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Reading Times

Temporalities and Time Work in Current Everyday Reading Practices

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Abstract    Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s observation that practice is not in time but makes time and Michael Flaherty’s concept of time work, this article explores temporal aspects of the use of literature in contemporary Denmark and describes how reading allows readers to manipulate their experience of time. The main part of the article focuses on cultural norms and readers’ expectations in relation to reading time, while the last, shorter part discusses the structuring temporal effects of a literary text, such as presence, narrative, and endings. The article concludes that time is not just a practical issue to consider (when and where to read), or just something to work on through reading (e.g., changing a boring time into flow time). Texts also affect the readers’ sense of time; that is, agency lies in the literature read as well as the reader. The empirical data are drawn from extensive ethnographic fieldwork (mainly qualitative interviews) in different social and geographical contexts in Denmark from 2014 to 2019. The article contributes to empirical reading studies by exploring everyday reading as a practice in and of time.

Keywords: literature, ethnography, experience, time, Denmark

The act of reading takes place in human time; in the time of the body, and it partakes of the body’s rhythms, of heartbeat and breath, of the movement of our eyes, and of our fingers that turn the pages, but we do not pay particular attention to any of this.

Siri Hustvedt, Living, Thinking, Looking

Can literary reading tell us something about how we experience, understand, and perhaps even produce time? And can a focus on time help us understand significant aspects of the reading of literature? How do we, conditioned by our material possibilities, use letters, words, and stories to move in and around the time given to us, perhaps even to open new time spaces in our imagination? As an integral part of participation in contemporary societies, reading is a repeated, ordinary, everyday activity for many people. But despite this widespread prevalence of reading,
we see few empirical studies of actual everyday reading practices. There are plenty of studies of reading in the formalized setting of the classroom, thanks to extensive interest in children’s reading performances, and laboratory studies of literature reading within psychology and cognitive science are prevalent, too. But studies of spontaneous reading in the middle (or on the margins) of everyday life are still rare (Rosen 2015).

Anthropologists might be expected to seize such a challenge with enthusiasm, but even they have largely ignored reading as an everyday activity. The anthropologist Johannes Fabian (1991: 80) observed: “Nothing human is supposed to escape anthropology’s attention. Yet reading, an activity on which many humans spend more time than on eating, having sex, or participating in rituals, has not been among the rubrics of standard ethnographic research and writing.” Up until the late 1980s, anthropological research about reading and writing included mainly large-scale discussions about literacy and the significance of written or oral tradition (most significantly Goody 1968, 1986, 1987) or related books like historian Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), which explores the role of printing technology for the development of large-scale societies. Only since then have empirical studies of everyday readers who read literature for pleasure emerged (Heath 1983; Radway 1984, 1997; Boyarin 1993; Long 2003; Collinson 2009; Sweeney 2010; Reed 2011). My work is part of this lineage.

Most of these studies of literary reading based on ethnographic data, as well as most studies within the history of reading, concern the reader’s active use of literature for subjective meaning making. As Adam Reed (2018: 37) notes in his review of the field: “In these accounts readers are often chiefly makers and manipulators of meaning and the historian (or ethnographer) is someone who identifies ‘frames of reading’ or highlights the ways in which different readers understand texts in diverse ways.” That is, these studies focus on the reader-narrative
relationship. One significant anthropological exception from this trend is Adam Reed’s own work on the Henry Williamson Society, in which he focuses on the relationship between the readers and the author Henry Williamson (Reed 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2011). Another noteworthy exception is Ian Collinson’s Everyday Readers: Reading and Popular Culture (2009), which focuses on mundane practices of literature reading. The consumption of a narrative, Collinson shows, is an important aspect of reading, but questions about where and when to read and what to do with books beyond reading them also form part of everyday reading experiences.

Collinson’s study draws on interviews with twenty-one readers (four of whom were men) between twenty and fifty-one years old, most of them living in the “generally affluent eastern or gentrified inner-western suburbs of Sydney” (Collinson 2009: 29).

Although thematically related to Collinson’s research, my data and analytical interests differ from his in significant ways. Data for this article stem from extensive ethnographic fieldwork (qualitative interviews and participant observation) in various social and geographical contexts in Denmark from 2014 to 2019.¹ None of the interviews intentionally focused on temporal aspects of reading. Only retrospectively have I trawled them through for examples and reflections on time in relation to reading. Therefore, I present empirical trends and possibilities, based on a material that is broader in terms of socioeconomic and regional variation than other qualitative studies of everyday reading, internationally or in a Danish context. I look for connections across differences, because all my interlocutors are, after all, Danish, brought up in a welfare society with a long tradition of public schooling and well-equipped libraries. I describe everyday reading practices across the different contexts and ask how the readers’ perception of time affects their reading practices and how these reading practices affect their experience of time. I use the terms literary reading and reading for pleasure interchangeably because both the
literary and the pleasurable are relevant aspects and *literary reading for pleasure* is a rather cumbersome term. By *literature* I mainly mean fiction, although some readers also read biographies or nonfictional stories for pleasure. {Au: words as words appear in italics throughout.}

