Young Adults in Sweden on Reading Literary Fiction in Print and Electronic Media

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Abstract: In her article "Young Adults in Sweden on Reading Literary Fiction in Print and Electronic Media" Skans Kersti Nilsson analyses 16-25 year old young adults' reflections on the reading of fiction in printed books versus electronic media. In Nilsson's study focus group interviews were conducted to gauge how conversations on the importance of reading literary fiction develop inside and outside the learning environment of school. The results suggest that young adults derive benefit from reading fiction and that they think this activity yields more benefits than reading fiction on electronic media or viewing filmed literature. Results also suggest that participants in Nilsson's study think reading fiction is important for self-insight and personal development.

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Research on the reading abilities and competence of children and young people today is a steadily growing field. This should be seen against the background of the opportunities afforded by digital technology in presenting texts and knowledge in a new way, for example by the linking of images and sound. The rapid expansion of digital media regarding information seeking and learning has contributed to digital reading competence being prioritized and developing quickly. According to the 2012 *Nordicom-Sverige* survey, young adults in Sweden devote approximately nine times more hours to digital media than to reading literature the weekly reading of literature in the 15-24 age group has reduced by 4% (<http://www.nordicom.gu.se/sv/publikationer/nordicom-sveriges-internetbarometer-2012>). The consequences of this digital expansion have begun to cause criticism (see, e.g., Carr; Piper). Research shows that screen-based reading involving scanning of large amounts of data, searching for keywords, non-linear reading, etc., has an influence on traditional reading abilities (see Liu; Wolf). Comparative studies of reading comprehension in different formats such as paper-based textual reading versus screen reading show clear differences in results (see Mangen, Walgermo, Brønnick). Brain activity, characterized by slowness and contemplation, cannot develop deep reading (see Wolf and Barzillai). Moreover, surveys and research show that students do not consider reading fiction to be essential to their lives (see, e.g., Fialho, Zyngier, Miall). Scandinavian longitudinal studies show reduced interest in reading classics and high-brow literature in favor of popular genres like fantasy and crime fiction (see, e.g., Gripsrud, Hovden, Moe; Nordberg).

In the present study I address the question of how today's young adults growing up in the age of the internet and the new media regard the significance of traditional reading of fiction in terms of their own thoughts and opinions. In particular I discuss the reading of fiction in printed books versus electronic media and the benefit the reading of fiction is seen to give (on this see, e.g., Foasberg). Here are some of the questions asked from research subjects: How is the importance of reading fiction experienced? How is reading fiction in book form experienced as opposed to the experience of fiction in other media and formats? How do the respondents regard the importance of reading fiction as far as self insight and personality development are concerned? Following the structure and content of the questions asked, the objective of the study is not on reading habits or preferences, but on young adults' understanding of and arguments on why reading fiction today is of importance and what benefits reading fiction might have for self-understanding. I also posit what Joan Swann and Daniel Allington suggest: reading group members enjoy hearing the views of others and that this affects their own interpretations of books.

The target group for this research project comprised young adults in Sweden in the age range 16-25 years at various levels of high school in the Swedish educational system. This means that literature didactics and pedagogy is located nearest to the objectives of the project. In this connection it is, however, the metacognitive significance and function of reading fiction to which attention is given, independent from aspects of pedagogy at the schools where the project's participants come from. The focus is linked to the technical cut-off point in terms of format in which society finds itself today where the reading of literature seems to have become side-lined in scholarly discourse and pedagogy. At the same time, my study links with research in Sweden and on the international landscape of scholarship (see, e.g., Langer; Molloy; Olin-Scheller; Persson; Tengberg) including the 2011 curricula for Swedish upper secondary schools, which in its description draws attention to the importance of reading literature for personal development: "The core of the academic subject Swedish is language and literature. Language is the primary instrument/tool of man for reflection, communication and development of knowledge. Through language man can express his personality, and with help of fiction, texts of different kinds and different types of media mankind is able to learn about the world surrounding him, his fellow men and himself" (*Läroplan* 160; unless indicated otherwise all translations are mine).

