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**Does fiction reading make us better people?**

**Empathy and morality in a literary empowerment programme**

Charlotte E. Christiansen

## **Does fiction reading make us better people?**

### **Empathy and morality in a literary empowerment programme**

Studies have proposed that participatory arts, particularly literature reading, enhance empathy, supposedly leading to enhanced moral judgment. Building on fieldwork in a Literary Empowerment Programme for people with mental vulnerabilities in Denmark, I seek to qualify the role of empathy, the ability to imaginatively put yourself in other people's shoes, when reading literature in a social setting. I describe encounters with empathy and the limits thereof, as it happened in the reading groups investigated. Taking inspiration from Jarrett Zigon, these encounters are situated within the moral and ethical assemblage of the programme, whose objective was to create 'literary free spaces'. I connect this objective to Scandinavian and Scottish Enlightenment values of freedom, equality and civil society. These insights are finally used to discuss future pathways for the anthropology of literature and reading, moving beyond a focus on understanding and meaning-making processes.

Keywords: reading; literature; morality; Denmark; empathy

#### **Introduction: participatory arts, literature and empathy**

Since the early 1990s, the arts field has seen a participatory turn: Ordinary people are increasingly involved in creative productions and social uses of art (Bishop 2012; Coombs & O'Connor 2011). This is also the case with literature. People might not read as many books as they used to, but uses of literature live on through a substantial rise in book clubs, literature blogs, literary awards, author talks and writing workshops (see Wulff 2008; Driscoll 2014). As part of this wave, alongside choir singing, painting and theatre performances, literature is increasingly used within the burgeoning 'arts in health' field, typically with the purpose of enhancing the mental health, well-being or job readiness of citizens (see Billington *et al.* 2013; Bundesen *et al.* 2020). Arts in health has notably flourished in the UK, but also in other OECD countries such as

Sweden, Australia and Denmark (Jensen 2013; Fancourt & Finn 2019).

In the arts and health field, activities are sometimes grounded in the presumption that it will enhance participants' well-being, through an enhancement of their social and empathic skills (Fancourt & Finn 2019: 9-10). This presumption has been investigated particularly with regard to literature reading, where cognitive and psychological empirical studies have focused their attention on how literature reading can train empathy: the ability to imagine and understand what other people think and feel (Turner & Felisberti 2018; Mar & Oatley 2008; Hsu *et al.* 2014; Bal & Veltkamp 2013). It has been discussed if such training can consequently enhance 'pro-social' behaviour (Johnsen 2012; Koopman & Hakemulder 2015), or as Mar and Oatley put it, make readers 'acknowledge the common humanity present between ourselves and dissimilar others' (2008: 181). A related field is narrative medicine, which has promoted the reading of literature in order to make medical workers better at recognising and attending to patients' stories (Charon *et al.* 2017).

The link between reading, empathic understanding and so-called pro-sociality has also been explored in the field of philosophy. Here, Martha Nussbaum, inspired by both Aristotle and Adam Smith, suggested that engagement in literature (and other kinds of art) enhances readers' moral faculties through a training of their 'literary imagination' (Nussbaum 1995). Building on a somewhat narrow literary canon, exemplified by Charles Dickens and E.M. Forster, Nussbaum claimed that novels are exceptionally suited to allow readers to, in their imagination, go through experiences and situations that are not their own. Experiencing these literary adventures makes readers more attentive to the adventure of their own lives, and enhances their 'moral imagination' (1990: 148). Novels can thereby help build empathy and compassion, which is highly relevant to democratic citizenship, Nussbaum argued (1995: 10).

The subject of my fieldwork, a literary empowerment programme offering shared reading groups to marginalised young people in Denmark, can be seen as a good example of uses of literature reading to enhance participants' pro-social or moral stance. Below, I will lay out how several of the 14 key readers<sup>1</sup> experienced the reading sessions as a positive feature in their lives, and that they could use the reading group to gain a more resourceful, reflective outlook on themselves and other people. I have also myself experienced increased mental and emotional resourcefulness after reading sessions. I take these experiences of personal change, among my interlocutors and for myself, seriously (cf. Hansen 2015: 62. For a lengthy investigation of the transformative experiences of shared reading, see Christiansen & Dalsgård forthcoming).

However, as alluring as the idea of an inherent moral potential in literature might be, it can easily be disputed. Art scholar Marcia Muelder Eaton noted that artists and theorists continue to connect aesthetics and ethics, even though there are too many counterexamples throughout history of people (Stalin, Mao, SS officers in Nazi Germany) who were avid users of literature and art, but not morally better. Furthermore, there is little evidence that artists are typically kinder than non-artists (1997: 356-357). Can we then keep saying that users of literature are more empathic and thus better equipped to make morally sound decisions than non-users? This conundrum leads me to the question of this article: Is it really a training of empathy – with Nussbaum's words, the 'literary imagination' – that can move fiction readers towards a stronger moral position – or could it be something else?

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms. Some interlocutors and situations have been further 'scrambled' in order to secure their anonymity.

### ***Empathy and reading in anthropology***

To begin to answer that question, let me briefly sketch out important notes on empathy and reading in anthropology. Widely discussed in philosophy and psychology, empathy has been difficult to locate in anthropology. Geertz famously stated that anthropologists should not seek empathic understanding, but instead hermeneutic interpretation (1974). This led to the concept largely disappearing from anthropological debates for several decades (Hollan & Throop 2008: 388). Still unsettled, Hollan and Throop recently dusted off the concept and suggested an initial definition of empathy as reaching a ‘first-person-like perspective on another that involves an emotional, embodied, or experiential aspect’ (ibid: 391-392). I follow Throop’s suggestion that empathy is not a *total* understanding, but rather an embodied, intersubjective mode of engagement, or attunement, which also necessitates that the subject of someone’s empathy opens up towards being understood (2012: 412). I also concur with Kirmayer’s comment that empathic striving necessitates an acknowledgement of the limits of empathy, when the other is experienced as alien, uncanny, and unknown: as radically other (2008: 458).