After some introductory notes about the role of light and the material environment in reading practices, I turn to theoretical questions about time and time making, followed by empirical observations of what my interlocutors considered proper times for reading literature. Subsequently, I explore reading as “time work” (Flaherty 2003, 2011; Flaherty et al. 2020) and describe how reading allows readers to manipulate their experience of time. Lastly, I turn to the texts themselves. My interlocutors read literature (audiobooks, crime novels, “great” novels) in different ways to form their experiences of time. But what aspect of the reading does the forming? I focus on textual form as “presence” (Gumbrecht 2004) and narrative and briefly explore how literary texts affect readers’ perception of time. I do not dip into the ongoing discussion in literary studies (see the introduction and the contributions by Karin Kukkonen and Dorothee Birke in this special issue) about the significance of internal textual qualities. I describe instead what readers find important when they enjoy a text; thus, their voices may be a correlative to more scholarly debates. My own interest, though, is the production of time through textual form.

These last reflections on the agency of form bring me close to existing empirical studies on narratives and subjective meaning making, and that is where I end this article. After all, most of the readers I interviewed read because it was pleasurable, and because the stories, read in one way or another, nourished their stories about themselves. Biographical time is thus my last focus point in this exploration of temporal aspects of reading.
1. Technological Affordances: Light and Media

Shamelessly, I have stolen the title “Reading Times,” from historian Alessandro Arcangeli (2017: 1), who notes: “In choosing a title for my contribution, I deliberately sought ambiguity between the time set for the practice of reading and the time perception one may experience while reading, with the intention of exploring both (and any connection between the two).” In his article, Arcangeli focuses on the early modern transformations of the realm of the written word, including both technology and perceptions of time. Among other aspects, he describes how the nineteenth-century industrial revolution included the introduction of gaslight, and later electric light, in the cities, which blurred “the age-old sensory divide between the visuality of daytime and the tactility of nighttime” (Classen 2014, quoted in Arcangeli 2017: 28). The introduction of electric light encouraged focused, solitary reading, a practice that replaced shared storytelling in dim evening light. Access to electric light was not the only technological innovation that changed storytelling practices into solitary reading, and it was probably not the most important factor, either. Indoor heating and certain furniture also introduced new spatial and temporal opportunities for solitary reading (Arcangeli 2017: 27).

Like Arcangeli, I am interested in the connection between the temporal practices and experiences of reading, and particularly the role of lighting popped up in the interviews I conducted. Many readers I spoke to light a candle as a way of creating the right atmosphere for reading. This may be a special Danish invention, closely related to the more general value that many Danes attach to what they call hygge, or relaxation and intimacy, if not with others then with yourself (Bille and Sørensen 2007; Linnet 2011; on candlelight in Denmark, see Ardener 1992). But candles may also symbolize more than just hygge. According to Siri Hustvedt (2016: 344), Marguerite Duras claimed never to read outside: “You can’t read by two lights at once, the
light of the day and the light of the book. You should read by electric light, the room in shadow, and only the page lit up.” The dim light of the surrounding environment and a focused light on the page of the book being read seem to help the concentration of the reader. The light on the page becomes the outer representation of the reader’s attention, mirroring its intensity.²

The focused attention and sensation of hygge are, however, portable. You can have a book or mobile phone in your pocket, enabling you to read in places which were not suitable for reading in the past. As Piet Schreuders has noted: “Contemporary readers are more likely to make the book fit their bodies and the social spaces through which they move” (quoted in Collinson 2009: 33). The paperback book was designed to accompany an increasingly mobile readership. Today, e-books on iPads as well as audiobooks and other cellphone-born literature set the reader even freer to read, whenever there is time for it. For instance, a middle-aged couple told me that the iPad and audiobooks had improved their possibilities for reading at night: they no longer needed to worry about waking up their partner by switching on the light to read. Another husband reported that the light on the iPad as well as its ability to stand had improved his reading in bed: “I do read paperbacks, but mainly on holiday or when I have some extra time during the day. Ellen [his wife] finds it irritating when I switch on the light at bedtime. . . . So I go to bed and switch on the iPad. . . . You can place it like this [he shows how the iPad can stand on the duvet]. You can even lie down and read this way.” In this way, reading practices and experiences are formed by material circumstances such as light, heat, and technological affordances.

However, such reading practices are also connected to expectations regarding the proper use of time. In Everyday Readers, Collinson (2009: 32) notes: “While everyday reading may appear to be free of the strictures that confine and inhibit professional readers, it would be quite
wrong to think that it is entirely formless or chaotic because it remains subject to cultural economies of time and space.” Collinson mainly focused on the places where people choose to read and what they “do” with books, for instance, giving them away as presents or decorating rooms with them. “I can read anytime, but I can’t read anywhere,” one of his informants stated (Collinson 2009: 53). I focus instead on time. Space may be an important element of the good reading experience, but possessing the time to read, as well as the temporal experience of reading itself, was at the core of the concerns of the people I interviewed. This obsession with time has to do with how collective time is orchestrated through everyday work ethics and practical matters, and the opportunities these factors offer readers. But first a few paragraphs on my theoretical inspiration.