The literary perspective on the importance of reading literature for the development of identity in its broad meaning is described by Rita Felski in *Uses of Literature* as a chain of events staged by "recognition" in the text: "Recognition is about knowing, but also about the limits of knowing and knowability, and about how self-perception is mediated by the other, and the perception of otherness by the self" (49). The invitation of literature to recognition is, in other words, about a form of mirror phenomenon, an invitation to transgressional reflection on the human condition without directly confronting real people. A more connected way of looking at things by means of neurology and the Theory of Mind (ToM), explains the ability of mankind to transfer and foresee the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and yearnings of other individuals. Lisa Zunshine argues in *Why We Read Fiction* that ToM can be transferred to the field of literature and this suggests that emotional engagement, insight, and empathy in the reading of literature can be explained on biological grounds. However, in *Empathy and the Novel* Suzanne Keen argues that a pre-mirrored connection between narrative empathy and altruism is too weak to be used as evidence of ToM. It is doubtful, according to Keen, whether this narrative empathy is capable of breaking into the reader's identity and reaching his/her individuality beyond common values of the collective. This would mean that the hypothesis of a connection between empathy and altruism is not valid for narrative empathy as a result of reading literary fiction.

Scholars of reading in psychometrics investigate the empirically measurable effects of reading literature. For example, David S. Miall and Don Kuiken suggest in "A Feeling for Fiction" that aesthetic and narrative feelings interact to produce metaphors of personal identification that modify self-understanding. Further, according to Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley in "The Function of Fiction," literary fiction communicates experiences and knowledge about social reality. While we are reading fiction, our mental ability to imagine is activated. Reading fiction has, then, the possibility of involving the

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reader's personality, awakening feelings and, given a credible presentation, arousing in the reader insights as to her/his own and other individuals' experiences and reactions. This happens, according to Mar and Oatley, in the following way: while reading fiction the reader is transported to the simulated reality of the story and while the reader is absorbed by the story she/he is also receptive to its reality and thereby his/her own understanding of self: "stories simulate or model the social world through abstraction … the abstraction of experience found in stories evokes, through various mechanisms of that depend on imagery and literary language, a simulative experience that allows for the compelling and efficient transmission of social knowledge … we propose that the idea of fiction as a kind of simulation that runs through our minds will extend our understandings of selves in the social world" (187). Psychometric studies have also shown that the reading of fiction can contribute to a greater degree than factual material, to an increased understanding of the variation of different social abilities, something which can be assumed to contribute to the development of one's own personality towards a better understanding of others (see Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, Peterson; Mar, Oatley, Hirsch, dela Paz, Peterson). Oatley takes this even further in *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*: "In relational conversation, we don't just understand the words said by the other. We understand the other's meanings and intentions. This requires entering others' minds" (158). And results by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano in "Reading Literary Fiction" show evidence that reading literary fiction, apart from reading popular fiction and non-fiction, improves ToM. The main point in this connection is the significance of reading fiction for the development of personality and social orientation, when the cognitive development of young adults is characterized by a growing degree of integration with the surrounding world (see Appleyard). Identity means consciousness of oneself as a unique individual, a self with a sharp border against other individuals. The understanding of self relates in a philosophical perspective to the binary opposites between inner and outer reality. We understand our thoughts, ideas, and feelings as something within us while we see objects in the world upon which these mental imaginings are based, as something external (see Giddens; Taylor).

For my investigation of young adults, focus group interviews have been chosen as a means of studying how conversations on the importance of reading fiction develop inside and outside of the learning environment at school. Among the advantages of the focus group interviews are that they offer opportunities to observe interaction within the group and also the character and formulation of the discussion. One of the advantages of focus group interviews are that one can gain insight into multiple perspectives at the same time (see, e.g., van Peer, Hakemulder, Zyngier). The philosophy of dialogue, particularly Mikhail Bakhtin's speech act theory, is the theoretical basis of the focus group interview (see Marková, Linell, Grossen, Orvig). According to Bakhtin, speech acts comprise "socially shared knowledge" (25) and discussions in focus groups can, then, be seen as dialogues between different ways of thinking and different socio-cultural traditions. Discussions where all participants are active can lead to a constructive interaction where associations from other people's assertions can lead to new insights. In order to achieve the maximum effect, it is recommended that there should be 4-6 respondents for each group. The interviewer should be restrained and not steer the discussion (see Wibeck). For my study, contacts were made with teachers of Swedish in the upper secondary school with responsibility for the university preparation and job preparation programmes, as well as with the folk high school, in order to obtain a good spread across the 16-25 year-old age range. The teachers were informed about the content of the project, how it would be carried out, and told that participation would be voluntary in accordance with research ethics. The information sheet was distributed among the students who were able thereafter to apply to participate in the project. The aim was for each type of school to be represented by three focus groups consisting of nine groups in all. The number of respondents distributed by school type and gender were:

school type	women	men	total
Upper secondary school: preparation program for university	11	3	14
Upper secondary school: job preparation program	10	6	16
Folk high school	7	8	15
sum total	28	17	45

