Couceiro, Louise (2023) *'Extraordinary Women', 'Visionary Women' and 'Fantastically Great Women': exploring children's responses to contemporary biographies.* PhD thesis.

https://theses.gla.ac.uk/83837/

'Extraordinary Women', 'Visionary Women' and 'Fantastically Great Women': Exploring Children's Responses to Contemporary Biographies

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April 2023

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Abstract

Having run one of the most successful crowdfunding campaigns in history, Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo published *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women,* in 2016 (King, 2018). Translated into dozens of languages and quickly selling over a million copies, the compendium was a huge success (Laity, 2018). Arguably, it signalled a reinvigoration of what had been considered, by many, a languishing genre: children's biography. Following the success of *Good Night Stories* (Favilli and Cavallo, 2016), titles such as *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (Pankhurst, 2016a) and *Little Leaders: Visionary Women Around the World* (Harrison, 2018) began flooding the market.

In this thesis, I offer an account of my exploration of how eight children, aged between 7 and 10, responded to and engaged with four of these biographical compendiums. Constrained by the social distancing measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19, I investigated participants' engagement from a physical distance. Participants received the books in the post, and I conducted interviews and group reading sessions via Zoom. I also developed a new method, the reader response toolkit, which comprised of participants' suggestions for arts-based activities that they could engage with in response to the texts.

Underpinned by Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (1938/1970; 1978; 1986) and framed by poststructuralist theories more broadly, I developed five themes to encapsulate participants' responses. Together, these themes illuminate the myriad of complex and insightful ways participants engaged with the texts. Simultaneously affirming and challenging the women's inspirational-ness, and drawing on neoliberal discourses of empowerment to appraise the women's bravery and confidence, participants' interpretations provide important insights into how expressions of popular feminism might be 'landing' with young people. My analysis also highlights how, despite perceiving the texts as resources for knowledge acquisition or, to use Rosenblatt's term, as sites for 'efferent' reading, participants' engagement went far beyond a simple retrieval of facts. Entering into critical, reflective dialogue on a range of social justice issues and questioning the texts' authority with exciting levels of zeal, the children's responses prompt reflection on the value of biographies, and the nonfiction genre more broadly, for facilitating readers' aesthetic, critical and 'aestheticritical' engagements.

This study makes four significant contributions. Methodologically, it provides insight into the opportunities and limitations of conducting reader response studies from a physical distance. Theoretically, it proposes the term 'aesthetricritical' as a way of capturing the fusion of aesthetic and critical qualities within readers' responses to texts. Pedagogically, it offers possibilities for how educators, practitioners and interested adults might utilise these texts to facilitate conversations with children about feminism and other social justice issues, and it highlights the value of supporting children's critical engagement with representations of 'truth'. Finally, it contributes to two neglected areas of research – children's nonfiction and children as consumers of feminist media – both of which require engagement *with children* to enrich their growing corpuses of scholarship.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I am grateful to the eight children who participated in this project. You engaged with such enthusiastic generosity, compelling me to think about things in new and important ways. Without you, this thesis, in this particular iteration, simply would not exist.

With thanks to the ESRC for funding this research and to the SGSSS for providing extensive training and development opportunities. I am also grateful to the UKRI and Mitacs for funding two periods of academic leave, which enabled me to undertake a policy internship at the UK government's Department for Education and to participate in the UK-Canada doctoral exchange scheme. Both experiences had a significant impact on my thinking and were integral to how the thesis developed.

To Dr Barbara Read, Professor Nicki Hedge and Professor Evelyn Arizpe for supervising this project. Barbara, for being a consistently positive, encouraging and supportive force; and for 'keeping me right' in the poststructuralist, discourse realms! Nicki, for asking the difficult methodological questions and challenging me when needed. Evelyn, for providing your scholarly expertise in children's literature and for warmly welcoming me into the University of Glasgow's children's literature community.

I am also grateful to Professor Mary Renfrew for her mentorship through the RSE mentoring programme. I have found our conversations deeply thought-provoking. To Associate Professor Natalie Coulter; you have taken me under your wing, providing invaluable mentorship and support. I am incredibly grateful. To Dr Helen Kara, Dr Janet Salmons and Dr Verity Jones for providing me with opportunities to publish my writing and extend my scholarly reach. Your guidance and advice has helped me develop my skills and clarify my thoughts. My thesis is undoubtedly better for it.

For riding the doctoral wave with me, celebrating my highs and supporting me through the lows - thank you to my PhD pals: Rhona, Hannah, Madeleine, Katrin, Dayna, Ro and Natalie. With special thanks to Rhona for engaging in conversations about creative methods with children while also teaching me how to ride a mountain bike (semi-successfully; I think there is still mud in my ears).

Running has been an integral part of my doctoral journey. It has been while running that a lot of my deep thinking has occurred. It has also taught me a lot about the research process – how to manage it and how to get the most out of it. I am deeply appreciative of my body, my mind and my running shoes, for carrying me through thousands of kilometres.

On my runs I have also spent hundreds of hours listening to podcasts. I have been especially inspired and moved by the wise words of Glennon Doyle, Abby Wambach and Amanda Doyle. Thank you for keeping me company for hours on end, for broadening my field of perspective, and for making me laugh.

Finally, with heartfelt thanks to my family and friends. Mum and Dad, diolch yn fawr for giving me every opportunity to pursue my interests and follow my curiosities. We've come a long way since the daily recitation of times tables when walking to school, and the

excessive, laminated revision notes strewn across the house. Now that I live in my own home I can appreciate that perhaps you did not want to read the mathematical formula for speed, distance and time every time you walked up or down the stairs. You have always been so very patient and unwaveringly encouraging.

Guy, thank you for being persistently and passionately interested in my work. Your enthusiasm has been infectious, and particularly helpful when I have been unable to see the wood for the trees. Kathryn, from the moment I suggested leaving my secure job to pursue a PhD you have been nothing but supportive. You have put up with my (fleeting?) grumpy episodes and forced me to get the LEGO out or to don my running gear when I have needed it the most. You have been, and continue to be, absolutely wonderful. Thank you.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature:

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Date: 15-04-2023

Chapter 1. Introduction

In this introductory chapter I begin by offering some insight into my background and scholarly interests, explaining what motivated me to design a study exploring children's responses to and engagement with contemporary biographies about women.[1] I outline the study's research aims and questions, provide a brief overview of how I attend to these, and establish their significance. I conclude by presenting definitions for key, literary terms I use throughout, and outline how the thesis is structured.

The Study's Origins

For my birthday in 2016, a friend gave me a copy of the children's biographical compendium, *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (Pankhurst, 2016a). Until this point, I had never paid attention to children's biography, but I was struck by this book's vibrancy and aesthetic appeal. Soon after, I started noticing similar texts appearing in book shops, often enveloped by a dazzling display of 'girl-power' advertising and accompanying merchandise. I wondered how children felt about these texts. How were they responding to them and engaging with them? Did they find them empowering and inspiring? My curiosity was not satisfied through exploration of the literature, for there was no literature to explore. I could not find a single study focusing on children's responses to contemporary biographies of women. Of course, absence of scholarly attention does not, in and of itself, determine that a topic is worthy of investigation. However, given the increasing visibility of 'girl-centred feminism' (think of the expansive media coverage celebrating the advocacy work of Malala Yousafzai, for example) (Dejmanee, 2018); young people's increasing engagement with (expressions of) feminism and feminist ideas, especially in digital spaces (Jackson, 2018; 2021; Kim and Ringrose, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019); and the increasing popularity of these texts, I could not shake the feeling that there was something important to explore here.

I have always been an avid reader. As an undergraduate, I studied English Literature and Language. During those three years I learnt the value of critical reading which, at that time, I understood as incessant questioning and not taking anything at face value. As I read texts using different theoretical lenses and concepts, I became more and more

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[1] For reasons I discuss in , I use the term 'contemporary biographies' to refer to biographies published from the 2010s onwards.

comfortable with ambiguity and open-endedness. I found feminist scholarship and gender theory particularly enlightening, and chose to further pursue this interest by enrolling onto a multi-disciplinary Masters programme in Gender Studies. I studied gender within and across a range of fields, including politics, geography, literature, law and history, and read the works of key feminist scholars up until the early 2000s. Yet, I struggled to reconcile any of my knowledge with the 'brand' of feminism I was encountering across these book shop displays. This feminism seemed to have a different tone or texture. Later, I would learn the terms, 'popular feminism', 'girl-power feminism' and 'neoliberal feminism', which is when the fog began to lift.

A couple of years passed. Biographies for children about women continued to proliferate and my curiosities around how children were responding still lingered. I had been working in children's education for five years and often grappled with the idea of pursuing a PhD. I resolved that my persisting intrigue about the reception of these texts was significant and that perhaps it did warrant exploration. I had read various blogs and news articles praising the texts' inspirational power (Brooks, 2018; Keating, 2018), and others criticising their 'individualistic approach to feminism' (Leszkiewicz 2018: 45). And still, no one seemed to be asking members of the intended audience: children. I found this troubling, though not altogether unsurprising. It seemed symptomatic of a much broader and extensive history of adults making assumptions about children's experiences and perspectives. I was personally interested in hearing children's opinions about these texts and had an inkling that a study exploring their responses could provide an important window on their engagement with (representations of) feminism more broadly. Mostly, though, I simply thought it important to seek and seriously engage with children's perspectives on literature produced for them.

Research Aims and Questions

The study's main aim (purpose) is to explore how a group of children respond to and engage with contemporary biographies about women. In line with this primary aim, the study is guided by the following research question:

How do eight children, aged 7 to 10, respond to and engage with four biographical compendiums about women published between 2016 and 2020?

Supporting research questions are:

1. What are the children's interpretations of the texts?
2. What are the implications of engaging with the texts in relation to the children's aspirations and sense of identification/exclusion with the issues?
3. How does the children's engagement with the texts impact or inform how they make sense of gender/gendered subjectivities?
4. How might the children's engagement with the texts inform their use in pedagogic contexts?