2. Between Structure and Agency: Making Time

Practice, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1972) and others, represents the dialectic between abstract structures and the actions, feelings, and thoughts of individual persons and groups. In this dialectic, “practice is not in time but makes time (human time, as opposed to biological or astronomic time)” (Bourdieu 2000: 206). It constitutes something as a center of interest while defining other things as being of no interest (207). In Bourdieu’s view, being engaged in practice means being invested in “a game” and its “forth-coming,” not necessarily as a conscious project but as a prediction based on past experiences. For instance, once we have experiences with books, we turn a page in a book anticipating that another page will appear, like the first, full of letters, which we also expect to be able to read. Only one book can perplex us by killing the main character on page 46 and leaving the rest of the pages empty. The next book that does the same thing will already be part of the repertoire we expect to meet. “The imminent forth-coming is immediately visible, as a present property of things,” Bourdieu (2000: 207) states. Practice and
things thus temporalize, make time, by always incorporating both a past and a future, and
temporal practices such as the use of alarm clocks or the division of the week into seven days
and the days into work days and holidays are ways of orchestrating such temporalizations in
collective times (Moran 2015: 283).

Collective time, however, does not necessarily coalesce with subjective time. You may
find yourself disillusioned, or perhaps just perplexed and not at all able to predict the next step.
Or you may, in a state of hope, despair, boredom, or impatience, find the imminent future
unsatisfying and wish to act upon it. Here I introduce Michael G. Flaherty’s concept of “time
work,” aware that Flaherty conceives of the actor as less constrained in terms of autonomy than
Bourdieu’s social agent. Time work, Flaherty (2011: 11) proposes, is “the intrapersonal or
interpersonal effort directed toward provoking or preventing various temporal experiences.” “My
experience is what I agree to attend to,” William James wrote in *The Principles of Psychology*
(quoted in Flaherty 2011: 7), and although Flaherty finds this “something of an overstatement,”
as our attention is also drawn in ways that we cannot control, he is inspired by James. Flaherty
develops the idea that we, as active subjects, to some degree can direct our attention in ways that
change our perception of time or “bring into being circumstances that provoke the desired form
of temporal experience” (3). One example is familiar: a young man describes how he speeds up a
boring class by doodling in his notebook, talking to the person next to him, or daydreaming (17).
The class, understood as a unit of time in which something specific is expected to happen, is a
collective orchestration of time, but the lad is not willing (or, in Bourdieu’s terms, does not have
the *habitus*) to sit still and listen. He feels bored and directs his attention elsewhere.

Flaherty proposes a typology of such willful modifications of temporal experience, or
“time work.” In his book *The Textures of Time* (2011), he identifies six kinds of time work:
duration, the effort to slow down or speed up experienced time; frequency, the effort to control how often things happen; sequencing, the effort to customize the succession of experiences; the timing of an event, to make it happen at the best possible time; the allocation of time for particular activities; and the taking, or stealing, of time. Most of these categories are relevant with regard to the reading of literature, as I show below.

Although Flaherty (2011: 150) acknowledges that “temporal agency is largely a product of existing arrangements and contributes to their reproduction,” he is mostly interested in intentionality and temporal agency, in the subjective side of time making. In this article I am also interested in the normative and material backdrop of reading practices, that is, how readers are predisposed or prompted to read in specific ways and how these specific ways affect their perceptions of time. When a reader picks up a book and begins to read or turns on an audiobook and pushes in the ear plugs, these behaviors do not happen in a vacuum. The specific act is already in time, including a past and future. For instance, the format of a book tends to lead to certain kinds of reading, and any resistance to the format (e.g., reading the last page first to remove the suspense) will happen within an already structured universe (where the story is normally suspended in the time it takes to read from the beginning to the end of a book).

In what follows, I will draw on Flaherty’s notion of time work, but within a Bordieuan framework, where the things to be done and the temporal experiences they afford present themselves in the interface between habit and expectation (habitus) and the conditions (structure of probabilities) of the given social space (Bourdieu 2000: 211).
3. Temporal Structures: Right Times for Reading

Let us now take a closer look at Danish reading practices and the allocation of time for reading. Many of the readers I spoke to expected reading for pleasure to take place in the evening or at bedtime. For instance, in a focus group of female industrial workers in Odsherred in 2016, these were their priorities:

Some people do the cleaning while they listen to an audiobook. I’d rather sit in a couch with my feet up. I’m not a great reader; maybe I’ll read in the winter when it gets dark. . . . I must have peace and quiet. No work I haven’t finished.

I also prefer a peaceful home, when they have gone to bed, the others, that’s wonderful.

A librarian in her midthirties said:

So when I sit down with a good book, it’s my way of relaxing. I’m a single mom. I have a full-time job. I have an hour and a half of transportation every day. So my everyday life is just very tightly structured. . . . And then when I sit down with this book—Wow! Then I just relax. I typically read in the evening. When I was younger, before I had a child, I could easily spend a whole Saturday sitting in the couch with a book. I can’t do that now, because there is the cleaning and laundry. I don’t usually sit down until I’m done with the day.