Table 1. Respondents by school type and gender

The focus groups were distributed between types of school and gender as follows:

group name	type of school	women	men	respondents
U1	Preparation program for university	4	1	5
U2	Preparation program for university	4	1	5
U3	Preparation program for university	3	1	4
J4	Job preparation program	4	2	6
J5	Job preparation program	3	2	5
J6	Job preparation program	3	2	5
F7	Folk high school	3	2	5
F8	Folk high school	1	3	4
F9	Folk high school	3	3	6

Table 2. Types of school and gender

Participation was, as mentioned above, voluntary, implying that bias could not be avoided as the participants would most probably already have a positive pre-understanding and attitude towards reading

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fiction. The interviews took place in an isolated environment a small room away from noise in order to encourage concentration on the conversation. Session began with oral and written information about the project and participants signed up in accordance with standard research ethics. Participants responded to the following ten questions (some questions include sub-questions): 1) What carries the most weight in your choice of literature? 2) What influences your choice most? The views of your friends or those of your parents? What about your own values, expectations and idols? 3) And what do you discard? What do you not read at all? Which themes, genres and authors, for instance, come into this category? 4) What is the significance of fiction reading as a whole for you? 5) What is the significance of the writer's linguistic style for your reading experience? 6) What is the difference in terms of experience between fiction reading and fiction in other media such as films, audio books and so on? 7) What particular benefit do you get from stories based on real events as opposed to pure fiction? 8) In what way can reading fiction help people to understand themselves better? 9) Can you give examples of fiction which has opened your eyes to something new? 10) What is the most important benefit fictive literature can provide? Each question was discussed thoroughly before turning to the next. In addition to the lead researcher, an assistant participated with responsibility for technical aspects such as sound recording. Concentration on the interaction between participants was deemed important as were follow-up discussions. When participants agreement was recorded, respondents used aliases in the investigation for ethical reasons. When anyone asked to speak, his/her alias was given in order to facilitate transcription. The following account of results and analysis is based on the three research questions. Each type of school is dealt with individually and respondents are identified both by group name and his/her alias. The main concept of the study, "fiction," was presented and discussed before discussions in the groups began.

In the university preparation groups' identification, changes of perspective and emotional insight are emphasized as characteristic of reading fiction. A participant in group U1 describes reading fiction as an important part of her identity: "I can sit and laugh when I read or I can cry. I make facial expressions … If it is a really good book I don't hear anything when other people talk to me." She has become easily absorbed by literature since childhood. Empathy is, in group U1, uncomplicated and immediate, which is something applicable to big readers generally (see Mar and Oatley). Others in the group, who usually read in order to relax, often feel that the reading of literature comes into conflict with their schoolwork. For this reason participants in group U2 read fiction on the internet, and this does not demand as much patience since it is often a matter of short, striking texts. Those who want a bit of relaxation find it more difficult to become absorbed, since they cannot tear their thoughts away from their schoolwork. In group U3 participants think that reading fictive literature gives people the sort of freedom that can lead to increased empathy and agree that fiction reading gives the reader a feeling of freedom, for example: "I am not exactly shut in on myself, as it were … [but] having access to the imaginings of other people feels very important." This confirms the results of earlier research (see, e.g., Keen; Nussbaum) who have maintained the positive relation between narrative fiction and social abilities.

In the job preparation groups reading fiction is associated with school and thereby regarded as a duty. The majority of the respondents read little or not at all outside school, and this, according to Stig-Börje Asplund in *Läsning som identitetsskapande handling* is the result of social reproduction and controlled group behavior. The usual idea is that books have to be exciting and easily read so that one does not tire. An exception to this kind of thinking is a participant in group J6 (training to be a building technician), who says that reading fiction means a lot to his concentration and composure. He likes, for example, reading Charles Dickens while at the same time listening to music such as Debussy or rock music. This helps him to shut out his surroundings when faced with something like competitive sports. He also emphasizes the importance of reading authors like Dickens for increased wealth of perspective, social and historical knowledge and development of language. His conscious choice is from several points of view an expression of integrity and independent construction of identity. Fantasy and fiction have a practical value in certain types of training where the students are trained in graphic communication, discussion buzzes round the uses of imagination. For a participant in group J5 who dominates the conversation in the group, "imagination is a form of knowledge." Imagination and creativity are a prerequisite for succeeding in one's future working life. She succeeds in convincing her friends in the group by putting fiction and the reading of fiction in a practical perspective and thereby strengthening the positive attitude of her friends (see van Schooten, de Glooper, Stoel).