I explore these questions by using reflexive thematic analysis and insights from discourse analysis to analyse data I gathered from September to December 2020. During this period, I worked with eight children, across two groups of four. Both groups were comprised of two boys and two girls.[2] Each participant received the same four biographical compendiums in the post, and participated in group reading sessions and individual interviews via Zoom. Participants were also invited to engage in arts-based activities in response to the texts, including LEGO building, drawing and baking.

The study's aim – to explore how a group of children respond to and engage with contemporary biographies about women – is important for two primary reasons. Firstly, feminism has become 'spectacularly visible' in recent years (Banet-Wesier 2018b: 154). Sarah Banet-Weiser has termed this particular iteration of feminism, 'popular feminism' (2015a; 2018a; 2018b).[3] Popular feminism is 'where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are obscured', it is 'a "happy" feminism, one that is about uplift' (Banet-Weiser in Banet-Weiser et al. 2020: 9). Banet-Weiser differentiates popular feminism from postfeminist culture which, characterised by 'girl-power' rhetoric, began emerging in North America

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[2] Throughout this thesis I refer to 'girls' and 'boys' who participated in the research study. I am aware of the complexities of using these terms and of the difficulties involved in evoking binary categories, especially when the study's feminist poststructuralist underpinnings hold that gender is socially and discursively constructed. However, this study focuses on the ways in which such categories are *understood* in the social world, and the ways in which participants understand themselves and others.

[3] I use authors' first and last names when citing them for the first time in the main body of the text. For subsequent citations, I use their last name only.

and Western Europe in the 1990s: 'Within postfeminism, feminism itself is rendered invisible, but within popular feminism, a version of feminism is spectacularly visible. Unlike postfeminism, popular feminism recognizes gender inequalities—though it finds mainly neoliberal solutions to address these inequalities' (Banet-Weiser 2018b: 154).

Contemporary children's biographies about women are exemplary of the 'popular feminism' Banet-Weiser theorises. They identify gender inequality as an issue and implore young readers to be the solution. For example, *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (Pankhurst, 2016a) opens with a preface explaining that the women presented in the book 'didn't listen when people said they couldn't do something. They dared to be different' (n.p.), and ends with a postface asking readers, 'HOW WILL YOU CHANGE THE WORLD?'. In other words, the text presents biographies of women who faced gender inequality but overcame it by 'daring to be different' (note the individualistic, potentially neoliberal undertones), and exhorts readers to do the same. The books undoubtedly offer a ' "happy" feminism' (Banet-Weiser in Banet-Weiser et al. 2020: 9), awash with bright colours and 'feel-good' messaging.

There is a body of scholarship presenting analyses of this popular feminist landscape and the discourses circulating within it. For example, Sarah Kornfield and Elizabeth Bassett (2023) analyse the pilot episodes of four contemporary television shows that 'were all celebrated as feminist in television reviews that revered feminist as popular' (p. 15). In *Younger*, *The Bold Type*, *Charmed* and *Sex Education*, they identify a shift in the portrayal of televisual feminism from postfeminist entertainment to feminism that is framed as being both popular and politically engaged, concluding that 'audience members might draw feminist inspiration from these series' (Kornfield and Bassett 2023: 26). This type of analysis is important, but it can only speculate as to how individuals are engaging with iterations of popular feminism, as its primary unit of analysis is the media itself. Kornfield and Bassett (2023) are 'optimistic' that consumers might draw feminist inspiration from the shows (p. 26), but the extent to which this optimism is congruent with consumers' actual experiences is unknown.

This said, there is a growing interest in girls' engagement with feminism and feminist identities. This has been largely facilitated by the legitimation of Girls' Studies as a scholarly discipline (Kearney, 2009) and spearheaded by scholars including, but not

limited to, Emily Bent (2016; 2020), Sue Jackson (2018; 2021), Jessalynn Keller (2015; 2018; Keller and Ringrose, 2015), Angela McRobbie (2000), and Jessica Ringrose (Kim and Ringrose, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; Ringrose and Renold, 2016). Much of this work focuses on girls' engagement with feminist activism and digital feminisms, and some studies explore how girls perceive celebrity feminist 'role models' (Jackson, 2021; Keller and Ringrose, 2015). My study offers a significant contribution to this corpus. With the aim of exploring how a group of children respond to and engage with contemporary biographies about women, which I contend are exemplary objects of popular feminism, it provides much needed insight into some of the complexities associated with children's engagement with popular feminist texts.

Ultimately, these texts call upon child readers to be inspired by the feminist role models presented, and to further advance the feminist cause by emulating their bravery, fearlessness and heroism. It is thus imperative that we understand how children are responding to this call. What do the discourses they draw upon in response to the texts tell us about how this form of feminism is being received? How do they make sense of it? If the purpose of feminism is to make the world a more equitable place for all, surely we need to explore how the people, the children, we are calling upon to do this work are responding and engaging with its tools. I purposefully use the term 'children' to signal the inclusion of boys in this exploration. Though the marketing of these texts indicates that boys are not the target audience (for example, Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavllo's (2016) compilation is titled, '*Good Night Stories for Rebel **Girls**: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women'* [my emphasis]), boys are obviously not inoculated from expressions of popular feminism and feminist messaging. Gaining insight into how boys respond to texts such as these, albeit in a small-scale study such as mine from which I do not claim generalisability, can be instructive for advancing boys' productive and thoughtful engagement with feminism.

In addition to offering an important contribution to feminist scholarship, the overall aim of this project holds value for the field of children's literature. Very little is known about how children engage with nonfiction, no doubt partly due to the fact that nonfiction has 'always played second fiddle to fiction in children's literary studies' (Tandoi and Spring 2022: 112). There is certainly a dearth of studies focusing on readers' responses to nonfiction (see Chapter 4), though the tide is slowly beginning to turn with the genre's

recent surge in popularity. In the introduction to the first systematic international collection of critical essays on nonfiction picturebooks, Giorgia Grilli (2020) begins by marking 2010 as the start of an exponential increase in the number of nonfiction books for children (p. 11). Data from Nielsen BookData reveals that, in the UK, the market for children's nonfiction reached a record high in 2022, amassing revenues of nearly £60 million – a 17 per cent increase on 2019 (the last pre-pandemic year) (Ross 2023: para. 4). Grilli (2020) continues, 'Not only has the number of children's nonfiction books increased, but the books themselves have completely changed in nature compared to the traditional children's learning books of the past' (p. 11). According to children's author, Marc Aronson (2011), one of the most prominent characteristics of this new form of nonfiction is a change in authorial approach:

> While nonfiction for young people is still illustrated — now often magnificently — many of us who write it have embarked on a totally different mission. We set out to discover new knowledge, even as it is taking shape — and thus often bring information to young readers that is not available in the adult world, and thus has not gone through the filters of general approval. We are not translators; we are explorers, out on the edge gathering new insights on our own, or alongside pioneering experts (Aronson 2011: para. 2).[4]

Joe Sutliff Sanders (2018) brings nuance to this interpretation of nonfiction's linear development from a genre of translation to one of exploration, contending that the 'categorical differences between older and newer nonfiction are few and far between, and often the things that writers take to be typical of the new nonfiction were already present, and in revealing ways, in older nonfiction' (p. 26). Perhaps contemporary authors of children's nonfiction are more explicit about their exploratory approach than authors of the past. Regardless of how 'new' the 'new nonfiction' really is, it is incontrovertible that, up until now, very little attention has been paid to children's nonfiction, and even less to the sub-genre of biography.

As I discuss in Chapter 4, Myra Zarnowski (1988; 2019; Zarnowski and Turkel, 2012) has been the only consistent voice in the scholarship on children's biography since the 1980s. Zarnowski (2019) argues that, rather than seeing 'biography as a single story, free of personal interest and perspective', it is vital readers are able to identify authorial perspective (p. 145). Given Aronson's (2011) point that contemporary nonfiction authors

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[4] Throughout, I indent all quotations that are 40 words or more.

are adopting more of an exploratory role in which their perspectives and positionality are more visible to readers than they perhaps have been in the past, Zarnowski's suggestion is particularly relevant. Providing insight into how and why texts have been produced through the inclusion of authorial notes and extensive source lists, for example, contemporary nonfiction provides an auspicious opportunity for supporting children with exploring the processes of knowledge construction. However, I suggest that research is urgently needed to understand how children are actually responding to and engaging with the new nonfiction. How, if at all, are readers engaging with peritextual materials? How closely do readers pay attention to authorial notes and prefaces? How is their engagement with nonfiction texts affected by their expectations of the genre? These are the types of questions to which children's literature scholars currently have only limited answers.

With regard to the need for studies exploring children's responses to and engagement with nonfiction, it is important to note that although part of the broader nonfiction genre, biography is a distinctive genre in its own right. As I discuss in Chapter 2, biographies have always facilitated a specific type of didacticism. 'As exemplars of accomplishment, subjects of biographies provide role models for readers' (Chung and Chaudhri 2021: 67). In other words, children's biography has always been a vehicle for inspiring young readers to be and to act in certain ways. Gale Eaton (2006), who has produced the most comprehensive analysis of children's biographies about women, notes that there is still a desire for children's biographies 'to instill moral values and ameliorate both the lives of individual children and the future of society at large' (p. 3). Indeed, biographies published since 2016 frequently call on children to save the planet, be world changers, and create a better future. Again, we know very little about how children are responding to these calls. Given the weight of expectation – ameliorating the future of society being a rather tall order – this is both troubling and perplexing.

In addition to contributing important insights for the fields of children's literature, feminist media and cultural studies, and feminist scholarship more broadly, there is a third benefit of this study's primary aim. This benefit also functions as an aim. By aiming to understand how children respond to and engage with contemporary biographies about women, this study seeks to increase the visibility of children's perspectives on these texts and, by implication, wider issues pertaining to gender and other social justice issues.