A man from Mid Jutland in his early fifties remembered that, as a boy, he used to read before falling asleep: “It was something . . . I think I got it from my parents, they would always read before sleeping.” A woman reported that her mother would read for them as children, when she
had finished her work in the barn and they were all waiting for their father to come in, while the potatoes (the traditional staple in Denmark) were boiling. And a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl from Aarhus said: “I also read sometimes, if I have time when I get home from school or if I just . . . just need to relax. If I don’t have homework or need to do something. [Otherwise, I read] a lot in the evening, it’s mainly there. While I’m in bed.” Readers who did not find time in the evening found time when they were on holiday. Reading on holiday and in the evenings was described by several as cozy (hyggeligt), and one female factory worker said, “This thing of withdrawing into yourself and sitting with a book, it’s fantastic!” A leading manager from a large IT company described his reading habits as follows: “Whether I read or not depends on the time I have, but on a normal day I typically read before I go to sleep. And I travel a lot and read on the plane. When we’re on vacation, we can sit and read in the afternoon, or for that matter in the morning, or whenever, and we can easily be buried in a book for hours.”

Readers read with props other than lighting. The couch, the cat, a duvet, and a full coffee pot was how a middle-aged woman from Horsens described her favorite reading situation. Or “with your feet up, a blanket and a coffee pot within reach. So I make myself a small cave,” as another woman said. Evening time, when the house is calm, or bedtime were preferred reading times. A certain work ethic is detectable here. Three female factory workers put it like this in a focus group conversation:

J: “I think you’re simply brought up to think like that, that you have to get everything done, and then you can enjoy.”

K: “Yes, only then can you enjoy yourself.”

J: “You’re selfish and you’re allowed to be because you’ve done everything you had to do.”
“It’s a bit like sitting down and watching a movie, I can’t sit and watch a movie in the morning, even if there’s a good movie on TV, unless I’ve got everything done. I think it’s true that you learn in childhood that you had to do all your chores first and . . .”

K: “. . . and then came the luxury, the reward afterwards, isn’t it so?”

However, the need to do all your chores first may mean that you never actually get around to having any reading time at all. A nurse from the outskirts of Copenhagen told me that she enjoyed reading, but when I asked, “And when do you read?” she answered:

It’s at . . . it will be in the e- . . . it will not be . . . and I’m really sorry. I’m not someone who sits down in the evening [and reads]. Right now we have many other things going on in the family—building projects, for instance . . . We hardly ever watch television anymore. . . . I’d really like to sit down with a book and read, but it’s often work on the PC. . . . I’m not home until half past seven, and then we’re cooking and then we eat and then half past nine, perhaps you know?

The people I spoke to who did not find time for reading during the daytime looked forward to having time to read when their children left home: “I have two children at home and I just don’t get to sit and read. I am looking forward to them getting older and moving away from home so that I can have the peace to read.” Or as one older colleague of this woman said: “I think maybe there is more space now, in my head, to receive and enjoy reading. It’s probably the case that there has been too much else that has filled it. But now they are big [the children] and they don’t really need me, so the time has come.” The librarians I interviewed were fully aware that the book clubs they facilitated (mainly by providing the books) were populated by women above the age of fifty, women who no longer had young children at home. The continually conducted Danish national survey of cultural habits also shows that regular literature readers are primarily
women in this age group (Statistics Denmark, accessed March 31, 2020; Nørtoft 2019). People use audiobooks to squeeze reading in when they would not otherwise have time. One woman (thirty-nine years old) who did manual labor explained why she started listening to literature: “I’ve always wanted to read, but . . . time . . . life is too short to read books . . . [she laughs] It’s really hard to find time. But the audiobooks . . . as a housewife I spend a lot of hours on the road, so both at work and when I’m sitting in the car, audiobooks are perfect.”

It becomes very evident from the statements above that time does not always mean the same thing, and that activities are allocated to particular times during the day and over a life span. As Collinson (2009: 124–25) also observed: “Without exception the readers mentioned the dearth of reading time and the lengths to which they had to go to ‘make time’ for their books, to fit reading into their day, a day where time is always already allocated to other things.” The people I met felt compelled to spend the most important part of their time being efficient and achieving things. Only when your chores are done (sequencing) can you allow yourself to be absorbed in a book, be that in the evening, during your holiday, or later in life. What is at play here is thus a culturally formed practicing of “right” times for reading, a collective time work sustained by norms of efficiency and a self-imposed temporal discipline. The feel for the game, in Bourdieu’s terms, implies this taken-for-granted attitude toward the pleasure of absorption.