Even though it has many positive connotations in Western cultures, anthropological studies have made clear that empathy is rarely perceived as a unilaterally good thing: Empathy may be used to hurt or embarrass others (Hollan & Throop 2008: 389). Operating with a different understanding of the concept, Bubandt & Willerslev have pointed to the ‘dark side’ of empathy; that the empathic faculty can be used tactically to deceive others (2015). These anthropological studies allow a critical light on Nussbaum’s proposed connection between empathy and morality. Yet, empathy always exists within a political and moral context (Hollan & Throop 2008: 393; Kirmayer 2008: 361). In this article, I will attend to a still underexplored question regarding empathy, posed by Hollan and Throop: What social, cultural, political and economic

conditions foster or suppress the development and use of empathy? (2008: 386).

Tending to the moral context, I aim to examine what actually happens in the supposed move from fiction reading to an improved moral attitude.

Just like empathy, fiction reading is understudied in anthropology. Adam Reed notes that historical and ethnographic studies since the 1980s have put their emphasis on different kinds of readers' meaning-making; illustrating the agency of readers as they come to understand and interpret the content of different texts (Reed 2018: 36-37).

Along this line, a major focus in literary anthropology has been how the anthropologist as a reader can reach a more nuanced understanding of certain societies through reading literary works and authors (see Rapport 1994; Fagerlid & Tisdell 2020). Thus anthropological studies of reading and literature have, in a way not dissimilar from other disciplines, explored the links between reading and reaching a first-person like perspective on characters, authors, worlds conjured up in texts, or 'real' societies reflected in the texts.

Yet, there are tendencies towards another focus, moving beyond readers' use of texts as a kind of prism for interpretations and understanding of what already exists, towards the way the reading (and writing) of different genres take part in the production of certain domains or spaces in society (Rosen 2019b: 9; Rosenbaum 2019) or ritualized realities (Csordas in Boyarin 1993b: 215); and how reading can serve as an intervention in everyday life (Radway 1991). This focus acknowledges how literary texts also come to act upon and transform readers (see Reed 2018: 38). Such investigations have shown that reading is not a single homogenous activity, but always culturally and historically determined and socially embedded (Boyarin 1993a: 3; Rosen 2019a; Long 2007).

Examining one such particular reading culture in Denmark, a literary empowerment programme, I find that moral change happened not through an

enhancement of empathic understanding in itself, but rather through participation in the moral framework of the programme. This framework, called a *litterært frirum* (literary free space) by my interlocutors, contained both empathic striving and making space for otherness, when other readers or literary texts were unfathomable. I connect the free space ideal to Scandinavian ideals of spaciousness and equality (Krøijer & Sjørlev 2011) and Scottish Enlightenment thought on civil society (Smith 2002 [1759]; Silver 1990; Carey 2017; Nussbaum 1995). I argue that the programme constitutes what Zigon has called a moral and ethical assemblage: a local morality expressed in institutional and public discourse and embodied dispositions, which result in certain ethical techniques and practices. Such assemblages contain traces from a diverse set of moralities and discursive traditions (2011; also Collier & Ong 2005).

In the following, I will briefly introduce my field and methodology, after which I will turn to the moral and ethical assemblage that the literary empowerment programme presented. I connect this assemblage to relevant historical and present-day ideas on empathy and civil society spaces. I will then illustrate how the literary free space played out in practice, with empirical examples from the programme. I will end with a concluding discussion of how this contributes with new insights to the anthropology of literature and reading. Let me therefore turn to the fieldwork.

### **Fieldwork in a literary empowerment programme**

In 2018-2020, I conducted fieldwork in a *Litterært Empowerment Program* (Literary Empowerment Programme), setting up *guidet fælleslæsning* (shared reading groups). The programme was run by the organisation *Læseforeningen* (The Danish Reading Society, DRS). Five members of the DRS team were involved in the programme, where young people, who would label themselves as *psykisk sårbare* (mentally vulnerable), could choose to join a weekly reading group in one of the large cities in Denmark. If



they were interested, they could sign up for a three-day training course and become so-called *læseguider* (reading guides). The stated goal of the programme was to create empowerment by strengthening social relationships, developing the sense of agency and enhancing the level of meaningfulness for readers. The fieldwork was carried out in a collaborative project between a group of researchers and DRS. Fellow anthropologist Line Dalsgård and I took part in the project with an interest in the relationship between narratives, imagination and selfhood among the reading group participants. Scrutinising the connection between empathy and morality within this programme thus also forms part of a critical examination of my own position as a researcher in this project.

The article builds on my fieldnotes and recordings from three reading guide training courses, during which a total of 14 readers were trained to lead their own groups. I also draw on participant observations in reading groups and events, as well as interviews, where readers reflect on their experiences. In theories of situated learning, training activities allow newcomers to go to the backstage of a practice, and see what goes on in the engine room. Such situated learning of skills and ideals leads to negotiations and reflections on actions and values in the ‘community of practice’ that the newcomers are initiated into (Wenger 1999: 91). I therefore see the reading guide training activities as a well suited setting to gain ethnographic insights into the values and ideals of the programme with perspectives from different actors.