Often, children's perspectives are inadequately represented in research on issues that concern them, such as the literature they read. Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2016a) argues that children's 'contribution to knowledge generation about what they read has an intrinsic value similar to insights offered by adult readers' (p. 217), asserting that more needs to be done to facilitate child-led knowledge generation. Although this study is by no means exclusively child-led – it is of my design and the analysis is based on my interpretation of the data – it seeks to increase visibility of children's perspectives and, in doing so, offers a valuable contribution to understandings of how young people are engaging with issues affecting them.

A Note on Terminology

Before proceeding to outline how this thesis is structured, there are a number of literary terms I use throughout that require explanation.

Book and Text

I use the word 'book' in the way that Roland Barthes (1980) uses the term 'the work' – to refer to that which 'is concrete, occupying a portion of book-space (in a library, for example)' (p. 74). The book is the material entity, it 'is held in the hand' (Barthes 1980: 75). Comparatively, 'the Text is experienced only in an activity, a production' (Barthes 1980: 75). It is that which the reader engages with – the discourses, the words on the page, the illustrations – in order to create meaning.

Nonfiction

Nonfiction seems to have a definitional straightforwardness, the prefix 'non' signalling that it is, quite simply, *not* fiction. Throughout this thesis, I do not hyphenate the term 'nonfiction' or use a space to separate the 'non' from the 'fiction' (though when referencing other works, I use the term preferred by the cited author). This is because I perceive nonfiction as 'something positive and self-defining in its own right, an entity rather than a non-entity' (Root 2003: 243).

Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer (2003) define nonfiction as 'informational texts about the way things are' (p. 128). They note that 'Unlike fiction, the many informational books

available for children claim to be true. Their authors' main purpose is to communicate knowledge accurately' (Nodelman and Reimer 2003: 128). Just as I do not perceive nonfiction to be straightforwardly not fictional, I do not perceive it to be straightforwardly informational either. As alluded to above with reference to Aronson (2011), children's nonfiction published in the 21st century tends to be more explicit about its factual humility, with some authors positioning themselves as explorers as opposed to omniscient narrators. In this respect, Nodelman and Reimer's definition could be regarded as somewhat outdated. However, Nodelman and Reimer (2003) do recognise that authors must make decisions about what to include and what to exclude, and that creating nonfiction texts is an interpretive process: 'different writers will interpret the same information differently—tell a different story about the same information' (p. 129).

Similar to Nodelman and Reimer's definition, I use 'nonfiction' to refer to texts that have predominantly informational intention(s). That is, as texts that impart information about aspects of the world, explore information about the world, or encourage readers to undertake their own information gathering about the world. However, and in line with the study's ontological and epistemological underpinnings (see Chapter 5, Methodology), I do not perceive nonfiction texts as interpretations of a single or objective reality. Rather than seeing a nonfiction text as *the*, or even *an*, authoritative knowledge on a particular aspect of the world, I see it as a generative entity; it generates knowledge about the world through its presentation of words and images.

Biographical compendium

Throughout this thesis, I position biography as a sub-genre within the broader genre of nonfiction. The Oxford English Dictionary (2023) defines 'biography' as 'a written account of the life of an individual, esp. a historical or public figure'. The four books utilised in this study are collections of biographies. That is, they are books containing a number of biographies, ranging from 13 to 100. I thus refer to these books as biographical compendiums.

Although the biographical compendiums contain illustrations, they are not 'picturebook biographies'. The picturebook 'hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page'

(Bader 1976: 1). In these biographical compendiums, the illustrations and written text are not interdependent. As with other illustrated books, 'the images may show a key moment described in the narrative but, in contrast to the picturebook and comic, the removal of these images will not result in any difficulty in understanding that moment' (Gibson 2010: 101).

Thesis Structure

This chapter has provided some insight into how I arrived at this study, an overview of its primary aims and research questions, and some clarification on literary terms I use throughout. I next turn to the structure of the thesis.

In [Chapter 2, Children's Biography: Some History and Context](#) I provide a history of children's biography, paying particular attention to the development of biographies about women. I trace the genre from the 1700s, when biographies about women provided explicit moral instruction for young girls, to the 2000s, when biographies about women began explicitly calling upon readers to become world changers. I suggest that the coalescence of three factors has provided a platform from which this most recent wave of biographies has been able to rise with such force and popularity; the attention they have garnered from schools and children's literacy organisations further fortifying their strong position in the marketplace.

[Chapter 3, Adopting a Reader Response Perspective](#) focuses on one of the study's key theoretical tenets – Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading. I explain how I arrived at Rosenblatt's work, specifically, and detail how she conceives of the reading experience. I introduce Rosenblatt's theory at this juncture as many of the studies I cite in [Chapter 4, Children's Responses: Reviewing the Research](#) draw upon Rosenblatt's work. Here, I situate my study within the broader research landscape. The review is presented in a way that resembles concentric circles. It begins at the core, with studies focusing on children's engagement with biographies. It then expands its focus, considering studies tending to children's engagement with the nonfiction genre more broadly. Finally, it looks beyond literature, examining studies that explore children's engagement with other types of popular feminist media.

In [Chapter 5](#) I provide details of the study's methodology, outlining my methodological approach and re-presenting the research questions. I explain how the study was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, detail my data gathering and analytic processes, and discuss some of the most pertinent ethical issues I encountered.

In [Chapter 6, Introducing the Biographies](#) I take a deep dive into the four biographical compendiums utilised in this study. Before providing an overview of each of the four texts, I outline some of the hallmarks and characteristics they share. In the interests of transparency and reflexivity, I conclude by offering a snapshot of my own critical content analysis of the texts.

I present my findings in Chapters 7 and 8, with my analytic discussion interwoven throughout. In [Chapter 7, Interpretations of the Women and the Texts](#) I focus on how participants seemed to perceive the women and the texts' inspirational capacity. In [Chapter 8, Efferent Expectations and Aestheticritical Engagements](#) I pay attention to the nature of participants' engagements, couching my analysis in Rosenblatt's theory of reading.

In my concluding chapter, [Chapter 9,](#) I reflect on the research questions to bring together the most important insights from the study. I outline the study's limitations and recommendations for further research, and highlight the study's main contributions.

Chapter 2. Children's Biography: Some History and Context

Introduction

This chapter situates contemporary children's biographies about women within the context of the genre's historic development, evolutions in nonfiction more broadly, and recent developments in feminism and feminist activism. I begin by providing an overview of the history of children's biography before focussing on the development of children's biographies about women. Given this study is interested in the pedagogic implications arising from the participants' responses to and engagement with the texts, I conclude by discussing the use of biographies in formal education settings.

Contested Beginnings and Didactic Intentions

Clémentine Beauvais (2020) has aptly described children's biography as 'a living fossil in the publishing landscape' (p. 58). Certainly, the history of children's biography is a long one, and its precise origins remain a matter of debate. Gillian Adams (2004) suggests that, in Britain, biographies for children existed as early as the medieval period, with children reading stories of saints' lives, stories of Alfred the Great, and stories about King Arthur from Geoffrey of Monmouth (p. 235). Barbara Chatton (2005) and Victor Watson (2001) mark the 16th century as the dawn of children's biography, with John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* being translated into English in 1563. In the same period, secular role models were provided in Sir Thomas North's (1579) translation of *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (Chatton 2005: 84). Medieval or 16th-century beginnings aside, it is clear that children were reading biographies-of-sorts, that is, stories of people's lives, from at least the medieval period onwards.

Rooted in Puritanical literature, the purpose of these early texts was to teach morals and virtues (Hinton, 2021). In fact, Carrie Hintz and Eric Tribunella (2019) cite James Janeway's *A Token for Children* (1671) – which 'gave child readers "real-life" stories of repentant children to inspire them to embrace the Puritan faith' (p. 316) – as an example of biographical writing that, in some ways, functioned as a kind of 'conduct book' (named as such for its intent to provide readers with exemplars of good conduct). The 18th and 19th centuries saw the continued use of biographies to instruct and encourage children to lead 'good' lives and to behave in the 'right' way. Victorian contributions included Charlotte

Yonge's *Book of Golden Deeds of all Times* (1864), Mary Louisa Molesworth's *Stories of the Saints for Children* (1892) and William Canton's *A Child's Book of Saints* (1898) (Watson 2001: 82).

That these early, biographical texts were written with the intent of instructing children to lead 'good' lives is unsurprising. After all, as Beauvais (2021) notes, 'Didactic literature for children—namely, for religious and moral instruction—was the origin of children's literature itself' (p. 57). However, even when the purpose of children's literature expanded to include entertainment, the biography genre retained its didactic core. In the 20th century, biographies continued to be written with the intention of providing children with positive role models. In America, many biographies focused on Abraham Lincoln, while in the United Kingdom, Geoffrey Trease was notable for his focus on British authors and monarchs (Stevenson 2006: 163). Lesser-known figures were also written about prior to the 1960s and 1970s, though these were few and far between (Stevenson 2006: 163). Primarily, children's biographies were written about individuals whose achievements were deemed worthy or important enough to be emulated by young readers. In a punchy exposition on the state of children's biography, Marilyn Jurich (1972) asserted:

> Many of these exceptional lives, particularly as they are presented to the child, are made into heroes whom the child cannot only admire but extravagantly worship. […] since ideals as absolutes can never exist, in past or present, one might suggest that hero making is ethically wrong simply as a falsehood (Jurich 1972: 143-44).

Leonard Marcus (1980) made a similar observation, stating that some children's biographers had 'reduced their subject's life to an implausible ideal, an image of ghostly perfection quite literally too good to be true' (p. 15). Although there were some exceptions (see chapter 3 of Sanders, 2018), it seems children's biographies were awash with presentations of infallible individuals, intended to function as role models, up until the late 20th century.