4. Temporal Agency: Finding Time for Reading

Some kinds of time may not interfere with each other, Barbara Adam (2006 1995: 12) writes: “The times of consciousness, memory, and anticipation are rarely discussed with reference to situations dominated by schedules and deadlines.” But reading time is discussed with reference to schedules and deadlines, at least among my interlocutors, as we saw above. Although reading
for pleasure has recently become associated with well-being and efficiency in our contemporary, “overheated societies” (Hylland-Eriksen 2016), along with mindfulness and other temporal practices (see also Kukkonen this issue), most reading for pleasure is still just for pleasure, and readers must carve out time for it from the schedules that structure their day.

Many of the people I interviewed read while traveling from one place to another, in the plane, on the train, or while driving, where audiobooks can now be used. One librarian who commuted to work every day said: “I love to sit those twenty minutes in the train and read a book. Or if I hear an audiobook, while I walk half an hour to my job. I walk through the woods and listen to the story. It’s not like reading with your eyes; but if the person reading the story is good, it’s like listening to stories when I was a child.” Other readers read during in-between times, pauses, moments of waiting, and parts of everyday life when nothing seems to be happening (Ehn and Löfgren 2010). Michel de Certeau (1984: 165–76) has compared reading to poaching. He focused primarily on the freedom and transgression experienced in reading, but some readers I spoke to quite literally poached time. They took it (Flaherty’s vocabulary) either by doing something else (reading) than they were supposed to do or by doing something else while doing what they had to do. Their aim was most often to modify the perceived passage of time.

Modifying our perception of time is possible insofar as time is subject to both structural and subjective influences (Flaherty 1999: 142). Flaherty (1999: 40) investigated how one’s perception of the passage of time is prompted by one’s immediate circumstances. Most of the time people live more or less in synchronicity with clock time, where ten minutes measured by the clock roughly feels like ten minutes. But Flaherty also found that time can be compressed (and in retrospect perceived as having passed quickly) or protracted. Protracted duration, or the
The perception that time has passed quickly stems from moments of temporal compression (Flaherty 1999: 115–35). During an interval of smooth immersion, the time interval may seem to have passed quickly. A captivating narrative (or plot) seizes and focuses our attention, and in that state we may lose track of time and in retrospect perceive it to have passed quickly. We can compare Flaherty’s moments of temporal compression with Charlotte Bloch’s (2001) empirical study of experiences of flow. An experience of flow, Bloch notes, emerges in a “standing now,” in which past and future blend in a dynamic relationship with the present. There is nowhere to go; it is all here. An experience of flow may also emerge from being in the time of another universe (isn’t there a parentheses missing here? you decide e.g., in fiction reading); Bloch 2001: 173). In both cases, one may “wake up” and realize that clock time has passed quickly.

I interviewed factory workers about their use of audiobooks while working. A thirty-three-year-old man from Ringkøbing who listened to fantasy audiobooks put it like this:

This is factory work. It’s really monotonous and repetitive and a lot of the time when you know your job and can do it, you just stand there and look nowhere. why break here?
Your hands know what to do and then... Well it’s a bit hard to say that you’re wasting your time, but you can spend your time so much better if you have an audiobook... You know, for factory workers it’s as much a question of making time pass faster. If you really have a good day [with a book], a working day hardly seems long enough. Because you want a bit more. Damn it, is it really time to go home?

A woman from a microphone factory in Odsherred who did skilled assembly work also spoke about days when she hardly wanted to go home because the story she was listening to had captured her attention: “One day I took it [the audiobook provided by the workplace] home with me because it was so exciting, and I listened all the way home, and later at home when I was doing the vacuum cleaning.” Literature, and perhaps auditory literature in particular, is used to direct attention away from the experience of time passing. A psychologist in his sixties described how he listened to stories while he was out cycling as follows: “Well, I use audiobooks a lot when I bike, to focus on biking along and kind of forget all the other stuff. Then I forget that the road is going uphill, that I have the wind against me and stuff like that.” These voices are also echoed in the advertising posters for audiobook providers like storytel.dk: “Speed up your pulse with a thriller!” “Turn your everyday life into an adventure!”

However, readers I spoke to also read to slow down and relax before going to bed or when on holiday. The paper book is still considered the most relaxing, because one can read it at one’s own speed and because it demands more of a reader’s attention. Some people listen to audiobooks at work or in the car but prefer paper books in other situations because they can concentrate better on a paper book or because it is “cozier.” However, the paper book requires you to sit comfortably and relax without doing anything else at the same time. Generally, all my
interviewees found that enjoying a book required immersion. The interesting thing here is that everyday time is invested in the reading but also becomes irrelevant (or at least fades into the background) as a consequence of the reading process. As one passionate reader, an academic in her forties, said: “It’s not about me. Actually, it has nothing to do with me or the world around me. It has to do with the secret life I have with the people in the books. And the authors and so on.” This reader reported that both the authors and the characters in the books existed without her participation and that she had to make a particular effort to be with them: “It was an effort to read that book. . . . Well, I said that thing about [the books] giving of themselves, and yes they do give. But [reading them] is definitely also something you have to give, something you have to invest in.” I asked her what the currency of the investment was, and she answered “time.” Time and energy, she said, because you have to be both persistent and patient. But I also found that once readers had gotten into a novel, it took over and took your time. Time was no longer something you gave; it was taken from you, and you had to accept this situation willingly. As the IT manager I interviewed said: “When we had the house in Spain, we [would sit] and just read for the whole day. And you simply didn’t put your book down, because ‘now we must . . . now we just want to get there!’” But when he was asked whether the effect of reading books continued after he had finished reading them, he said: “No, I don’t think so, I’m good at letting a book go.” However, another man, around sixty years old, had read Butcher’s Crossing by John Williams and been deeply affected for several days after finishing it.