DRS is a voluntary social organisation that provides a cultural activity. It was initiated in 2010, inspired by the British organisation *The Reader*. Groups exist within different institutions such as libraries, eldercare centres, homeless shelters and psychiatric wards. Some groups are open for anyone to join. Others have target groups such as people struggling with loneliness. The programme studied here did have such a target group: mentally vulnerable people between 18 and 35. However, the components

of shared reading are the same for almost all groups. Basically consisting of reading aloud and discussing the texts openly along the way, facilitated by a reading guide, shared reading is precisely hailed as a method that can bring literary experiences to anyone, no prior experience necessary (Billington *et al.* 2013: 27). The two reading groups I draw on here met once a week, except for holidays. One met at a cultural community centre in Aarhus, and one in the offices of DRS in central Copenhagen. Both were homely, cosy places with assorted vintage furniture and ceramics, books scattered around, and literary quotes written on windows or walls. Here we read many kinds of texts, which were typically chosen by the reading guide of the day. Though there were no strict rules spelled out regarding what you could bring, critically acclaimed texts and geographical breadth was favoured by most guides.

A remark on the target group is needed here. The term mental vulnerability gained ground as a social category in Denmark during the 2010s. It has sporadically been used by welfare institution actors, NGOs, users of psychiatry, news media and politicians. Most of the readers did not use the term actively to characterise themselves. But mental vulnerability, as a necessary foundation for joining a group, covered experiences such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, voice-hearing, psychoses, personality disorders, eating disorders or autism. The majority had been in contact with health or social services due to their mental health issues. Participants often had experiences of not being as social as one would wish, being more sensitive than desired, and worrying that one might not be able to find a job or finish an education (see Christiansen 2020; Christiansen & Dalsgård forthcoming).

To bring a typical example, Bjørk, in her early 30s, got diagnosed with a serious mental health disorder five years prior to joining the empowerment program. In the months leading up to this, she had not been able to speak with her parents about her

symptoms, this was just not something they did in her family, she explained. During the onset of her disorder, she dropped out of her university studies and later took a more hands-on education as a medical secretary. She was still in therapy. When she was employed, it was hard to find time for the reading group, but at the time of the reading guide course, she had time, as she was momentarily unemployed. Living on the outskirts of Aarhus, she took the course because she wanted to ‘work on herself’, and dreamt about starting up a reading group for people like herself, in her local area.

As a second example, Henriette was in her late 20s, and currently attended therapy for milder mental health problems. In an interview, she called herself an ‘overthinker’ and perfectionist. She lived alone in an apartment in Copenhagen, and studied an arts programme at university. Henriette was a hungry reader and had a wide social circle, with whom she shared both a passion for literature and book recommendations. She had a hard time accepting the ‘vulnerability’ label in the programme, as she felt that it only represented parts of what she was; it made her feel ‘pigeonholed’. Having sketched out this background picture, because the empowerment programme was strictly *not* framed as a therapeutic setting, but, on the contrary, as a space where you did not need to work on yourself, the focus of this article is not mental vulnerability, but how the readers and DRS understood and experienced their practice and values as *litterære frirum* (literary free spaces).

### **Making literary free spaces**

During the fieldwork, I encountered quite a lot of information about what the reading group space was like: Pamphlets, PR videos, course material, webpages and members of the small secretariat of DRS spoke about meeting in ‘litteraturens rum’ (the space of literature) or the chance to have a ‘litterært åndehul’ (literary vent) or ‘litterært frirum’ (literary free space). Here there was room for everyone and no expectations were placed

on the readers. As an example, the welcome letter for the reading guide training course said<sup>2</sup>:

[...] the ethos of DRS's approach is that literature can become the object of human realisation, when we put personal experience in the centre of our reading experiences. Throughout the course we are occupied with making great reading experiences and room for reflection through conversation and observation.

Here, readers could meet each other openly on a more human level: they did not have to talk about mental vulnerabilities, and they did not need to perform as they did in Danish society.

As another example, in a joint discussion at a training course, the teacher Rikke made a point of the free space ethos: The course attendant Laura had suggested that she would start her future reading group with an introduction round, where people could tell about their current occupation. But Rikke would not advise this: 'I usually make a point of not introducing what we do in our daily lives. Otherwise people might think it's yet another space where they need to perform', she said, and later continued: 'After all, this is a nice space to be in, because it is just a human space, and we meet in the group as human beings'. Here, people appreciated that they were allowed to react and show emotions, she said.

Reading group participants also spoke a lot about their experiences of a caring, yet free space in the reading group. The guide Fie talked about how the group was her own 'laboratory' where she could try out different things without severe consequences, for example talking more than usually, as it was not really connected to 'the rest of her life'. She kept a thin membrane separating the reading group from other contexts.

Solveig talked about being free from straining expectations: when she said something in

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Danish are done by the author.

the reading group, it was taken for what it was, and not as an expression of some underlying challenges due to mental illness. Here, she could give the impression she wished. Though she had been a very keen pupil, she had had to end school in her late teens, due to the onset of a mental health disorder. Now, she got headaches from reading, because of her medicine, and she found academic pursuits challenging. She had tried audio books and podcasts, but it did not really work for her. The reading group was therefore an appreciated literary input in her daily life. She said she loved how the group was 'et godt rum' (a good space) to have her own ideas of the text challenged by other inputs, opinions and versions of things.