As I discuss in Chapter 6, this hyperbolically positive presentation is a trend that continues in children's biography today, though Chatton (2005) and Suzanne Rahn (1991) argue there was a shift in the 1970s as depictions of individuals became less idealised and more holistic. The style of biographies also began evolving, with 'dry' instructive accounts being replaced with 'lively narrative and eloquent artwork' (Chatton 2005: 86). Biographies

continued to transform into the 21st century, with expanded front and end matter (authors' notes, prefaces, bibliographies, documentary photographs, timelines and maps) (von Merveldt, 2018) and a more 'speculative' style of communication (Aronson, 2011). Aronson (2011) suggests that the dawn of the internet made information ubiquitous, and so rather than presenting readers with information retrieved from the nooks and crannies of libraries and archives, nonfiction authors took on a new role, 'showing readers how they swarm through a sea of stuff and found a way to dry land' (para. 12). Arguably, the expanded front and end matter Nikola von Merveldt (2018) observes in a lot of contemporary biographies serves this exact purpose. The success of this evolved style of biography was marked by the genre's spectacular revitalization in the 2010s and, excitingly, it was biographies about women that took centre stage during this period of proliferation.

Biographies About Women: From Instructing Moral Behaviour to Inciting World Changers

Children's biographies about women have a (her)story of their own. In summary, this subset of the genre has evolved from explicit moral instruction in the 1700s to 'empowering' exhortations for girls to change the world in the 2000s. Below, I offer a brief description of this evolution, suggesting that the coalescence of three factors have provided a platform from which a new wave of children's biographies about women has been able to rise with particular force and popularity since 2016. These are: the continuous stream of scholarship exposing women and girls' under-representation and problematic representation in children's literature since the 1970s, the increasing visibility of feminist movements and activism in the 2010s, and the arrival of the 'non-fiction renaissance' (Edwards, 2016) in 2013. The result has been an explosion of biographies about women, in which readers are routinely called upon to be inspired and to take emulative, world-changing action.

Mary Pilkington's *Biography for Girls; Or, Moral and Instructive Examples, for Young Ladies* (1799) is one of the earliest recorded biographies in English, written specifically for girls (Robson 2000: 107). Like John Darton's (1864) *Famous Girls Who Have Become Illustrious Women: Forming Models for Imitation for the Young Women of England,* it was written 'to evoke humility and modesty in their female readers' (Robson 2000: 107).

Similar to earlier biographical texts, these works were as committed to instructing 'proper' social and moral behaviour, as they were to the presentation of scientific and biographical facts (Kiefer and Wilson 2010: 292).

In the 20th century, a number of notable biographies about women were produced, including Laura Richard's writings on Florence Nightingale (1909) and Abigail Adams (1917), and Diane Stanley's biography of Joan of Arc (1998) (Stevenson 2006: 163). In 1934, Cornelia Meigs' *Invincible Louisa: The Story of the Author of "Little Women"* (1934) was awarded the Newbery Medal for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children (Watson 2001: 82) and Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* was published in 1960, signaling the start of stories about heroic children making their way into print (Chatton 2005: 85). Picturebook biographies (characterised by an interdependence between illustration and text) also became increasingly popular, with prominent titles about women including Fay Stanley's *The Last Princess: The Story of Princess Ka'iulani of Hawai'i* (1991) and Diane Stanley's *Cleopatra* (1994) (Chatton 2005: 85). Whereas 18th-century and 19th-century biographies about women were predominantly about instruction and encouraging 'correct', 'moral' behaviours, these later publications were arguably more focused on women claiming a history, claiming a presence, and claiming a future.

It was this precise sentiment that seemed to propel the genre's resurgence in the 2010s. Keen to increase the number of female role models in children's media (Rebel Girls, 2017), Favilli and Cavallo launched a crowdfunding campaign to publish *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women* in 2016. The book was an instant success. It quickly sold over a million copies worldwide and was translated into dozens of languages (Laity 2018: para. 2). Rebel Girls has since expanded into 'a global empowerment brand dedicated to raising the most inspired and confident generation of girls' (Rebel Girls, 2023). Today, the franchise includes a series of biographies about women, downloadable podcasts, and a range of apparel and merchandise. Soon after Favilli and Cavallo's 2016 publication, a slew of biographies about women began appearing, with entire sections in bookshops devoted to texts showcasing the lives and achievements of women. Popular titles have included: *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (Pankhurst, 2016a), *Women in Science: 50 Fearless Pioneers Who*

Changed the World (Ignotofsky, 2016) and *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* (Harrison, 2017).

Similar to Favilli and Cavallo, authors of these texts have cited the under-representation and problematic representation of women as one of their main motivations for creating children's biographies about women. For example, Vashti Harrison said she created *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* (2017) because she 'felt inspired to highlight the stories we don't hear too often and to celebrate contributions Black women have made to American history' (Harrison cited in Sarno 2017: para. 2). Kate Pankhurst, author of the *Fantastically Great Women* biographies and distant relative of suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst, explained:

> No matter what my surname I'd want to write and illustrate strong and I hope, dynamic, female characters, because those are the characters I wanted to read about as a child and why on earth should female characters not be all of the above? (Pankhurst 2016b: para. 3).

Expressions such as these corroborate academic studies that have been published in the Global North since the early 1970s. Attending to the inadequate representation of female characters in children's literature, findings across these studies generally agree that the representation of gender has been, in some form or another, severely lacking (Allen et al., 1993; Bender Peterson and Lach, 1990; Casey et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2003; Ellefsen, 2015; Engel, 1981; Graebner, 1972; Hamilton et al., 2006; Heintz, 1987; Kolbe and LaVoie, 1981; Kortenhaus and Demarest, 1993; McCabe et al., 2011; Oskamp et al., 1996; Paynter, 2011; Weitzman et al., 1972; Williams et al., 1987). Lenore Weitzman and colleagues' (1972) research is often quoted as the pioneering study in this area. The researchers analysed 18 Caldecott Medal and Honours books (winners and runners-up) from 1967-1971.[5] Although their analysis focuses on these 18 Caldecott winners, the researchers read several hundred other picturebooks to situate their results, claiming wide applicability for their findings. They report under-representation of female characters in titles, central roles, stories and illustrations (a ratio of 11 pictures of males for every one picture of a female in the Caldecott sample); the overwhelming passivity of

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[5] The Caldecott Medal, awarded by the Children's Service Committee of the American Library Association, 'is the most coveted prize for preschool books', and those awarded the coveted gold seal are highly regarded and widely-read (Weitzman et al. 1972: 1127).

female characters in comparison to that of male characters; and a serious lack of role models for girls.

More recent research (though there has been a dearth of studies post-2000) highlights that while there has been an increase in the proportion of female characters in children's literature, male protagonists remain over-represented (Casey et al., 2021). Furthermore, stereotypical portrayals persist (Adams et al., 2011; Crabb and Marciano, 2011; Hamilton et al., 2006) and the proportion of female characters of Black and ethnic minority remains woefully low.[6] For example, analysis undertaken by the Guardian and Observer in 2018 found that, of the top 100 bestselling illustrated children's books in the UK, only two featured female lead characters who were Black or of ethnic minority (Ferguson, 2019). However, this is not to say there has been a straightforward, linear (albeit slow) pattern of progressive gender representation in children's literature (McCabe et al., 2011). Based on their analysis of over 5,000 children's books published throughout the 20th century, Janice McCabe and colleagues (2011) conclude that 'change toward gender equality is uneven, nonlinear, and tied to patterns of feminist activism and backlash' (p. 198). For example, they find that the 1930s to 1960s reveal the greatest disparity between male and female characters. Notably, this was the period following the first-wave women's movement, when feminism was heavily scrutinised (McCabe et al. 2011: 219). Sara VanderHaagen (2012) observes a similar pattern in relation to African American biographies for children and the civil rights movement in the United States, suggesting that the 'flood' of biographies that emanated during this period was part of a broader campaign to raise awareness of the contributions African Americans had made to society (p. 21). These analyses are particularly relevant for understanding the explosion of biographies about women in the late 2010s. That these texts emerged during a time when feminist consciousness and activism was becoming increasingly visible – one political commentator dubbing it 'the decade women fought back' (Elting, 2019) – seems far from coincidental. In the following paragraphs I provide insight into this context. Although my discussion is somewhat protracted, having an awareness of this context is

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[6] This thesis reflects Stuart Hall's understanding that 'race is a signifier, and that racialized behavior and difference needs to be understood as a discursive, not necessarily as a genetic or biological fact' (1996: 7). As such, unless directly citing literature that does not use capitalisation for the term 'Black', I capitalise Black throughout to signal its significance as a political category that is discursively, socio-culturally, and historically constructed.

necessary for understanding the recent proliferation in children's biographies about women.

Put simply, 'in recent years popular culture has launched feminism in the spotlight' (Jackson 2021: 1074). In 2016, there was the watershed cultural phenomenon of the #MeToo movement. In 2017, we saw the advent of Women's Marches in the wake of Donald Trump's presidential inauguration in the US, and the implementation of gender pay gap reporting legislation in the UK. Merriam-Webster also selected 'feminism' as their Word of the Year in 2017, reporting a 70 per cent increase in people looking up the word in their online dictionary from 2016 to 2017, with the largest spike occurring after the Women's March on Washington (Merriam-Webster, 2023). The mainstream and commercial media quickly became the backdrop and the conduit for these feminist movements and campaigns (Banet-Weiser, 2018a). For example, Alison Phipps (2020) explains how the #MeToo movement, although established in 2006 as a programme of work by Black feminist and civil rights activist Tarana Burke, went viral as a hashtag in 2017 following a tweet by white actor, Alyssa Milano (p. 2). Banet-Weiser (2018a) contends that it is precisely because forms of feminism have manifested themselves in practices and discourses associated with the mainstream and commercial media that feminism has become increasingly popular in North America and Europe. She explains how expressions of feminism are everywhere – in movies, on social media platforms, on t-shirts – and they tend to be couched in discourses of empowerment. Banet-Weiser (2015a) terms this 'a market for empowerment, where empowerment itself becomes a commodity' (p. 182). She offers the implied messaging of Always' #LikeAGirl and CoverGirls' #GirlsCan advertising campaigns as examples of this phenomenon: the insinuation is that 'girls and women individually need to lean in, be confident, to stop thinking "I can't" ' (Banet-Weiser 2018a: 53). In other words, it is through purchasing feminine hygiene products and makeup (for those who have access to the market), that girls and women can achieve empowerment (Banet-Weiser 2018a: 47).