Readers allow their time (and sometimes their sense of self) to be taken over. Nobody used the word flow, but a lot of my interviewees described experiences of what could be labeled as such. In her empirical study of stress and flow, Bloch (2001: 54) found that the flow experience was characterized by a sense of absorption, ease, and presence, in which the everyday
world and its time schedules fade away. One of my interviewees, a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl, described reading for pleasure as follows: “If you’re reading a really good book and you are captivated by it, it will run like a movie inside your head. You just read the book, without seeing the pages.” And Lone (a fifty-five years old, a disability helper) described reading *The Clan of the Cave Bear* by Jean Auel as follows: “I am her. It is me who is riding the horse, and me who tames that cave bear. . . . I’m in the story, there’s no doubt about it, it’s so exciting, so enthralling that I can’t help it.” Many of the interviewees read to change their mood (see also Radway 1984: 90). As I have written elsewhere (Dalsgård 2014; Thorsen and Dalsgård 2020), emotions are temporal, or vice versa: the experience of time is “a feedback mechanism for how things are going” (Hall 1983: 3). Pleasant moods are moods in which you feel good about your present situation and the future it entails, while emotional states like boredom, anxiety, or depression are all negatively experienced relations to time. Readers can pick up a book to change this relation or allow themselves to forget it. The mood of a book may therefore be crucial. One librarian reported that reading was not so much about the narrative as the mood for her: “I’m the kind of reader who connects feelings to books. I remember feeling ‘That book has done me good!’” An academic in her forties described why she avoided certain kinds of books: “I don’t like too much social realism, [as] when a book gets too heavy. But this has nothing to do with the people of Gedser [a Danish town known to be the location of a particular writer’s work], it’s more to do with . . . I get sad.” And the factory worker mentioned above, who listened to books to make time pass more quickly, often reread books with happy endings. “What about books with sad endings?” I asked him, and he answered: “Then I only listen to them once. [Sad endings] are not my thing. I like to feel good when I finish a book.”
What we observe in this section is that taking time, giving time, or even being captivated by your reading demands a certain kind of effort or willingness on the part of the reader. However, the reader’s efforts occur within the circumstances (Flaherty’s term) or structures (Bourdieu’s) provided. I now briefly introduce the idea that the text in itself may also have temporal agency and be a structuring part of the reading process.

5. Textual Time: Presence and Endings

I deliberately use the term text to indicate “a set or series of signs interpretable as verbal symbols” (Rosenblatt 1964: 127). The fact that the texts read were fictional in most cases is not germane here. Instead, I reflect on how the text became real to the reader. Texts are perceived by the eyes or the ears, and the materials they are made of matter to readers, as well as the rhythm of their appearance, the tone of words and letters (and the narrator’s voice in the case of audiobooks), the length of sentences, and of course the structure and speed of progression of the narrative they create (Kukkonen, in this issue, writes about this in terms of “probability designs”).

First of all, printed books have a lasting presence that audiobooks do not have. “Made of paper and ink, they lie where they are put, until the moment someone shows an interest in them. They wait,” as Georges Poulet (1969: 53) puts it, and this is how at least some of the readers in my studies experienced the physical presence of printed books. They stand on the shelf, inhabit life, and have a presence over time. You can reread certain pages or passages of favorite books, or as one reader said, reread a book later in life and realize that it means something else to you. Audiobooks are most often temporary acquaintances. You typically have to return them, and while you read them it is difficult to find a page you particularly like and reread it.
The medium of the text also matters in the process of reading. More than the printed book, the audiobook creates a dual time. In their book *Digital Audiobooks*, Iben Have and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen (2016: 12) describe how listening to audiobooks can be a polyaesthetic experience, in which the listener’s impressions of the environment are part of the experience of the storytelling: “Listening to an audiobook, . . . [the reader’s] auditory attention is connected to the literary experience, while his gaze and his body are able to move around” (25). This double engagement may result in a kind of merging between the “outer” life and the story told, with the place being imbued with the story one is listening to. However, according to my data, rather than merging, the two times (demands from the environment and the storytelling) run parallel. The audiobook readers I spoke to had all experienced moments when they would have to leave what could be called “story time” and attend fully to the demands of “outer” time.