In the following example, the guide Gerd wrote about how the ambiguity of literary texts provided a free space for her<sup>3</sup>. She wrote about a short story by the Danish writer Pia Juul, 'Rosas Mor' (Rosa's Mother) (2005). In the story, Rosa's mother suddenly becomes apathetic after a phone call, where she learns that she has lost her brother. In a paradoxical way, Gerd felt free to judge what happened in the text as she pleased, while this allowed her to leave a judgmental attitude behind in her everyday life, towards other people as well as herself:

Some of the things I took with me from the text were the many dualities at play. In the text, there was Rosa's mum, who was happy and smiling, but she changed completely and then the father had to take over, and that created a completely different dynamic. I often think about, when I see people walk down the street, that you really don't know anything about how they feel. You can forget that in this Instagram culture. It can be good to step back and say "I have no idea where you come from or what you carry in your bag". I often think this duality is presented in the literature, and it's good for me to be reminded of it. I can have a feeling of being judged when I'm out in the public space, in Brugsen [a supermarket] for

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<sup>3</sup> In connection with DRS editing an anthology of texts.

example, then it's me who's being judged, and then it's not so much about other people, or how they feel.

But in the literature, it's different, there you can be an asshole towards the text, be critical about it, and that's alright. The text provides a *frirum* (free space) where I don't feel like I'm being judged.

Reading guide Amalie noticed how, for many readers, the group had become a kind of 'safe space', as she called it. She told me about how she had met with another reader, Laura, outside of the group, for an evening of wine and good food. Amalie had been surprised that no other readers joined. Maybe they found it came too close, she contemplated:

It is a kind of safe space that people don't want to break. Some would probably think it transgresses their limits [to meet]. I can see that some people don't have a need to mix these different spaces together.

Like Gerd, she mainly ascribed the literature the role of creating a comfortable space for her, with no prejudiced expectations. With her friends, she was Amalie who used to be well and then got serious mental health issues, but in the reading group she felt free to be just Amalie. When she began in the group, she had difficulties concentrating, which meant she mainly read poetry. Sometimes she would pack her bag and go to a literary café, or, in the summer time, to a historical park, to read in solitude. It was one of her small rituals she had invented to create a sense of safety. Her life was 'a little bit empty' at that time, and, like several other readers, she was looking for a community and intellectual stimulation without a performance pressure.

On a practical level, the 'free space' of the shared reading groups was constituted by various necessary elements (for a characterisation of shared reading see Dowrick *et al.* 2012). In the empowerment programme, it typically played out like this: five to ten readers sat in a circle in a demarcated area. There was tea, coffee and snacks. Each

reader had been handed photocopies of a prose text and a poem, which were read aloud and discussed, led by the reading guide, for 1-2 hours. The authors were not revealed until the end of the reading. Additionally, the group had a tacit agreement on how to approach the texts and talk about them, helped along by subtle instructions from the reading guide (see Steenberg *et al.* forthcoming): basically, personal experiences could be included in the discussion of the texts; there were no right or wrong views, and the group should not ‘evaluate’ the texts, aesthetically or morally, but focus on experience and open interpretation. My study builds further upon on earlier ethnographic studies of collective reading practices, which has shown to bring an extra layer of dialogue between readers, on top of the dialogism between text and reader (Boyarin 1993b: 212; also Long 2007). Researchers of shared reading in England have noted how the text, because it is presented ‘on-sight’, works as a strong force in the reading group. It draws people in ‘like a vocal, embodied presence that offers a centre towards which participants can gravitate’, Longden *et al.* write (2015: 115).

However, while the reading group was generally described as a positive free space, and the basic elements were quite clear, it could still be difficult for readers to express what was actually going on in that space. I have discussed with readers several times the puzzling fact that even though people dealt with some heavy issues, and the texts were often quite gloomy, the reading was almost always an energising event of the week. Texts, readers and characters were mixed together: Tine typically remembered a *reading* as a blur of things said, sentences read aloud, the way the text looked on the photocopied A4 sheet, and a mood. Henriette talked about an acceptance of foggy not-knowing in the reading group, while at the same time having warm feelings towards her fellow readers. Knowing that they could all categorise themselves as mentally

vulnerable, she described the idea that she should be able to ‘rumme’ (tolerate – in Danish, ‘rumme’ literally means to make space for) not always fathomable reactions:

It’s also just because I know that in this reading group, we’re all dealing with something. I don’t necessarily know what, but I know we are there if we can categorise ourselves as mentally vulnerable. So, there is a ‘omsorg’ (solicitude). Even though I can’t understand them, I know that there is something that makes them think like that, and of course I should be able to ‘rumme’ (tolerate) that.

As a reading guide, you were responsible for creating spaces for others that were free from the expectations of everyday life, and somewhat in opposition to the rest of society: a caring space where literary worlds and social roles could be explored openly. The freedom from demands was created through new tacit norms and direct instructions, learned gradually along the way; for example, not asking about people’s occupation or questioning their viewpoints. New reading guides gradually acquired the values of spaciousness in the empowerment programme. These values also meant that, in addition to the experiences of understanding and comfort, the readers (and myself) often ruminated a lot about what our fellow readers actually felt and thought in different situations; they sensed that they sometimes unwittingly impacted another reader deeply. Or, they simply went separate ways after a reading had ended, with an implacable discomfort from the texts they had read. Experiences of both understanding and otherness were placed within the overall ideal in the program of creating literary free spaces.

Two years into my fieldwork, at a summer meeting in the programme, I presented to DRS members and readers how I had gradually identified a kind of utopian free space ideal in the programme. Rikke, a key DRS member, completely agreed, and shared some thoughts on what these spaces meant to her:

Some of these *psykiske sårbarheder* (mental vulnerabilities), all of these things you can develop, which are also developed in a societal context [...] we had an idea



that in the reading group, we can create some spaces, you can call them safe spaces, but in reality, they're not very safe, because you never know what the reading group will bring, but you can create some spaces that are nice to be in, because there are no specific demands as to what you should bring [...] It's so obvious that we're somehow creating free spaces, which also train our muscles to dare to create free spaces for ourselves when we step out into the world afterwards.