Barbie's Inspiring Women series provides another striking example of this market for empowerment. As part of their Dream Gap project ('an ongoing global initiative that gives girls the resources and support they need to continue believing in themselves' (Mattel, 2023)), Mattel launched a range of 'inspiring women' dolls, featuring civil rights activist, Rosa Parks; tennis player, Billie Jean King; and astronaut, Sally Ride. According to Lisa

McKnight, Senior Vice President and Global Head of Barbie and Dolls, the dolls aim 'to help empower the next generation of female leaders by sharing their stories' (McKnight cited in Mattel 2022: para. 4). Purchasing an inspiring barbie doll thus becomes synonymous with purchasing empowerment. Presenting narratives of 'empowered' women who have achieved extraordinary things, these new biographies about women can also be perceived as objects of popular feminism; as participants in Banet-Weiser's market for empowerment. On the Rebel Girls website, the purchase of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (Favilli and Cavallo, 2016) promises to 'brings readers on an empowering journey, introducing them to the real-life adventures of trailblazing women' (Rebel Girls, 2023).

Responsibilisation is an integral component of these discourses of empowerment – girls and women are responsibilised do so something – usually to buy something – in order to become empowered. The term 'responsibilisation' was first

> … developed in the governmentality literature to refer to the process whereby subjects are rendered individually responsible for a task which previously would have been the duty of another – usually a stage agency – or would not have been recognized as a responsibility at all (Wakefield and Fleming 2009: 276).

More recently, feminist scholars have discussed responsibilisation in the contexts of neoliberal feminism and popular feminism. In 2014, Catherine Rottenberg pointed to the emergence of neoliberal feminism, in which the neoliberal feminist subject is 'mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair' (p. 420). Neoliberal feminism has 'helped construct the context for popular feminism to flourish in popular culture and media', as it 'clearly connects to these neoliberal principles of individualism and entrepreneurialism' (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020: 10). Indeed, the message to self-responsibilise is manifest in expressions of popular feminism, which often valorise individual character traits rather than advocating for collective political action.

Objects of popular feminism, these contemporary biographies about women certainly valorise individual character traits, bravery and confidence in particular. Exhortations for girls to be brave are pervasive across expressions of popular feminism. In the sphere of children's literature alone, books centring and celebrating female bravery continue to flourish. Recent titles include *Forgotten Fairy Tales of Brave and Brilliant Girls* (Davidson

et al., 2019); *Tales of Brave and Brilliant Girls from Around the World* (Cook et al., 2020); *RBG'S Brave and Brilliant Women: 33 Jewish Women to Inspire Everyone* (Epstein, 2021); and *Fantastically Great Women: True Stories of Ambition, Adventure and Bravery* (Pankhurst, 2021). There even exists a growing body of self-help literature targeted at girls, offering advice on how to cultivate bravery for oneself. Books such as *Brave New Girl: How to be Fearless* (Hamilton, 2016) and *A Girl's Guide to Being Fearless: How to Find your Brave* (Lavington and Cope, 2021) provide readers with tips and suggestions including, 'If you're going to be in the room, BE in the room' (Lavington and Cope, 2021: 86). As words such as 'brave' and 'fearless' become buzzwords, they become increasingly palatable and accessible. This makes them particularly effective as they can carry self-responsibilising messaging with alluring subtlety.

As Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill (2022) demonstrate in their recent publication, *Confidence Culture* (2022), exhortations for girls and women to be confident are also pervasive across expressions of popular feminism. Throughout, they argue that imperatives such as, 'love your body' and 'believe in yourself' might ultimately hold women back. While Orgad and Gill (2022) do not offer an extended explication of how children, specifically, are inculcated in 'confidence culture', their discussion of how role models function within this landscape provides a useful foundation for understanding the context within which these biographies have emerged. Presenting girls and women with role models – what Michele Paule and Hannah Yelin (2022) call 'role model solutions' – is an integral component of popular feminist constructions of confidence, as exhortations for girls and women to 'be confident' are often transmitted through women's self-presentation of their own success in mastering this skill. For example, in her analysis of sports advice books for girls, Dawn Heinecken (2016) finds that female athletes 'often construct a lack of self-assurance as the primary problem affecting girls' (p. 329). Heinecken (2016) draws on Alex Morgan's *Breakaway: Beyond the Goal* (2015) to demonstrate how well-intentioned encouragement that urges girls to counter their fears and be confident is actually unhelpful, for it counterproductively 'presumes girls' lack of confidence' (p. 329).

Orgad and Gill (2022) also present innumerable examples of this phenomenon, including analysis of Elizabeth Day's (2019) book, *How to Fail: Everything I've Ever Learned From Things Going Wrong.* Day is a British author, journalist and broadcaster, and *How to Fail* is

part-memoir, underpinned by the basic premise that understanding why we fail ultimately makes us stronger and more successful. Orgad and Gill (2022) write:

> The importance of confidence pulses through the book like a heartbeat: if she had been more confident, she would not have repeatedly accepted the journalistic assignments that no one else wanted; she might have asked for a pay rise; she would have avoided all those dates with unsuitable men (Orgad and Gill 2022: 95).

In addition to sharing stories from her own life, Day offers advice for readers by encouraging them to take heed of her own journey. Confidence thus emerges 'as a central disposition to be fostered and cultivated' (Orgad and Gill 2022: 96).

The acclaim that then-22-year-old poet and activist Amanda Gorman received after delivering her poem, 'The Hill We Climb', at the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden in the US in January 2021 offers another prime example. Reports persistently praised Gorman's eloquence, confidence and passion (Alter, 2021; Gabbatt, 2021; Perlow, 2021). Journalists, politicians, celebrities and educators were quick to testify to the 'Amanda Gorman effect' (Ostasiewicz, 2021). Stories of children and young people's engagement with poetry proliferated (Asmelash, 2021; Block, 2021) and scholars endorsed the wide-reaching, positive effects that young people's engagement with poetry can have (Williams, 2021). Unsurprisingly, Gorman is hailed as an inspiring role model, one reporter writing that 'Amanda's story is an inspiration to the world: regardless of your age, when you are prepared, and opportunity comes knocking, you can seize the moment and make history' (Osibanjo 2021: para. 3).

As with Day, confidence is a central tenet of Gorman's 'brand'. In a campaign clip for the cosmetics company, Estée Lauder, Gorman's voice overlays the visual recording: 'I am a changemaker, a poet, who finds inspiration in history, in passion, in the confidence it takes to face forward and change the world. Confidence inspires change' (Estée Lauder UK, 2022). The implication is that a purchase in Estée Lauder's double wear foundation is a purchase in confidence, and confidence is required to change the world. Of course, being confident in your own abilities is important, but confidence also sustains neoliberal capitalism. All one has to do is work on confidence, and mastery and success will apparently follow. The corollary of a culture in which advertisements like this exist and well-intentioned media reports centring character traits such as confidence flourish, is

that they 'enter into human memory through ritual recitation, pedagogy, amusement, festival publicity' (Foucault 1968/1991: 60) and become *the* accepted mechanism for achieving individual success.

For contextual purposes, it is important to note that exhortations to be confident are not only identifiable across iterations of popular and neoliberal feminism. They are also manifest within neoliberal educational discourses. Specifically, emphases placed on developing qualities such as grit, resilience and confidence are part of a recent resurgence of character education in the UK and beyond (Spohrer and Bailey, 2020). Although character education is certainly not a new phenomenon, scholars have argued that developments in UK policy have cemented its authority over the last 15 years (Allen and Bull, 2018; Bull and Allen, 2018; Spohrer and Bailey 2020; Slater, 2022). This re-emphasis 'on character in policy is markedly influenced by a new human capital paradigm, according to which the development of personal traits is imperative for future economic prosperity' (Spohrer and Bailey 2020: 562). Anna Bull and Kim Allen (2018) were among the first to present an explication of this revived, governmental investment in 'nurturing children and young people's "character" ', suggesting that 'character strengths' such as grit, resilience, and optimism are being established as 'key factors shaping academic and other life outcomes' (p. 392).

All of this is to say that there has been a discernible socio-cultural and political context from which these biographies about women have emanated. They began emerging at a time when feminism and feminist messaging – heavily couched in discourses of empowerment – were becoming increasingly visible. Crucially, calls to self-responsibilise have been an integral component of these discourses: girls and women are promised empowerment through purchasing certain items and embodying certain character traits such as bravery, confidence, grit and resilience. This valorisation of certain character traits has also gained traction in the sphere of children's schooling, where 'character education' has undergone a recent resurgence. It is thus unsurprising that these calls to be empowered and self-responsibilise found for themselves 'a perfect vehicle in the form of children's biography, where the notion of inspiring readers to exhibit certain behaviours has been present since its beginnings' (Couceiro 2022: 7).

Finally, this recent explosion of biographies about women has also contributed to, and coincided with, what Lisa Edwards (2016) and others have termed the 'non-fiction renaissance' in children's literature, which is posited to have begun around 2010. As Grilli (2020) explains:

> … we have witnessed an exponential increase worldwide in the number of non-fiction books for children. Not only has the number of non-fiction publications increased, the books themselves have completely changed in nature compared to the traditional children's learning books of the past. Increasingly released in the form of a picturebook – very often large format picturebooks – non-fiction publications have recently offered and continue to offer ample space for far-reaching experimentation using a range of original, surprising and previously unthinkable ways of combining transmission of knowledge and artistic research, description of the world and a poetic approach, especially achieved by means of a well-meditated and skilfully designed visual code (Grilli 2020: 11).