Listening to a book makes demands on the reader: you cannot slow down or speed up your reading, or skip a boring page, as you can with a paper book (see also Have and Stougaard Pedersen 2016: 35). The reading proceeds at its own speed. As one reader, an academic in her fifties, said: “In the audiobook you have to hear everything, and this happens at the same speed, which you don’t control yourself. When you read a [printed] book, there are some passages that are either difficult or giving a lot [full of content], they hit you with depth, and then you slow down the reading.” This reader noticed that she slows down when a passage affects her in some way. In her article this issue, titled “Reading, Fast and Slow,” Kukkonen reflects on the high modernist critique of automatization and mass production, particularly by Viktor Shklovsky and Walter Benjamin, and the cherishing of slow reading through defamiliarization, noting that “a literary work of art, Shklovsky famously argued, can provoke defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), which makes readers slow down and pay proper attention to the text they read.” Kukkonen points
to the difference between physical reading speed and phenomenological reading speed. We may simply perceive the speed as slow, without necessarily slowing down. This perception of slowness resonates with Flaherty’s observation that duration is a matter of experience.

However, defamiliarization seems to be an intellectual move in Shklovsky’s conception. In some of my interlocutors’ experiences with texts I found an embodied engagement with the written that slowed them down but did not imply any distancing. Rather, this embodied engagement was a kind of coliving, or shared presence, that they cherished. Some readers pointed out the atmosphere or tone of a text; others, the wording or particular details in a description. The IT manager, for instance, who read the Danish author Jakob Eijersbo’s trilogy on Africa and found it bleak, felt that the atmosphere stemmed from the language: “The language is very raw. I don’t mean like . . . with profanity and that kind of thing, it’s more like unpolished in some way. It’s a good book, it’s a really good book, I was influenced, yes, I was influenced by it when I read it.” And a description may “give a lot,” as another reader said, and force readers to slow down. In his book *Production of Presence* Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004: xv) calls such phenomena a text’s “presence effects.” “We sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin” (106), Gumbrecht notes, and this “layer” is not the layer of meaning. We wish the text to appeal to our senses. Although Gumbrecht emphasizes that presence mainly refers to a spatial relationship to the world and its objects (xiii), I find it an important notion here. Presence is also a temporal experience. It does not point you into the future; it is an enjoyment of the now (and as such, it may be part of a moment of flow).

A similarly embodied temporality, however, may be produced by the narrative and the drive toward the end. Certain reading practices repeat an intense drive toward the end,
particularly the reading of crime fiction. The crime genre is the most widely read genre in Denmark. The national survey of cultural habits conducted by Statistics Denmark revealed that in the first quarter of 2019 more than half of all regular readers preferred crime fiction, independent of gender, age, level of education, or regional variation (Nørtoft 2019). What I find interesting here is how crime reading, almost as a by-product, trains or performs a particular temporal practice. Reading for the plot in this intense way often means caring less for the words and the description. A reader’s central point of concern, in the view of the readers I interviewed, becomes what happens next. Readers do not dwell on the page or the descriptions (or their own memories that merge with it) but spend their time hunting for the solution to the crime riddle.

The former math teacher whom I interviewed, who enjoyed crime fiction, said she would often skim the pages without reading the words properly. In other genres you cannot do this, she said: you had to read each individual word. Another interviewee spoke of skipping the last pages of a crime novel if the riddle had already been solved. A technical designer in his fifties experienced a certain amount of irritation with himself: “Well, here [in crime fiction] you can talk about it being a nuisance, you know when the book takes over completely. Because it drives, it’s all about suspense. Well, it’s because I end up focusing too much on the plot.”

The fact that the text must end is interesting in terms of temporal experience. One experience is the drive toward the end that instills a sense of temporal linearity, but another is the break in time when the reader (literally) reaches the last page. The fact of stories ending was experienced by many of the readers as a kind of loss. As one reader, a librarian in her mid-thirties, expressed it: “I can shut out noise and music completely [when I read]. I can also read when I’m making spaghetti Bolognese or that kind of thing. [Question: And when a book ends?] Yes, it can be really annoying, because then you have read it. Then you are . . . where is that story then?
Where in the world is it, right?” Another librarian in her mid-thirties explained that she would postpone this break in time: “If it’s a good book, then I like to drag it out, in the end, right? It’s so sad that you have to say goodbye to it. And it can also be difficult to find a new book to get started with afterwards.”

Whether readers enjoy the drive of a crime novel or drag out the ending, they are making time when reading a narrative. They feel the duration and speed of it, and they rehearse a certain structure of time: the plot. The plot is the logic and dynamic of narrative, a structuring operation, Peter Brooks (1984) notes, and narrative itself is a form of understanding and explanation. Narrative is the form we give our lives when we wish to understand ourselves and others, but it is also a form that may distance us from more direct impressions of our situation (Mattingly 2005). The experience of time, whether this is subjective inner time or time that is perceived as being external to ourselves, comes to us through the practices in which we engage, willingly or not. Reading practices are one set of practices that form our experience temporally. We could say that we learn to live time in particular ways through literature reading.

