

This document includes excerpts from my Research Masters (2018) thesis: “The Cultural Capital of Reading in the Early 21st Century: a Creative and Critical Study”. My university allowed for dissertations that addressed a research question through both the creative and the critical. Creative writing theses usually involve producing a creative work and an accompanying exegesis that examines an aspect of the artist’s practice. Given that the dissertation had to be 50% creative and 50% critical, I decided to use the opportunity to integrate my interests in both creative writing and the sociology of education. The key to taking such an approach was finding supervisors and examiners who supported this method of inquiry. I have not yet decided what approach I will take in my PhD. It is very unlikely that I will revisit this format as the field of creative writing has evolved in the years since I completed this thesis.

Abstract

Advances in technology, as well as shifts in the socio-cultural landscape, have democratised and created new forms of reading so that today the term reading itself is contested. This creative-based thesis, examining how an individual’s socio-economic and education background shapes their reading identity and informs their reading practices, consists of two components: a small anthology of creative writing and a dissertation based on qualitative research.

The stories in the anthology—including traditional and experimental short fiction and a dramatic script—represent the perspectives of an array of characters in diverse settings for whom reading, broadly defined, matters in different ways. In capturing the minutiae and nuance of everyday practices often taken for granted or difficult to capture in traditional scholarly writing, these creative pieces illustrate the tensions constituting the field of reading.

Each piece, and the themes inspiring and embedded in the creative work, are those that emerged from the thesis’s critical component. The dissertation is a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 14 Western Australian teenagers. Using French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital as a point of departure, the study examines and reflects on the ways older teenagers in the



final years of secondary school value various forms of reading in situated contexts. The study finds that reading practices are shaped largely in response to a participant's home and school culture and the value of each practice is context-dependent; yet participants determined the legitimacy of these practices according to institutionally sanctioned notions about reading. Using rich descriptions and imaginative insights to explore how individual dispositions influence and challenge various practices, the thesis makes a combined critical and creative contribution to the existing body of work on reading as a socio-cultural practice.

Epilogue

Developed as one part of a creative and critical thesis and through a Bourdieusian lens, the dissertation has interpreted the findings of semi-structured interviews with 14 older teenagers at Perth metropolitan schools. The two key themes presented in this qualitative study are also embedded in the creative component. Through the latter, I explored, in another language and through different fictional genres, the ways in which reading, in its diverse forms, practices, meanings and significance plays out (or might play out) in our lives and communities.

My overarching claim for this thesis is that the language of critical scholarship (reflective, descriptive, questioning and evaluative) and the language of the imagination (observant, dramatic, emotive, and even satirical) can be read productively alongside, and in conversation with, one another. In this way, we may more deeply appreciate the pervasive, intimate, and inexhaustible ways that reading has played and continues to play in our individual, social and political lives.

Sun, E. "The Cultural Capital of Reading in the Early 21st Century: a Creative and Critical Study." Research Masters thesis., Murdoch University.