### *Ideas of civil society in Scandinavia and Europe*

The literary empowerment programme was not based on a strictly defined moral system. Each participant had their own ideas about what the practice was about. The two leaders of the programme were more explicit about its societal contribution, while the reading guides often talked more narrowly about their personal experiences and perspectives on their particular reading group. Still I have identified some shared values and practices.

In a study of globalisation, Collier and Ong introduced the term 'global assemblages', which means a politically or morally charged area, containing inherent tensions, and influenced by local and specific economic, ethical, political, technical factors (Collier & Ong 2005: 10-12). Their work was developed further by Jarrett Zigon, into what he called 'moral and ethical assemblages'. With this, he meant a conglomeration of moral values 'uniquely constituted by the influence of distinct and particular sociohistoric trajectories, religious traditions, and problematics' (2011: 46, also Zigon 2010: 4). I suggest that, hailing the free space ideal, the empowerment programme constituted such an assemblage. And I suggest that this assemblage can be understood to constitute the 'social order' (Hollan & Throop 2008: 393), in which empathy, and the limits thereof, played out. I will now briefly turn to the 'sociohistoric trajectories' that I found were most clearly manifested in the programme. First, I

connect it to traditional Scandinavian values of freedom and equality. I then go on to discuss Scottish Enlightenment ideas on empathy and civil society.

In colloquial Danish, the term *frirum* (free space) signifies breaks from work, having a fun hobby, carving out leisure time, or meeting in a community of like-minded people. The term reflects traditional Scandinavian values of spaciousness and autonomy, along with equality and sameness (see Gullestad 1989). In a study of a youth movement in Copenhagen, Krøijer and Sjørsløv showed how the notion of ‘free space’ expresses Danish values asserting the individual’s right to be different and to creative flourishing, in the public spaces of a modern, liberal democracy. These values combine with another set of strong values of communality and equality, which, paradoxically, means that Danes simultaneously strive to ‘make room’ for people’s differences (‘forskellighed’) *and* to be careful not to take up too much space at the expense of others. Freedom and equality are thus inherently conflicting values, which means that they can be difficult to uphold in practice in the civil sphere (Krøijer & Sjørsløv 2011).

The cherished spacious Danish civil sphere did not emerge by itself, but has been politically nurtured throughout history. As the modern Danish nation state consolidated in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the government supported civil cultural associations in order to *danne* (educate) citizens. The idea was that strong, enlightened citizens would help build a strong nation. This has meant that in Denmark, while civil society actors have often challenged the political status quo, they have simultaneously been intertwined with public institutions and supported by the policies of changing governments (Kaspersen & Ottesen 2001: 125). From the beginning, reading and literature played a crucial role in building the Danish nation state. Some of the first civil associations were literary societies – for example *Læseselskabet 1835* (The Reading Society of 1835), which mainly consisted of liberal bourgeois and academic members

(Kaspersen & Ottesen 2001: 109). In contemporary Denmark, the metaphorical spaciousness of civil society is often linked to particular practices or places: In Krøijer and Sjørlev's case, the free space metaphor was linked to a physical house, *Ungdoms-huset* (The Youth House) which was seen as in contrast to the rest of society, even though it was owned by the municipality (2011: 87). Recently, the free space term has been used to describe therapeutically oriented participatory arts projects run by or in collaboration with public institutions (Jensen 2019; Bundesen *et al.* 2020: 144). I suggest that the way DRS strove to create concrete literary free spaces built on a long tradition of supporting the 'spacious' civil sphere of Danish society through cultural practices.

Nikoline, who co-ran the empowerment programme and was a passionate reader, mentioned in an interview that she read Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge* during university, and had been occupied with Nussbaum's idea that literature reading could provide a space for philosophical reflection and emotions. Reading Nussbaum had been a main reason for joining DRS. To recap, Nussbaum took inspiration from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Nussbaum 1995: xvi) and I will dive a bit into these Scottish Enlightenment ideas, as I recognise them in the free spaces ideal in DRS – and because they particularly dealt with the role of empathy and morality in civil society.

The Scottish Enlightenment thinkers (notably Hume, Smith and Ferguson – I focus here on Smith) have often been read as proponents of hard individualism. But they were actually occupied with how the emergence of commercial society meant that space could be freed up for the disinterested friendship relationship (Carey 2017: 47; Silver 1990: 1480; Smith 2002 [1759]). In the ideal model, friendship was egalitarian, voluntary and based on what Smith called 'sympathy' (which equals the contemporary

use of the term ‘empathy’), as opposed to previously being based on gains or necessity. The heart of friendship was, in this view, trust, intimacy, and the progressive unveiling of oneself to someone else. Meetings with strangers in the civil domain represented potential, or extended, friendships (Carey 2017: 50; Silver 1990: 1482). In the conception of liberal modernity, the unlimited potential for sympathy served as a kind of social lubrication in society, and entailed a move from ‘tribal brotherhood to universal otherhood’ (Nelson in Silver 1990: 1485; Carey 2017: 52).

The shared reading groups were supposed to be ‘spacious’, following Scandinavian values of autonomy and equality. Furthermore, they were framed as a kind of sympathetic meeting between strangers. I suggest that these literary free spaces as such constituted miniature spaces of civil society, representing an attitude and logic quite similar to those of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, who emphasised the courteous attitude of a potential friendship in the civil domain. As Amalie reflected at one point on the strange status of semi-friendship between readers: ‘I still think about how open we are towards each other... it’s a weird in-between status. We are not friends but we share a lot of stuff’. Readers and members of DRS reported on how they could take this sympathetic attitude with them out into the rest of society.