Prior to this renaissance, nonfiction had 'somehow been viewed as the poor cousin of its more glamorous relatives, fiction and picture books' (Edwards 2016: para. 5). In fact, it was not until 1989 that a specific award for children's nonfiction – the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction – was even established (comparatively, the Caldecott Medal for picturebooks was first awarded in 1938). Today, there are numerous awards that recognise excellence in children's nonfiction. These include the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal, the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction and the Children's Book Guild Nonfiction Award. In an article suitably titled, 'Narrative Nonfiction: Kicking Ass at Last', Elizabeth Partridge (2013) recounts the awards nonfiction texts have won in direct competition with picturebooks and novels, referring to this era as an 'amazing, starry, silver-and-gold-stickered time' (Partridge cited in Sanders 2018: 1).

Biographies have proven especially popular in this 'renaissance' period. According to figures from NPD BookScan in America, the biographies/autobiographies subcategory of children's nonfiction saw the genre's largest increase in sales (26 per cent) from 2016 to 2017, led by *Women in Science* and the children's edition of *Hidden Figures*, a book presenting an account of four African-American female mathematicians work with NASA (Milliot, 2018). Comparatively, the next highest increase was social situations/families/health with a 22 per cent growth in sales, while the subcategory of games/activities/hobbies saw a decrease of 7 per cent (Milliot, 2018). In the UK, The Bookseller reports that, in 2018, books like *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (Favilli and

Cavallo, 2016) helped increase the children's general nonfiction category to a 30 per cent boost in volume and a 31 per cent jump in value compared to 2017 (O'Brien 2018: para. 3).

Undoubtedly, 'the dinosaur is still in excellent health' (Beauvais 2020: 58). Children's biography, largely due to the recent proliferation of biographies about women, is booming. Volumes such as *Good Night Stories* (Favilli and Cavallo, 2016) have instigated a cascade of copycat publications, including *Stories for Boys Who Dare to Be Different: True Tales of Amazing Boys Who Changed the World Without Killing Dragons* (Brooks and Winter, 2018). The market for children's biography is a lucrative one – there is an already-extensive and ever-growing corpus of potential biographical subjects, and further revenue can be generated through selling accompanying merchandise and apparel. For example, in addition to the *Fantastically Great Women* books, Bloomsbury sells postcards, activity books and calendars. Publishers also provide epitextual and peritextual educational materials for teachers, signalling a more formalised approach to capitalising on biography's didactic core.

Biographies in Education

Biographies have long been used in formal education settings for learning about history, and different cultures and perspectives; for developing comprehension and vocabulary skills; for expanding students' engagement with a variety of writing styles; and for inspiring learners to think about their own futures and aspirations. Increasingly, educators and researchers are also looking to biographies as valuable resources for developing young people's critical reading and thinking skills (Chung and Chaudhri, 2021; Colabucci and Yenika-Agbaw, 2018; Sanders, 2018; Zarnowski, 2019). For example, Zarnowski (2019) examines three types of clues that can help reveal an author's perspective in picturebook biographies and offers suggestions for how teachers can support readers to critically examine authors' perspectives. These include paying close attention to the authors' notes and examining several biographies of the same person.

In *A Literature of Questions: Nonfiction for the Critical Child*, Sanders (2018) provides a beautiful examination of how nonfiction texts, including biographies, can invite or refuse critical engagement. For example, by using peritexts, pointing out characters' flaws and

mistakes, or dramatising debate between sources, texts might open themselves up to dialogue 'rather than maintaining the privilege of monologue' (Sanders 2018: 12). One of Sanders' (2018) claims is that 'trade nonfiction, especially when thought of as the opposite of textbooks, is better situated to offer opportunities for critical engagement simply because it is less deeply embedded in the paranoid economy in which textbooks circulate' (p. 9). In many ways, contemporary biographies seem to fit Sanders' mould for inviting critical engagement, and it is thus unsurprising that they are being utilised by educators to help cultivate children's critical reading and thinking skills.

Even when the use of biography is not specifically mandated in national curricula (for example, nonfiction is mentioned under the literacy experience and outcome, 'understanding, analysing and evaluating' in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2008), but there is no mention of biographies specifically), the abundance of resources available for teachers online (see www.teachit.co.uk, www.tes.co.uk and www.twinkl.co.uk) suggests biographies are a mainstay in teachers' toolboxes. This new wave of biographies has provided a profusion of further material for educators to draw upon as they design lessons and develop their pedagogic practices. Indeed, and as noted above, publishers of more recent biographies also produce resources for teachers on their websites. For example, Bloomsbury (2023) provides a range of resources to accompany the *Fantastically Great Women* books, including a resource pack for Key Stages 1-3 that covers literacy, history, drama, art and PSHE objectives.

These more recent biographies have also gained support from organisations such as CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education), Booktrust and Scholastic, all of whom recommend various, contemporary biographies on their reading lists for schools and educators. Anecdotally, at IBBY's (International Board of Books for Young People) conference on nonfiction in 2019, a school librarian told me that these new biographies were 'going down a storm' at her school. In particular, she said the compendiums, filled with a rich variety of one-page biographies, were popular among less confident readers as they found them aesthetically appealing, easily-accessible, and digestible. All of this is not to say that classroom shelves and school libraries are overflowing with these new biographies. There is a chronic lack of investment in school libraries – a quarter of disadvantaged schools in England do not even have a library (National Literacy Trust,

2021). However, it is to say that these texts do seem to have a found a place for themselves within the UK's educational landscape.

Conclusion

From exalted saints to trailblazing rebels, from instructing moral behaviour to facilitating critical reading and thinking, children's biography has evolved significantly since the medieval period. Yet, at the same time, nothing has really changed. The genre's didactic core remains firmly intact, and children are still called upon to do *something* (though that something has changed) in response to the texts. Perhaps most significantly, though, our understanding of children's engagement with and responses to biographical texts has not advanced. Regrettably, and as will become apparent during my review of the research (see Chapter 4), we still know very little about children's actual engagement with the genre. Before proceeding to situate my study within the broader, research landscape, I spend the next chapter discussing one of its key theoretical tenets – Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading. Given many of the studies I review in Chapter 4 also draw upon or are underpinned by Rosenblatt's theory, it seems logical to discuss Rosenblatt's work at this juncture.

Chapter 3. Reader Response Theory and Rosenblatt

Introduction

This chapter focuses on Rosenblatt, whose theoretical works underpin this study. I explain why I have chosen to adopt a reader response perspective to explore the study's research questions and detail how I arrived at Rosenblatt's work, specifically. I describe how Rosenblatt conceives of the reading experience by focusing on two key tenets within her work. Firstly, I summarise her transactional theory of reading, which holds that texts do not hold fixed meanings. Rather, Rosenblatt proposes that meanings are constructed through readers' transactions *with* texts. Secondly, I provide an overview of the efferent-aesthetic continuum Rosenblatt sets forth, which operates as a type of framework for discerning how readers approach texts.

Arriving at Rosenblatt

Throughout, I view and analyse readers' responses to and engagement with the texts from a reader response perspective. Primarily, I take this perspective because reader response theory emphasises the reader's active role in constructing meaning when engaging with texts. Rather than the text being an object upon which information, knowledge and meanings can be extracted or discovered, the reader is understood to play a significant role in the meaning-making process. As the reader arrives at a text at a particular moment, in a particular context, with their own set of experiences and insights, it thus stands to reason that every reader's interaction or 'transaction' (Rosenblatt, 1978) with a text is unique. In fact, the same reader will engage with the same text differently, in a different context, under a different set of circumstances. As will become apparent in Chapter 5, where I discuss the study's methodology in detail, recognising the participants' active role in the reading process is a linchpin in one of the study's primary objectives: to spotlight children's agency and capacity in sharing their own perspectives and knowledges.

However, reader response criticism 'is not a conceptually unified critical position' (Tompkins 1980: ix). There are multiple approaches within what has become known as reader response, with many overlapping points of convergence, as well as some more significant points of divergence. Some of the most prominent thinkers in this field include

Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser and Rosenblatt. In Holland's (1975) work, the role of the reader is paramount. Holland takes a psychological approach, focusing on how readers' personalities and motives affect their engagement with texts. Fish's (1980) work emphasises the role that 'interpretive communities' play in meaning-making, contending that 'it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features' (p. 14). Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies which, crucially, exist prior to the act of reading, therefore determining the shape of what is read (Fish 1980: 14).

Although the theories set forth by thinkers such as Fish (1980) and Holland (1975) *do* highlight the role of the reader when engaging with texts, Iser and Rosenblatt's work differs in that they 'attempt to strike a balance between the information in (and constraints of) the text and the prerogatives and control of the reader' (Sipe 2008: 55). In other words, for Iser and Rosenblatt, both the reader *and* the text are considered integral to the construction of meaning. Margaret Mackey (2011) provides a succinct summary of how Iser perceives this 'fusion' between text and reader:

> Reading, as Iser reminds us (1978, p. 126), is designed for us to take another person's thinking into our own mind, yet our own mind does not evaporate under the weight of another's words. We infuse the words with life but it is partially *our own* life: we contribute the cadence of our own unspoken voicing of the words, the background details of our own world, the emotional force of our own experiences and understanding. A fusion of text and reader evolves, and we generate inferences from both our awareness of the text and our understanding of the world and of ourselves (Mackey 2011: 123).

Affirming that the reader's mind 'does not evaporate under the weight of another's words' (Mackey 2011: 123), Iser clearly ascribes agency to the reader. He also foregrounds the reader's own positionality, calling attention to the reader's background and to the emotional dimensions of their experiences. However, Iser affords the text a greater level of authority in its structuring of meaning than Rosenblatt does in her transactional theory of reading (discussed below). Iser (1978) writes that reading leads 'to the fulfilment of conditions that have already been structured in the text' (p. 50). As Jane Tompkins (1980) puts it, for Iser, 'the reader must act as co-creator of the work by supplying that portion of it which is not written but only implied. […] Each reader fills in the unwritten portions of the text, its "gaps" or areas of "indeterminacy," in his own way'

(p. xv). The reader is deemed active, but the text provides a framework upon which the reader's action can be taken. In Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, the reader and text are considered equal partners.