Students in folk high school classes (groups F7-F9) describe the importance of reading fiction as an influence and being positively affected in the right direction. One can describe this common standpoint as meaning that reading fiction is affirmative and emancipating. Several of the male respondents dissociate themselves strongly from detective and horror stories since these repeat destructive patterns. In this group affirmative qualities of literature were discussed, for example the *Bible* and other religious writings, but also the reading out loud during childhood of, for example, *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (*The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*), which helped F7 to look to the future with confidence.

A common thread running through all three types of school (U, J, F) is the emphasis on the importance of language for understanding and insight in fiction. It must be "good," but should neither be too "formal" nor too "childish." Resistance to reading texts with what the respondents called "formal" language, for instance classics and poetry, can be seen as the result of a lack of knowledge of certain genres and forms as bearers of content and conventions (see Persson). It is interesting, however, that those respondents who set the tone irrespective of school type, evaluate the treatment of language differently. Qualified language treatment is seen as a greater challenge, demanding concentration but also yielding greater rewards. This kind of attitude to reading and experience of different types of texts is a prerequisite for being capable of deep reading (see Wolf and Barzillai).

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All groups irrespective of type of school agreed that the filming of best sellers seldom approached the qualities of the books. The question therefore became one of which order is best: seeing the film first so that one does not spoil the reading experience or in order to have a surprise. In group U3 the discussion went over to the question of fiction and memory and the importance of memory for holding on to the experience, for example: "It is, of course, good that a book remains in one's memory for a long time, i.e. that one can feel the emotions of the book for a long time. One does not usually manage to do this with film." A film experience is regarded as fleeting as compared with reading as one participants in this group suggests, who thinks that the book is the form of media best able to communicate a story and engage the reader. In books one gets to know why characters behave as they do and how they think. The readers themselves can then fill in the way things look, according to him. And also in group J5 participants emphasized the advantages of reading fiction compared with those of film, precisely because one's own imagination and visual images are developed, thereby strengthening one's memory. Participants in group F8 think that empathy and engagement vary between the different media. Words and explanations contribute to inner visualisation, which gives so much more than the rapid sequences of film. One acquires greater understanding of feelings in a book than in a film since the background and its causes are explained. The respondents' comparative observations of fiction in text versus film agree in the three types of school. Reading fiction seems to engage the respondents in a different way from film, when cognitive abilities, such as understanding and imagining, are activated. It is therefore a matter of the structure in the text, whose 'void' the reader gets to fill in (see Iser 64). Overall, a recurring response appeared to be that the concept of fiction was simpler to apply to film than to written text but more difficult to use in digital media. One can discuss whether the medialized text concept supports the students' ever greater need to be able to distinguish fact from fiction, particularly as an almost endless number of different types of text meet the reader today (see Olin-Scheller).

The question of the importance of format for reading fiction was answered in a similar way in all groups. Comparisons between reading in a book printed on paper versus digital was given particular attention. Several participants complained of the lack of concentration and tired eyes as typical of digital reading. The tactile experience of books heightens the reading experience, as for example a participant in group U2 suggests: "They are also fine in a way, to leaf through and hold. This is part of the experience. When one reads a book and sees the actual cover in front of one the atmosphere is heightened, compared with reading on a tablet." The book is valued, in other words, for its sensual qualities and contributing to a special frame of mind. Another participant in group J5 compares traditional textual reading with reading on the social media: "Reading on the social media is far away from traditional textual reading. On the social media it is so much easier and quicker, but the reader reflects less on experiences or genres." No participant in group J8 read fictive literature in e-format and no one showed interest in trying. The "charm" of the book is seen generally not to be replaceable by reading on a screen. In groups F7-79, too, the traditional reading in books was compared with digital reading and one participant described this as follows: "You create while you read" and another suggested that "When I read I want to hear my own voice." Respondents, then, show in their comments that it is important for them that the cognitive and emotional experiences of the content in fictional literature are united with the physical and sensomotorical experience of the book as object and artefact. This is confirmed by experimental reading research, which shows that reading comprehension is worse with computer reading (see Mangen, Walgermo, Brønnick). Deep reading is not achieved in an equivalent way by digital reading (see Wolf and Barzillai).