Overall, using the term *frirum* (free space), DRS invoked a combination of Scandinavian and Enlightenment ideas, of the possibility of constructing a civil society space, outside market, political, family or other straining logics, where citizens were free and equal. The free space of the empowerment programme was in between a meeting of total strangers and the personal friendship; readers were possible subjects of each other’s empathy. This space was discursively contrasted with ‘society’, which was marked by stress, a superficial Instagram culture and having to perform various inauthentic roles.

## **Empathy and otherness**

I will now turn to how the free space ideals played out in practice, before ending with a concluding discussion of the relationship between literature, empathy and morality. The following scene stems from an intense day at a reading guide course in the programme. I wish to show how empathy was strived for and did take place, but that the limit of empathy was also foregrounded.

The readers Emil, Tine, Amalie, Gitte, Fie and Laura had chosen to take this particular course to become reading guides and, in time, conduct their own readings. Before meeting on the course, readers had been asked to bring copies of poems they liked, to be used for practical exercises. They all had an interest in literature and read many different genres on their own, from young adult to Danish classics such as Tove Ditlevsen. For example, Gitte had attended writing courses and several other reading groups and literary workshops. She used to read excessively when she was younger, and was fond of Scandinavian children's books and Nicole Krauss, but now, being engaged in university studies again, her reading time was sparse. She got many of her reading suggestions from a friend she had met during her studies. Laura, on the other hand, got most of her literary inspiration from her former high school Danish teacher, whom she still met with occasionally. Laura was fond of Kate Morton and classics such as Jane Austen and Henry David Thoreau, and just like Gitte, she was member of another reading group outside the programme.

*'Mostly because I miss you so and cannot bear that you are happy...'*

It was a long February Sunday. We sat around a wooden oval table in the upstairs office of a trendy café, in a railway town in Funen. About every half hour, trains stopped right outside the windows and passengers heading for Zealand or Jutland crowded on the platforms. We were drained, having worked all of yesterday and begun around nine this morning. But the presence of homemade cake and strong

coffee in vintage ceramics kept us going, and the room was often filled with overtired laughs. Notes, short stories and poems were scattered on the table, along with guidelines on how to choose texts, how to use your voice reading aloud, and how to ask good questions.

To complete the course, every participant was to act as reading guide and conduct a final *læsning* (reading). It was Emil's turn. He was sitting awkwardly on top of the table, which meant he had a hard time getting eye contact with everyone during the reading. He passed around his poem, a copy for each of us, from a poet, Cecilie Sund Kristensen, I later found out he held dearly.

'I will happily lick all of the ink/off your chest/Sink it/so everything in me/becomes pitch black' he read, slowly, with rehearsed breaks and clear pronunciations. The poem was not long, four stanzas in total. It depicted an 'I' that missed a 'you', even though they had had an unhappy relationship. Emil finished: 'I will do/everything you ask me to/if you will do one thing for me/To become yourself again/Mostly because/I miss you so/and cannot bear/that you are happy'. The poem immediately struck me with its directness and intimate images. I was not sure I liked it. I thought the line breaks were demonstratively pathetic, but at the same time it got to me. Like a pressure on the top of my lungs, making it harder to breathe. It reminded me of a buried, desperate feeling. There was a long silence. 'Hm...', Rikke, the teacher of the course, said. Silence again.

'How do you perceive their relationship?' Emil asked us. He was a laidback guide, mostly listening to what we had to say and asking some follow-up questions. The talk became increasingly elevated and the group moved towards a consensus: We all knew these kinds of relationships, mostly from our teenage years, and were relieved that we had left the dramatic emotional rollercoaster and unhealthy dependence – even though Rikke claimed that there was also a kind of communion in the poem.

'The way she sinks is, takes it all in... that makes me think it's unhealthy', said Tine.

'I'm happy that I've left this kind of relationship, right?' Fie said at some point. We laughed and agreed.

'You fear a bit that the "I" is locked in this position... it's probably not very healthy for her', Amalie said.

But then Rikke spoke again. She said that the talk was becoming normative. That we all *could* recognise these feelings, and it was okay to have them, because they were part of the universal human experience. It was easy to say that we were all grown-ups now, but there was also something amazing about just letting go and

being completely occupied by another person. But even though Rikke suggested that we left the normative talk, we kept circling around the ways this relationship was just unhealthy. That the ‘I’ was too dependent on the ‘you’ and could not move on. ‘Thank you’, Emil then said and abruptly ended the talk.

Facilitated by Rikke, the group discussed how the reading went<sup>4</sup>. Amalie said she had felt the poem could have been written by herself. That was when I noticed that she was crying silently. She had also felt that the talk had become a bit judgmental, she said, but found that Emil handled it alright. In the moment, we did not ask her about how the poem reflected her own experiences. The air was tense, and people were still somewhat caught up in what the poem had said. Rikke suggested that Emil could have finished by reading the poem again. ‘In that way’, she said, ‘you could have given the final word to the text itself’. She told us that it was crucial to her that ‘no one should pass judgement over a text’.

This reading presents an intensive version of the intersubjective mechanisms of shared reading – probably because the text spoke very directly about taboo emotions and relationships. As readers we imagined ourselves in the shoes of the ‘I’ of the poem and talked about it, and then imagined the experiences that the other readers talked about. Shared reading was thus a kind of game of shifting perspectives. When Emil’s poem spoke of a lost love, we could gain a sense of some of it. However, some things were not decipherable: in the text itself, for example, the depiction of licking black ink off a chest and becoming pitch black was strange. Furthermore, the group had unwittingly set standards for ‘good relationships’, which seemed to be difficult for Amalie to live up to. Afterwards, she pointed towards her own past when she said that the poem could have been written by herself. We listened, sensed her sadness, and Rikke gave her a hug. But otherwise, we kept a respectful distance and did not ask exactly *how* the poem could

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<sup>4</sup> The exercises were also supplemented by 1:1 follow-up talks with each course participant that I did not participate in.

have been written by her – or if she was the ‘I’ or the ‘you’.

