelan, write fiction (as yet unpublished), and Geoffrey has published academic criticism on Wordsworth. Fererlith also writes on children's fiction, including reviews, as discussed below.

⁴³ For information about the collection see 'National Life Stories: Authors' Lives', www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories-authors-lives, and for a summary of Grant's interviews see <http://sami.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgiisirs/?ps=NATmWuyBBE/WORKS-FILE/175010062/9>, accessed 10 August 2018.

⁴⁴ Bayard, *How to Talk about Books you haven't Read* (London: Granta, 2008), p.50

⁴⁵ Aiden Chambers is an author of books for children and also writes about children's literature, often for teachers and librarians. His website provides a 'Selected Critical Bibliography' <www.aidanchambers.co.uk/critbib.htm> [accessed 10 August 2018].

⁴⁶ Paul Eliot's interviews can be found through the University of Roehampton's library catalogue and are summarised here:

<<https://calmview.roehampton.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=MOF%2f8%2f1&pos=2>> [accessed 10 August 2018].

⁴⁷ For a recent example see Ferelith Hordon, review of *Long Dog* by James Davies, *Books for Keeps* 231 (2018) <<http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/search/node/ferelith>> [accessed 10 August 2018].

⁴⁸ Pamela Paul, *My Life with Bob: Flawed Heroine Keeps Book of Books, Plot Ensues* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2017), Kindle edn.

⁴⁹ Some of Waller's participants also keep records, such as Sue who 'recognises her tendency to forget quickly and easily and explains that she has 'got into the habit of keeping a note' about current books she encountered to avoid any further decay in knowledge of her reading history', *Rereading*, p.186.

⁵⁰ Paul, *My Life with Bob*, Kindle edn.

⁵¹ David Allan, *Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.61.

⁵² Allan, *Commonplace Books*, p.63.

⁵³ Commonplace Book of Revd J.E. Gambier, archived at Maidstone's Centre for Kentish Studies (U194 F9/1) cited in Allan, *Commonplace Books*, p.64.

⁵⁴ Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2010).

⁵⁵ Allan discusses the ongoing controversy over novel reading and the inclusion of 'more conventional forms of printed text' in commonplace books but also mentions the 'rising profile and growing status of prose fiction through the Georgian period', pp.259-263 (p.260 for 'rising profile' and p.262 for 'conventional').

⁵⁶ Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.3.

⁵⁷ Blair, *Too Much to Know*, p.79.

⁵⁸ This section builds on Lyons's chapter, 'Why We Need an Oral History of Reading', in *Reading Culture and Writing Practices in Nineteenth-Century France* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp.151-164, which addresses both how oral history engages 'ordinary' readers and the active role of the interviewer.

⁵⁹ It would be interesting to further consider in this context how critics are also extensive readers, although space does not permit that here. Guillory discusses how scholars are both intensive and extensive, forgetful readers, in 'How Scholars Read'. See also Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (first published in 1921), for how critics forget too, although he claims not so much as when they or others read 'uncritically': 'Indeed he knows well that it will melt away in time; nothing can altogether save it; only it will last for longer than it would have lasted if it had been read uncritically' (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p.21.

⁶⁰ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p.86 ('pressures and tensions'). Sandra spends a significant part of every day reading and seems to *need* to read; she had a panic attack when her Kindle went flat on holiday. She also said books 'nourish you'.

⁶¹ Goodreads is used by millions and promotes itself as a means of reminiscing and communicating your 'reading life': see '2017 – See Your Year in Books!', www.goodreads.com/blog/show/1114-2017---see-your-year-in-books (December 13, 2017), accessed 2 May 2019.

⁶² See for example, Stanley E. Fish, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', first published in *New Literary History* 2: 1 (1970), and reprinted in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980). See also Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History* 3: 2 (1972), 279-299.

⁶³ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (London & New York: Penguin, 2009), Kindle edn.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Catherine Ross, Lynne McKechnie, and Paulette Rothbauer, *Reading Still Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries, and Community* (Santa Barbara & Denver: Libraries Unlimited, 2018); Rick Rylance, *Literature and the Public Good* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016).

⁶⁵ See Nicholas Dames, 'The Disease of Temporality; or, Forgetful Reading in James and Lubbock', for discussion of novelistic techniques for combatting the pervasive forgetfulness of readers, rather than a novel's memorability depending on the reader's ability to slowly or to critically read, *The Henry James Review* 25: 3 (2004), 246-253.