In the university preparation groups (U1-U3) the importance of reading fiction was regarded as considerable. One grows as a person by opening oneself to new worlds and this gives perspectives on things, "a sound judgement" meaning that fiction is a way of holding on to our humanity, and that one learns about oneself through reading fiction: "It is like seeing an image in the shape of another person" (see Felski; Keen; Zunshine). Even so, most important of all for participants is the experience of acquiring new insights, something one perhaps does not obtain in any other way: "One feels that one is left to oneself and that one actually learns a little more about oneself" and according to another participant "then one is in one's own little bubble in this world. And one feels that one is not alone, as it were," i.e., one comes in contact with one's inner self. Respondents describe self-insight as both an outward reaching movement towards new experiences and perspectives and an inward-looking movement towards contemplation. In group U2 one participant sees reading literature as a reflection, such as is described through the framework of the Theory of Mind. Identification can be used with the object of testing oneself to reflect on how one should react to imagined threats or moral problems (see Hakemulder). Even in the job preparation groups (J4-J6) with generally lower appreciation of reading fiction (see Asplund), this was still stated to be of importance for self-knowledge. In group J5 the world of the imagination is seen as a source of self-insight and personality development, for example: "It feels good to have a developed imaginary world when reality is tough" and "one's imagination will always be one's own and nobody else's. Nobody can take that away from you." This confiorm's Oatley's argumentation that imagination is an area, a "playspace" where creativity is developed. It is a free zone, where readers can make the experiences of the story their own ("Fiction" 55).

Participants folk high school groups (F7-F9), too, saw the great importance of reading fiction and for some respondents it was crucial to their identity, for example: reading literature "gives me better self-confidence, better thoughts about myself" and "when one sees someone who has landed in trouble… then one gets this flashback from everything one has read … How would I react? How am I as a person? Would I offer help? It is this that fiction gives: Opportunities which are not there in reality." This comment not only shows evidence on how reading fiction can modify ethical judgement (see Hakemulder) and self-understanding (see Miall and Kuiken), but also how this becomes a model for community life, for justice and social equality (see Nussbaum). In group F9 one participant suggested

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that insight and identification have an "enormous power," something he likens to a drug. But identification is also problematic for another participant in the same group: if one lacks critical capacity it can and she refers to terrorist Anders Behring Breivik as an example. It can easily happen when one is young and seeking an identity that identification leads to suggestion, think the respondents. This is also something which distinguishes fiction from fact. The influence of fiction on the inner life of the individual is maintained as being stronger. Effects such as language development, identification and taking perspectives such as development of imagination, emotional empathy and affirmation are examples of practical aspects which the respondents, irrespective of gender and school type, expressed as characteristic of reading fiction. The capacity for imagination is a prerequisite for abstract thinking (see Oatley, "Fiction" 29-30), but also for improving the framework of the Theory of Mind and critical social capacity (see Kidd and Castano). This gives the opportunity to think of the future and alternative life choices, as well as possible ethical situations. We can thus assume that the abstract qualities and "usefulness" of fiction reading were confirmed by participants in this study. The ethical dimension came out exclusively in the folk high school classes and this differentiated this category from the young upper secondary school and job preparation programs.

Fiction in different media is regarded as giving different kinds of rewards. A distinguishing feature of literature is that it was seen to offer possibilities for development of personality since the experience of the inner voice came out clearly, as well as the creation of one's own perception in imagination. This came out in all the groups irrespective of type of school or gender, as something specific to reading fiction. Personal "emotional memories" to which reading fiction gives rise were seen to produce longer lasting benefits than experiences of films. Reading fiction is associated with paper books rather than in a digitized format. The conclusion is that fiction on paper takes on a special position among young adults since the book is sensual thus making reading enjoyable. Similar results are found in United Kingdom survey where 62% of 16 to 25-year-olds prefer traditional books over their digital equivalents (see Bury). The meaning of fiction is to tell us what can happen, while facts tell us about what has already happened. This occurs in group F7 in one respondent's suggestion and refers to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Identification, "self-implication" in fiction gives the reader a simulated experience of reality. This is a strong and effective transference of social knowledge, something which extends and changes our understanding of ourselves in the social world (see Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, Peterson; Mar and Oatley). Reading fiction offers experiments in thinking where the reader tries out different roles and their consequences (see Hakemulder). Ways of thinking such as these came out mainly among older respondents at the folk high school groups, but also among respondents in the university preparation groups, and in some cases also among respondents in the job preparation programs.

In conclusion, young adults realize that reading fiction offers opportunities for personal development and self-knowledge. The importance of the focus group interview as a method and data gathering technique has worked well. It should be emphasized that the respondents in all groups were interested in immersing themselves in the questions provided for the study and that they listened to each other and derived benefit from each other's opinions. The discussions showed the same qualities as conversations with characters in reading fiction does: "In relational conversation, we don't just understand the words said by the other. We understand the other's meanings and intentions. This requires entering others' minds" (Oatley, "Fiction" 58). Further, it emerged spontaneously on several occasions that participants appreciated being able to discuss these matters. The overall conclusion is that engagement in reading literature at school would gain from new models of teaching and learning (see Ivey and Johnston). Focus groups developed into reading groups could be one such model possible to develop for the engagement of students in reading fictional literature.

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