In line with the described Enlightenment ideal of equality and empathy between strangers in civil society (Silver 1990: 1485), the literary free spaces of the readings entailed empathic understanding, while it also made evident other people’s otherhood, and thus the limit of this game: reading sessions showed us experiences that we could not understand, and readers were sometimes, unwaringly, not empathetic towards each other, but judgmental. Furthermore, as Rikke explained during Emil’s reading, no reader could ultimately judge on behalf of other readers, whether the relationship depicted was really unhealthy, or whether it was just a fantastic teenage romance. This norm of equality of opinions entailed an unsolved ambiguity regarding what the literary texts *really* spoke of, deeming the text as ultimately ‘other’.

Later, I talked to Emil about his reading guide initiation ritual at the course. He was surprised that the poem had spurred such a wild talk. He noted Amalie’s reaction, and how he saw it as an exercise in upholding an open space for reactions:

You learn at the course to embrace [reactions], so the person feels seen, but also protected. It’s a delicate balance. I’m here if you need it. It’s just a completely different role when I’m the reading guide [as opposed to participant]. I actually thought it was pretty easy. Because it was not about overthinking it. Just being there, *give plads og rumme* (giving space). I felt that she mostly just needed *plads* (space).

Because of the possibility of strong reactions, Emil explained how he tried to be careful not to choose texts that explicitly dealt with vulnerable topics such as schizophrenia, rape or abuse. But the catch was that reading guides could not possibly know what other readers reacted to. This quote about a reading, from another reader, illustrates this:

It was also quite interesting because there were so many different interpretations of the text in the reading group. I think it depended on your values, because there



were themes connected with family, money, work and love. It was fun to see how you're touched by different things, and that this determined how eerie, positive or negative you perceived [the text].

Consequently, guides could try to avoid stepping on other readers' toes, while realising that it was practically impossible. People were often affected, but in the programme, this was okay, as it was not supposed to be only pleasant.

I will include two more significant examples of the simultaneous presence of what I call empathy and otherness in the reading groups of the programme. At another reading guide course, reading guide Bjørk had experienced an odd sense of 'being on a different wavelength' than the others. We had read a short story about a woman who lived alone and slowly moved towards what in clinical terms might be called a psychotic state. An increasing amount of dirt, junk and bugs piled up in the woman's apartment. The text was 'good', but Bjørk had felt 'very very alone [...] More alone than with people' in that reading. Because she had had some similar experiences as the female character some years ago, it had been strange to sit and talk about the condition of the character in the reading group. She had not said much.

In yet another reading, I had previously interviewed Gitte about her mother's alcoholism, and how that was one reason for her current struggling with her mental health. One day in June, we read a story that included a scene of heavy drinking in a bar. Here are some (slightly polished) fieldnotes from that day:

Ohh, but I said something stupid. Because the text gave it straight from the shoulder with an alcoholic-like main character, and I know of Gitte's personal experiences with alcoholism. And I still brought up the subject, talking about how people hang out and drink at the pub where I live, because we had discussed if the scene and the characters were a caricature or realistic. Then I regretted and kept quiet. Luckily, Sigurd and Solveig smoothed out the conversation, especially Solveig, saying that it was alright and that it was nice for alcoholics to have a place

to meet. Gitte didn't say much [...] Maybe I should write about the nervousness we all feel all the time, about having said something wrong.

Later, I asked Gitte about the situation. She had thought about whether she should say something about her own background at that moment, but it had mostly been interesting to hear the others' views on the subject. Seemingly, not opening up towards empathy was what readers sometimes preferred, maybe even appreciated, in a reading.

To sum up, participating in a reading entailed being confronted with mysterious reactions and emotions of fellow readers or literary characters, and at other times yourself not opening up or feeling understood. This might under normal circumstances be embarrassing, but in the literary free space, it was allowed a place to exist. Within this setting, readers accepted that you could not know what the sometimes-strange literary story was 'really' about, nor how or why it might be interpreted as being about family, money, work, love or something completely different by the other readers. My final example further illustrates how, moving towards this acceptance, readers and reading guides sometimes bumped into corrections or tensions, when their immediate reactions did not fit into the moral framework.

### *Aftermaths and negotiations*

Some weeks after we had attended the reading guide course in Funen, I met with Laura for a coffee at the cultural community centre to hear about what she thought of it. She was heading off for another appointment, so after a little less than an hour, I tried to round off the conversation and asked if she had any last comments. This led to an interesting conversation about Emil's poem at the course. As it turned out, Laura had also been deeply affected by it, but she had turned quiet in order not to upset Amalie even more. Managing her own appearance had made Laura ponder the inaccessibility of the other readers. And it made her wonder what impression she actually gave in the reading group. She continued her worries:

‘I sometimes wonder if I give enough space to others... The reading group is a space where I need to know what the others think about me. I don’t normally need that. Of course, it’s a place I come often, and then automatically it becomes important. I think you just don’t know what people really... Sometimes I think a lot about if I accidentally said something or there was a topic that touched people deeply. You have to make sure that you don’t say something stupid which upsets the others... But in a way, there is a kind of distance. That people maybe need, in some way. Which is difficult for me to act in – navigate in. For example, I never think I’ve given anyone a hug. I feel a need to think about it, do I talk too much, am I considerate enough, am I really a bit annoying [...] sometimes it’s nice, if you’ve been together several times, to ask, what do you really think about me?’

