CultureCase

How book groups talk about fictional characters as if they were real people

This research was conducted by **Alexander Laffer** at the **University of Birmingham**

Summary

This paper describes a study of five different book groups as they discussed the actions of characters from the novel *The Other Hand* by Chris Cleave. Participants tended to talk about the characters as if they were real people. They did this through seven technical processes identified in the study: automatic empathy, attribution, positioning, stereotyping, extension, mediation and 'synechdocal interpretation'. The last of these is perhaps most important for understanding the value of book groups and the social reading experience. This is because 'synechdocal interpretation' describes how groups of readers take what they have understood about a fictional character and use it to form an empathic bond with other social groups relating to that character that exist in the real world: in this case study that group was female asylum seekers.

The Other Hand was chosen by the researcher on behalf of the book groups

The novel is a story of immigration, altruism and intertwined lives. It was selected for its potential to ‘engage or limit empathy’ among readers.

The act of talking ‘about fictional characters as if they were real' will be familiar to anyone who has participated in a book group

To put it simply, ‘readers gossip about characters, assessing their behaviour against social norms’, which means they both empathise with and judge the

fictional characters. Sometimes this empathy can be quite visceral and intuitive – like wincing at a description of violence. Readers often have limited knowledge of the worlds in which fictional characters operate, but that does not stop them from filling in gaps with their own lived experiences, their assumptions, or imagining from limited data provided in a text. The lack of gender and ethnic diversity in the book groups for this particular study is a reminder that the types of lived experience people draw upon are not necessarily universal or useful for every topic of literature.

Keywords

reading **observation** **literature** **empathy** **UK** **fiction**

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