> Whereas Iser uses the metaphor of a "set of instructions" for the text, Rosenblatt's (1978/1994) metaphor gives a bit more authority to the reader: she calls the text a "blueprint, a guide for the selecting, rejecting, and ordering of what is being called forth" in the reader's mind (p. 11) (Sipe 2008: 57).

According to Rosenblatt's conception, readers have more autonomy in choosing whether to follow or reject the textual 'blueprint', whether to fill pre-existing gaps or to create their own ones.

A Transactional Theory of Reading

Rosenblatt's work has been hugely influential across numerous fields, including literary and critical theory, education, and children's literature. In fact, with regard to the latter, most 21st-century studies of children's responses to picturebooks are 'rooted in the importance of the participation of the reader in the act of reading, usually based on the ideas of Louise Rosenblatt (1978)' (Arizpe 2023a: 141). It was in her first book, *Literature as Exploration* (1938), where Rosenblatt first highlighted the significant role that the reader *and* the text play in the construction of meaning. Rosenblatt (1938/1995) describes the reading process as follows: 'The relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed' (p. 26). Evoking the imagery of a spiral, Rosenblatt depicts the act of reading as something that is neither unidirectional nor ephemeral. Rather, reading is configured as an ongoing, cyclical, iterative and winding process, in which the interaction between reader and text is central. The 'physical text is simply marks on paper until a reader transacts with them' (Rosenblatt 1986: 123).

It was not until 1978 that Rosenblatt used the term 'transaction' to describe the reading process. For Rosenblatt (1978), 'transaction' is when 'the reader looks to the text, and the text is activated by the reader' (p. 18). To the reader, the text brings an arrangement of signs and symbols to be engaged with; to the text, the reader brings their own set of experiences and knowledges. Crucially, as these experiences and knowledges are unique

to each individual reader, there can be, according to Rosenblatt, no single 'true' reading of a text (Shimek 2021: 150). This notion of the impossibility of a single, authoritative 'truth' might seem antithetical to the reading of nonfiction texts, where there is usually an expectation that readers *will* extract objective truths and facts, where there is deemed to be one 'correct' reading. However, any educator who has observed a group of students engaging with a nonfiction text can attest to the varying responses that inevitably ensue. One student's response to a nonfiction text about a tiger might be coloured by their recent visit to a zoo, whereas another student's response might be influenced by their intense fear of wild cats. Both responses are legitimate, and both may or may not involve the retrieval of information.

The Efferent-Aesthetic Continuum

Staying with these hypothetical students and this hypothetical, nonfiction text about tigers, Rosenblatt's (1978) theory would hold that the text could be approached from a more 'efferent' stance or a more 'aesthetic' stance. In basic terms, Rosenblatt posits that readers are likely to adopt a more efferent stance when their purpose is the retrieval of information. In efferent reading, the text is 'viewed as a set of signs whose arrangement is to be described in some objectively verifiable way' (Rosenblatt 1978: 89). Importantly, when approaching a text from an efferent stance, the reader tends to focus on the end product, 'concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading' (Rosenblatt 1978: 24). When adopting a more aesthetic stance, readers connect to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that the words and their referents seem to evoke within them (Rosenblatt 1978: 25). Therefore, while the text about tigers would likely contains facts that are expected to be extracted and retained, readers' responses would be affected by whether they adopted a more efferent or a more aesthetic stance. Regardless, Rosenblatt would affirm no response is 'truer' than another; a position that might be deemed problematic by some educators, say, for whom ensuring students take away the 'correct' knowledge is of utmost importance.

Yet, as Lawrence Sipe (2008) notes, one of Rosenblatt's chief contentions is that 'the immediate, personal response of the individual reader, uninfluenced by the teacher, is the crucial beginning of the literary experience' (p. 58). Rosenblatt is clear that while comprehension activities, analysing literary form, or identifying key themes are

important, personal responses should not be overlooked. Without this, the text cannot 'come alive' for the reader (Rosenblatt 1938/1970: 81). Furthermore, Rosenblatt warns against the simplistic view that readers adopt an efferent stance when reading nonfiction and an aesthetic stance when reading fiction. She was clear that these 'two stances constitute opposite ends of a continuum rather than a dichotomous pair' (Sipe 2008: 57) and that readers have autonomy to choose where they fall on the continuum (though this will be shaped by external factors such as the text's content and aesthetic qualities, readers' expectations, and educators' instructions). Nonetheless, and despite research illuminating the various stances readers adopt when engaging with nonfiction texts (as will become apparent in [Chapter 4](#)), scholars, researchers and educators often equate efferent reading with nonfiction, and aesthetic reading with fiction (Spink, 2019). As Kevin Spink notes, this can 'short-change' the full range of possible benefits offered by both fiction and nonfiction texts (2019: section 1, para. 4).

Conclusion

Exploring response is a messy, thorny and complex process. 'Response' is a broad term, which can be used to invoke a variety of reactions, ways of engaging, and ways of expressing. Some aspects of response are visible and identifiable, while others are invisible and thus go undetectable. As I discuss in detail in [Chapter 8](#), there is scholarly debate, for example, around whether or how critical engagement fits within (or beyond) Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, and what this critical engagement might look like. For now, suffice to say readers respond to texts of all genres in a multitude of ways, and Rosenblatt's theory and accompanying continuum of stances offers a helpful framework for exploring readers' engagement while honouring each reader's individual experience.

Chapter 4. Children's Responses: Reviewing the Research

Introduction

There is a dearth of studies exploring children's responses to nonfiction, and even fewer focusing on responses to biographies. Not only have literary scholars been slow to theorise nonfiction (Sanders 2018: 2), but interest in children's engagement with the genre has been similarly deficient. 'Although there is an increasing amount of empirical research on how to use nonfiction in schools' (Tandoi and Spring 2022: 115), research tending to children's engagement with nonfiction beyond the exclusive purpose of its utilisation as an educational tool, is scarce. Indeed, as these studies are focused on understanding how texts can be used most effectively in educational settings, they tell us very little about how readers are actually engaging with nonfiction, or the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of their responses. While my study considers the pedagogic implications arising from its findings, one of its chief contentions is that paying attention to children's engagement with contemporary biographies about women is valuable beyond formal or more traditional educational purposes, such as investigating what nonfiction texts are most effective for developing students' comprehension skills, for example. Therefore, this review is limited to studies in which the objectives are not exclusively educational (though some studies do include recommendations for educators and almost all took place in school settings).

I begin this chapter by reviewing the few studies that have explored children's responses to and engagement with biographies, before casting the net wider to consider studies that have explored children's engagement with other types of nonfiction texts. This is an important adjunct, as participants' engagement with the biographies seemed to be determined, at least in part, by their expectations of what nonfiction is or what nonfiction should be. However, in addition to being biographical and nonfiction, these texts can also be considered feminist texts. Foregrounding and celebrating 'empowering' women, they are objects of popular feminism (see Chapter 2). Therefore, the final part of this chapter reviews research pertaining to children's engagement with popular feminist texts across the broader media landscape.

Children's Responses to Biography

Using various combinations of a number of key words and phrases, including 'reader response'; 'biography'; 'children's biography'; 'good night stories for rebel girls'; 'fantastically great women'; 'women'; 'children'; and 'readers', I identified five studies that include readers' responses to children's biographies (Armstrong, 2005; Griffin, 2010; Haight and Boryenace, 2019; López Estrada, 2019; Zarnowski, 1988). Of these five, only Mary Armstrong (2005), Jennifer Griffin (2010) and Zarnowski's (1988) studies include analysis of children's responses to biographies. Patricia López Estrada (2019) analyses university students' – not children's – responses to *Good Night Stories* as part of her investigation into the use of empowerment pedagogy, and while Jesse Haight and Vanessa Boryenace's (2019) report makes brief reference to girls' responses to biographies about women, it does not present analysis of these responses. Rather, the report describes how the researchers established an after-school group for girls aged between three and six in Pennsylvania, the primary goal being to encourage active citizenship (Haight and Boryenace, 2019). The girls engaged with biographies about women, finding ways to replicate aspects of the women's work in their local community. Although these two studies provide very limited or, in the case of López Estrada (2019), no insight into children's responses to biographies, they are included in this review because similar to the other studies, they call attention to the texts' capacity to inspire readers and to instigate discussions around gender equality.

Armstrong (2005), Griffin (2010) and Zarnowski's (1988) analyses all pay attention to *how* their participants engaged with biographical texts. Zarnowski's (1988) study involved eight children (five girls and three boys) from a public school in New York City. The participants represented different ethnic and racial backgrounds and were selected 'because they were average or above average readers who would benefit from reading and responding to literature' (Zarnowski 1988: 62). Over the course of three weeks, participants read biographies of Margaret Thatcher, Mother Teresa, Dolly Parton, Golda Meir, Diana Ross, Dorothea Lange and Betty Friedan; wrote journal entries in response to the texts; and engaged in group discussions. Zarnowski (1988) does not offer extensive insight into how participants responded, though she does note that their responses 'indicated that the children understood that a biography gives facts about the person's life and focuses on an individual's development in roughly chronological order' (p. 62).

The notion that children have expectations that biographies contain factual information is corroborated by Armstrong's (2005) and Griffin's (2010) studies.