Laura laughed, seemingly knowing that asking that was not an option. She went on to reflect on another reading session where we had read a poem by a young Danish poet called Birk Danø called ‘I’m crying because’. The poem repeated different unusual reasons for crying. During the reading, Tine said she could personally relate to the poem: she teared up constantly because of the medicine she took. Laura found it tragicomic, but at the same time she was sad to hear that Tine even had to take medicine: ‘I don’t know what she struggles with. I could tell it was difficult for her to say [...] but she opened up. It made a big impression on me’.

This conversation with Laura illustrates how both explicit and implicit free space norms and ideals of the programme did not just come naturally. Sometimes, norms were hard to accept: for Laura, the norm that you did not hug each other, but kept a polite distance and only revealed bits of yourself was difficult to accept. Other readers talked about the emotional difficulties in accepting that you did not know what the others thought of you. This leads me to a concluding discussion of the moral and ethical assemblage of the empowerment programme.

### **Discussion: fiction reading and moral and ethical assemblages**

I began this article by describing an increasing use of participatory arts. In this context, there are theoretical ideas of fiction reading leading to enhanced empathy, possibly

leading to enhanced moral judgment (see Nussbaum 1990). But based on numerous counterexamples of people who have read literature, but did not have a particularly good moral judgment, I wished to further examine whether fiction reading really can be said to enhance empathy and subsequently our moral sense.

My empirical examples showed how the practice of *guidet fælleslæsning* (shared reading) was not only empathic attunement, but also marked by tensions: unanswered questions about yourself and others, or a sense of ‘being on a different wavelength’ than the others. In the texts, readers met characters, narratives and different authors. Additionally, fellow readers shared their stories, thoughts and feelings, relating it to the texts. All of these elements were sought to be understood in the group, while it was respectfully acknowledged that this was ultimately not completely possible – and that you sometimes did not know about, let alone empathise with, other readers’ experiences. Importantly, the reading groups were not merely safe spaces of unalloyed support, but entailed confrontations with difficult aspects of life, and bearing your thoughts and feelings in solitude. Reactions, such as crying, that might have been awkward in other social circumstances, were left to be. In its unpredictable nature, the literature was a charged element in the readings, presenting both semblance and otherness to us readers.

Revisiting Enlightenment ideas on empathy and civil society (Carey 2017: 49), I suggest that the reading groups were framed as what could be called exemplary spaces of civil society, where readers were free and equal; ‘friends’ in an extended or potential understanding of the term. Meanwhile, people were to some degree kept in a position of strangers and refraining from asking about people’s private lives was seen as a way of caring. In Emil’s words, it was required to ‘just give space’ to people’s reactions. This also mirrors broader Scandinavian values of being tolerant and accepting others’ freedom and right to be different. Sometimes in this framework, *not* empathising, was

the morally good thing to strive for. I would therefore argue, along with recent anthropological studies, that in my field setting, the empathic faculty could neither be said to be 'good' or 'bad' in itself.

The moral norms of the 'literary free space' did not seem to come naturally to readers, nor through the fiction reading itself; rather, readers acquired free space values through activities in the literary empowerment programme. Based on this insight into the contingency of moral values, I suggest that in order to understand how a 'moral training' is brought about through literature, instead of assuming that fiction reading leads to empathy, and this leads to a moral enhancement, we should attend to the moral and ethical assemblages, in which empathy and fiction reading exist.

Not everything in the programme fit perfectly with the two socio-historical currents I identified, and other influences not yet identified might also have shaped it. Following Jarrett Zigon, moral and ethical assemblages are inclusive in the way that they contain sometimes seemingly contradictory discursive influences, the consequences of which are not always recognised by those participating in them (2011: 47). In the particular assemblage that Zigon identifies, a Russian Orthodox drug rehabilitation program, the goal was a complete, moral transformation of the self, influenced by both Orthodox Christian aspects, therapeutic techniques and Soviet traditions of moral self-cultivation (2011: 46). The moral and ethical assemblage of the literary empowerment programme focused on something quite different: Here, the ideal seemed to be to change *society* and make it more spacious and thereby more tolerable on an individual level. This work was begun by teaching individual techniques that allowed readers to create micro 'free spaces', where values of freedom, equality and an appreciation of differences flourished.

To round off, this allows me to bring some comments to the anthropology of reading: Firstly, my study has illustrated Rosen's point that investigating reading opens up a window into social worlds, as the literary activities tie on to broader value frames and socio-economic conditions. Rosen writes, regarding his own study of an independent book store in Albania, that the local literary and artistic activities related to 'the stresses and strains of everyday life' (Rosen 2019a: 83). In my case, many readers had found the reading groups in their search for a stimulating community without a performance pressure. For the readers who were unemployed and not completing an education, life felt a bit empty. This allows a view into experiences of a contemporary Danish society with a high pressure to perform, where a fulfilled life is dependent on being integrated in or moving towards the job market. Here, fiction reading was seen as one of few valuable activities placed outside of the usual rat race.

Secondly, as noted earlier, a prominent focus in ethnographies of reading has been how fiction reading leads to meaning-making and understanding of what already exists, in or outside of the text. However, this article, along with other recent studies (eg. Rosen 2019b; Rosenbaum 2019), showed the importance of tending to how reading might lead to the production of certain new spaces; demarcated literary domains interweaved in everyday life. Thirdly, my empirical case suggests that the production of such spaces is not achieved merely through coming to understand something or someone during reading, but just as much through encountering and accepting what is unfathomable or radically other.

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