The few studies on literary reading in anthropology and related disciplines have focused considerably on how that literary content becomes part of readers’ lives (e.g., Radway 1984, 1997; Long 2003; Reed 2011). Stories, told or read, may enter one’s understanding of human motivations and form one’s worldview. Stories may also become part of one’s biographical narrative as the time we did not live, perhaps an intimate dream that was never realized (Rapport 2008). This is what I hear in this librarian’s relation to a particular book on her bookshelf:

Many years ago I read a novel called *Cold Mountain*. It was written by a man who found his great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather’s letters. And he had been a soldier in the American Civil War and had deserted. He started to walk home. He simply couldn’t stand
all the violence and all that. And then he had a girlfriend at home whom he longed for.

Somewhere along the way, when he was injured, he was shot, he meets an old woman living in a . . . kind of abandoned circus trailer in the woods. And she takes care of him. And she just has that little circus trailer where she cooks and collects herbs and writes a diary and makes drawings and . . . and the atmosphere of the life she’s living, right? I like to reread that part of the book once in a while, right? The choice she had made and this thing that . . . I have it at home on my bookshelf.

My intention in this last section has been to indicate how the text (printed or audio) has agency in forming our experiences of time. By moving into the role of the story, I am aware that I have opened a subject that I cannot exhaust. I end here, with this book that represents a life never lived. A story becomes part of “the time of the body, and it partakes of the body’s rhythms, of heartbeat and breath,” Hustvedt (2012: 134) wrote, and *Cold Mountain* certainly partakes in the life of its reader, both through its content and its form. Life as lived (or practiced, we could say) is not life as experienced (or, for that matter, life as expressed), as Edward Bruner (1986: 7) once observed, but the care this reader took with the book on her shelf somehow joins these aspects of life together.

6. Conclusion: Reading Time

I have focused on the temporal aspects of literature reading in this article. Reading takes time, makes time, and dissolves other kinds of time. The time reading takes is the break in a busy day that you give yourself, or the investment in a huge book or in an elaborate description. The time it makes is, for instance, the special evening time with *hygge* and candlelight; it is biographical time formed and fed by reading of other people’s lives; and it is the suspense and restlessness of
crime fiction. The other kinds of time, which reading may dissolve, are the boring times spent sitting in a train or standing by a production line, or the desperate time in the middle of the night when you cannot sleep—in other words, time that troubles you and that you can set aside by reading.

Practice always takes place in a specific context, where certain ways of thinking, feeling, and doing make sense and are reproduced over generations. Temporal practices are no exception. The empirical material this article is based on stems from Denmark. The Danish welfare state provides certain conditions for literature reading, among these a well-equipped public library system staffed by enthusiastic and, indeed, passionate librarians. Several of the interviewees in my fieldwork reported that a librarian had induced their joy of reading. Some of the librarians I spoke with even became librarians themselves out of a kind of gratitude and desire to embody this role in other people’s lives. My own father, who came from a working-class background but worked as a school librarian for most of his adult life, always spoke lovingly about his Danish teacher, the author Peter P. Rohde, who first opened his eyes to the world of good literature. The pleasure of reading thus has its own transmission lines, consisting of passionate readers. Does their passion for reading have to do with time, you may ask?

I think so. Inspired by the conception that our desire for meaning and purpose makes us seek out antidotes to the contingency of human existence and its finitude (Bourdieu 2000: 239), I think we can say that literature reading is one way, among others, that allows us to believe that our time on earth is interesting and that we make this time ourselves. We could call it a large-scale time work.
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1 To give an idea of my fifty-six interviewees’ various social and geographical backgrounds, I list them here: four social workers in the capital, Copenhagen; three industrial assembly line workers from Ringkøbing, a town on the west coast of Jutland; two focus groups of four women each in a microphone company in the generally socially disadvantaged region Odsherred; two nurses near Copenhagen; fourteen public librarians in Mid Jutland (see Dalsgård 2019); three participants in a reading group for relatives of war veterans in the provincial town of Horsens, also in Mid Jutland (see Dalsgård 2018); thirteen readers suffering from mental vulnerability or illness in Copenhagen (see Christiansen and Dalsgård, forthcoming); three fifteen-year-old school pupils from Aarhus; and some readers in my personal network, comprising three academics, one IT manager, one technical designer, and one former math teacher.

2 In the story “Hundekunstneren” (1988), the Danish author Per Højholt uses this parallel between outer light and inner intensity to describe how a story is told in the light of a hurricane lantern. As the story unfolds and captivates the reader, the light of the lantern becomes brighter and brighter.

3 I got this idea (a book stopping at page 46) from a satirical cartoon in the Danish newspaper Weekendavisen. But I lost the newspaper and do not have the correct reference.

4 Kukkonen, in her article in this issue, explains that in literary reading past experiences allow us to predict what comes next in a sentence and thus make reading easier: “The form of language in style and narrative thus devises a probability design that informs not only how readers make sense of the novel but also how much ease and speed they experience in the reading process.”
Prediction, she argues, needs to be disappointed to some degree to prevent the text from being boring.

5 See Nørtoft (2019) for an overview of the 2019 data.

6 This could be the focus of a separate article, and I do not develop it here.

7 This particular factory participated in the national campaign Denmark Reads by providing equipment for employees so they could listen to audiobooks.