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Bookshelves in Memories of Reading

In my ongoing dissertation project, I have been analyzing an archival material collected in 2014, in which Finnish people were asked to look back at their lives as readers. In their writings to the archive, many described important literary experiences and their favourite books in different stages of their lives. What they also wrote about was connected with reading as a material and sensory experience. Reading memories were associated with certain situations, places and atmospheres, and books were viewed as objects with smells, feels and sounds that were positive elements of reading moments.

Especially people who emphasized their love for books were attached also to another group of artifacts; the bookshelves. These were considered as obvious and essential parts of readers lives but on the other hand also as objects that were sometimes seen as problematic. In this presentation I will focus on the reminiscences of bookshelves and analyze the different meanings they were given in the context of readership. My theoretical background draws from ethnological studies of material culture, which will be combined with oral history research in the analysis. The presentation will concentrate on the themes of visibility, ownership and the expected futures of bookshelves.

Silja Juopperi

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Significance and change of reading according to Finnish readers' own stories

There is a growing concern for the reading competence among the young people in Finland. Less and less the youth consider reading books as a meaningful recreation, and many view that as a worrying development. Due to the concerns, reading has raised plenty of interest in different academic disciplines. As many studies approach the subject from the outside, focusing on quantitative data, my aim is to explore reading from inside, in the people's own stories and motivations.

In this paper, I will present preliminary results from my analysis of the written recollections of reading experiences archived by the Finnish Literature Society in 2000 and in 2014. There are 12 writers who wrote to both of these collections of memories. I am interested in what these writers told about their reading experiences, what experiences have meant for these writers, which factors have motivated them to read and how reading has changed in the 20th century according to these people's own stories. The purpose of my study is to make these experiences visible and analyse the changes in their writings from the past to the present, partially to understand the situation today. My research is experience-centered and based on thematic narrative analysis of the archived written material. Preliminary themes that are guiding my analysis are concepts of experience, motivation and change.

François Vignale, Brigitte Ouvry-Vial

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The European Reading Experience Database : a contribution to oral history

This paper aims to present the potential contribution of the European Reading Experience Database, <http://eured.univ-lemans.fr>) to new waves in Oral history. Eu-RED is a proof of concept produced within a French National Research Agency funded collaborative project (2014-2017). Its ultimate goal consists in providing both researchers and the broad public with a unique entry point to diverse sources in multiple formats and automatic recognition of testimonies in multiple media and languages about famous as well as anonymous Europeans' reading experiences from the 15thC onwards. This implies collecting new digital data scattered among various private or public archives and reusing existing data and collections (e.g the UK-RED database, <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK>).

Memories and narratives of live as well as fictional reading experiences in films or novels are key sources for the characterization of reading, a complex mental activity that is hard to record and leaves only indirect traces. Beyond the mere gathering of testimonies (audiovisual as well as transcribed), EuRED project aims at developing innovative tools of data description and annotation in order to foster new interpretation and understanding of past and present reading practices. The paper will thus study how two methodological features in EuRED contribute to the analysis of a few sample of representative reading emotions through: a) a standardized (XML-TEI) description allowing indexing and retrieval of large amounts of data ; b) a series of 23 thesauri building up a rich first-ever as well as large scale testimony-based ontology of reading experiences.

While contributing to the recent field of automated reading experiences databases EuRED is paving the way for an integrated framework of approach of both the objective (location, environment..) and subjective (emotions, perceptions) features involved in personal narratives of cultural experiences that could be instrumental for other digital oral history projects outside book and reading studies.

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Childhood Reading Experiences through the Eyes of the Adult Narrator

In the beginning of the 20th century, children's reading was under a strong control of adults. Yet change was slowly happening: children's literature was published at accelerating rate and children were gaining ground in public libraries. In my paper, I analyse childhood reading experiences during the first five decades of the 20th century from the perspective of freedom and restrictions. How did children experience their position as readers?

As material, I use childhood memories from two collections of written library memories, collected by the Finnish Literature Society in 1983–1984 and 2000. In addition, I analyse memories derived from other types of texts: an autobiographical novel by Toivo Pekkanen (1953) and two studies on child and adolescent readers, in which the researcher made use of his own childhood memories together with other material (Bruhn 1920–1921 and 1944). Are there similar characteristics in how childhood reading experiences are described in these texts representing different genres, produced in different times and for different purposes?

I use narrative analysis to approach the obscure borderland between childhood experience and adult narration. Where does narration stop and experience begin? Is it possible, or even desirable, to draw a borderline between them?

References:

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Exploring book ethnography and oral histories of reading in Finnish immigrant communities

Reading cultures in Finnish immigrant communities have many specific features. Books and printed or manuscript documents (letters, memory books, certificates) were brought from Finland by the original immigrants, produced in immigrant communities, or sent from Finland during the later decades. Now these books and documents are an important part of family and ethnic heritage for the third and fourth generation of Finnish immigrants. They are now valued as material objects, and their illustrations and inscriptions are more important than the verbal content, which members of the later generations cannot understand.

My paper is based on archival and field work during the years 2013-2016 in Rockport and Lanesville on Cape Ann, Massachusetts. Finns were recruited to the granite quarries at the end of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th century. The Finnish heritage is maintained in the community, even though most members of the Finnish immigrant community no more speak or read Finnish. In my paper I will present some case studies of "book ethnography", a method which I have developed during my fieldwork. This method involves both visual documentation and interviews, which reflect the family histories related with books and documents.

Christa P. Whitney

Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project, USA

What Will You Do With The Inheritance?: On Interpretations of Legacy

What does it mean to be the son, daughter, or grandchild of a famous writer? How does that fame impact and integrate into one's identity? What if that fame diminishes with the shrinking of the language community in which the writer was known, as with Yiddish writers? Does the decline of recognizability increase or decrease the pride in such an association for the descendant? Some may be overwhelmed with a sense of duty while others have a rarely-mentioned nostalgia for their parents participation in "the intelligentsia." Some may dedicate their lives to translating and publishing the work of the writer while others may never learn to read the work in the original. I examine these questions and other patterns among narrators interviewed as part of the Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project "Beyond the Books: Yiddish writers and their Descendants" series.

The Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project is a growing collection of in-depth interviews with people of all ages and backgrounds, whose stories provide a deeper understanding of the Jewish experience. Since 2010, the project has recorded more than 750 video oral history interviews about the legacy and changing nature of Yiddish language and culture.