Rosenblatt's efferent stance provides a useful vocabulary for capturing the expectations Zarnowski (1988), Griffin (2010) and Armstrong's (2005) participants attached to nonfiction. They seemed to presume that the biographical texts were for retrieving information. In other words, that they were for efferent reading. In a large midwestern US city, Griffin (2010) spent one year researching second graders' small-group, peer-led discussions about three genres of literature, one of which was biographical picturebooks. The study's primary goal was to explore how peer talk mediated response and how the type of genre affected response. One of the data excerpts Griffin (2010) presents perfectly encapsulates this expectation of biographies as factual resources. The excerpt is taken from a discussion where participants were engaging with *When Esther Morris Headed West* (Wooldridge, 2001), a biographical text about the first female judge in the US. Griffin (2010) recalls that the discussion opened with one participant, Emily, ruminating about the significance of suffragists on gender equality today. Emily said, "Girls might not have had // girls might not have rights today thanks to Esther Morris" (Griffin 2010: 103) and another participant, Jason, challenged this suggestion by asking, "where does it say that?" (Griffin 2010: 104). Jason's question suggests an understanding that extracting information is the only type of legitimate response to the text. It also implies that the text holds pre-eminent status – if the conjecture that women and girls have benefited from Morris' actions is not identifiable in the text, it is not necessarily reliable.

Armstrong (2005) goes beyond suggesting her participants' 'fascination with facts' (p. 181) was simply indicative of their expectations of the genre. Rather, she interprets their keen engagement with facts to be demonstrative that personal interest was a key driver of engagement. Armstrong's (2005) doctoral study examined children's (aged 9 to 11) responses to nonfiction, including biographical texts, over a four-month period. The classroom-based study was undertaken in Arizona in the US, and data included transcripts from interviews; interactive read aloud sessions and discussions; observational field notes; and student artefacts (drawings and written responses). Observing that participants often responded to the texts through reciting facts and retelling information, Armstrong (2005) reflects:

It should not be surprising that students documented facts or retold information in response to nonfiction. Nonfiction is typically looked upon as collections of facts. However, I regarded students' fascination with facts and assignment of value to them was much more than simple recitation. Students did not collect random facts; they selected and reported facts that had personal meaning (Armstrong 2005: 181).

This observation that participants' engagement with facts was contingent on personal connection to the subject matter resonates with another observation Armstrong makes, which is that participants' engagement was both prompted and sustained by personal interest in the topic: 'The students' curiosities moved them into independent inquiry. They exhibited fascination with their topics, often taking their work home, an atypical behavior for these students. Pursuing their own questions sustained them and fueled their inquiries' (Armstrong 2005: 260). In other words, participants did not extract and recite facts as a matter of course. They engaged with material that was of interest to them. Crucially, having autonomy to follow their interests propelled participants to engage further.

Interestingly, Armstrong (2005) and Griffin (2010) highlight that, contrary to participants' expectations about nonfiction being for efferent reading, participants *did* engage with the biographies in ways that went beyond simply adopting an efferent stance. Armstrong (2005) reports:

After reading biographies, students in this study expressed outrage at the racism, discrimination and segregation depicted in the United States historically and in the present. They registered curiosity about the motivations and styles of artists. Students reported they 'got possessed' by and 'got hooked' on the lives of people whose biographies they read. They personally connected with the people whose lives they explored and made comparisons between their own lives. These students did not simply extract information from the biographies and report it; they exhibited strong interest and engagement (Armstrong 2005: 268).

Although Armstrong's participants expressed curiosity and interest in the lives of individuals they read about, they also responded in deeply personal ways, drawing connections between the texts and their own lives and experiences. Griffin (2010) also notes that participants engaged with the texts in 'affective' ways (that is, their responses conveyed feelings evoked by the text or discission), though it is unclear to what extent this analysis applies to their engagement with biographies, specifically, as the study

included three different genres. Nonetheless, observations that highlight the variety of children's responses to nonfiction, such as these, are important. As Armstrong (2005) asserts, 'When nonfiction is regarded as more than a repository for facts to be extracted and reported, when the power and possibilities that response to nonfiction are embraced and supported, learners will thrive' (p. 260). Studies highlighting children's oscillation between efferent and aesthetic stances when engaging with nonfiction are vital for debunking the myth that nonfiction serves an exclusively efferent purpose (Alexander and Jarman, 2015; 2018; Heller, 2006; Khieu, 2014; Maynes, 2018; Tower, 2002), as they help advance a re-framing of the genre so that readers' experiences can be enhanced and expanded.

Armstrong (2005) and Griffin's (2010) observations that participants' responses also included questioning further subverts the expectation that reading nonfiction is synonymous with a mere inhalation of facts. Both researchers developed a set of categories – that included questioning – to capture the type of responses their participants engaged with. However, the nature of participants' questioning differed across the studies. In Armstrong's (2005) study, participants seemed to ask questions, primarily, to satisfy their own curiosities and to learn more. Comparatively, in Griffin's (2010) study, participants' questioning often involved challenges to the texts' factual accuracy. Reporting on participants' conversations about biography, Griffin (2010) notes that

> … students often questioned the sources of the information that were, or
> should have been, included in the books. […] As students discussed this topic,
> they examined facts from within the text and from outside sources, referred
> to the author's point of view as a source of information, and did their own
> research about the historical events covered in the books (Griffin 2010: 121).

In light of the entrenched presumption that nonfiction is factual, neutral and apolitical, and thus disqualified from scrutiny or challenge (as discussed by Beauvais, 2020; Crisp et al., 2021; Sanders, 2018), Griffin's (2010) finding that children can and do question the 'truth' of nonfiction texts is significant. Though Griffin (2010) does not discuss the specific conditions that gave rise to this type of questioning, one of her recommendations is that teachers engage as responsible and reflective practitioners, scaffolding students' conversations and providing explicit instructions on the process of collaborative discourse (pp. 162-63). Griffin also suggests that collaborative or communal reading (a point I return

to in the following section on nonfiction) and engagement with particular genres can promote critical inquiry. For example, she writes that multicultural literature 'may bring content about currently marginalized groups to the center of inquiry where issues like discrimination, racism, and prejudice are explored' (Griffin 2010: 26).

Another point of commonality across the studies is an interest in how participants responded to the inspirational aspect of the biographies they engaged with. Zarnowski (1988) writes that the biographies evoked a number of interesting discussion topics among participants, including whether they found the women inspirational:

> The children suggested that both possibilities were tenable. One child wrote that readers 'might get upset' if they failed at a career they had learned about through books; another child, in contrast, stated that a biography could inspire a person to 'a dream that might come true (Zarnowski 1988: 62).

In other words, the texts' inspirational capacity was not a foregone conclusion for participants. Here, it is useful to return to Haight and Boryenace (2019) and López Estrada's (2019) studies. During their bi-weekly meetings with the group of girls in Pennsylvania, Haight and Boryenance (2019) read picturebooks celebrating inspirational women. Although, as aforementioned, the authors provide little insight into the girls' engagement with the texts, they do report that, at the outset of the project, the girls seemed sceptical about their capability to 'fix problems' given their age. One of the girls said, "I'm in kindergarten and we are just learning how to read. We don't learn about fixing problems" (Haight and Boryenance 2019: 10 and 12). However, the researchers suggest that as the girls read about the women, they were inspired to act. Having read about Isatou Ceesay from Gambia who invented a way of recycling plastic bags, 'they were eager to teach reducing, reusing, and recycling lessons at their local libraries and host an art/invention show with the repurposed materials, just as Isatou Ceesay did' (Haight and Boryenance 2019: 13). Although Zarnowski (1988) and Haight and Boryenance's (2019) reports are more anecdotal as opposed to analytical, these examples suggest that the readers' engagement with the biographies as sources of inspiration was an elemental part of their experiences.

López Estrada (2019) chose to use *Good Night Stories* for her investigation into the use of empowerment pedagogy (an approach that 'promotes students taking ownership of their

own learning process' (López Estrada 2019: 223)) in higher education because of its inspirational capacity. López Estrada (2019) contends that the text offers 'a distinctive perspective that included women as visible, empowered individuals to further the students' own ways of thinking and perceiving' (p. 226). In an advanced English class for Computer Engineering students at the Instituto Technológico de Costa Rica, López Estrada used the text with her class every week over the course of one semester. The class consisted of ten men and one woman, aged between 18 and 22, and each class included the reading aloud of two or three biographies followed by group discussions. López Estrada (2019) observed that students 'constantly referred to the girls of the stories as inspiring, amazing, extraordinary, warriors, athletes, independent, strong, bold, and emancipated' (p. 232). These adjectives are littered throughout *Good Night Stories,* and so the students' invocation of them might be expected. Indeed, one of the categories Sipe (2008) develops in his exploration of children's responses to picturebooks is imitation of the text's language (p. 115). That is, readers respond to texts by using the exact language found therein. Zarnowski (1988) reports a similar finding: 'Their responses echoed the message, frequently found in children's biographies, that through hard work and determination, women could achieve' (p. 62). Again, these observations highlight the significance of the expectation and/or experience of biographies as potential sources of inspiration.

In addition to evoking conversations regarding the biographies' inspirational capacity, three of the studies (Griffin, 2010; López Estrada, 2019; Zarnowski, 1988) report that biographies about women instigated conversations regarding gender equality. López Estrada (2019) observed a dichotomy between participants' perceptions of gender equality, noting that approximately half the students agreed 'lack of gender equality is not a real problem in our society. To an extent, students perceived the stories as fictional; they were seen as examples of "realities" that do not exist', while 'the rest of the students consciously expressed how gender inequality is perpetuated in all social, academic, and professional levels' (López Estrada 2019: 232). Comparatively, Zarnowski (1988) found a dichotomy *within* participants' own reflections on gender equality:

> The children's journals pointed out contradictions between what they read
> and what they knew from experience. For instance, one child wrote of women
> and men as "almost equal," and another youngster stated that women are

mostly athletes, singers, and politicians. Several sentences later, this same child noted that most women stayed home all day (Zarnowski 1988: 62).

This particular example suggests a fissure between the reader's personal experiences and observations (that most women stay at home), and what is presented in the text (that most women are athletes, singers and politicians). As there are so few studies exploring children's engagement with media foregrounding contemporary women as feminist role models, it is impossible to say anything beyond acknowledging that further exploration is required. What is clear, however, is that biographies about women have the potential to stimulate conversations about issues pertaining to gender equality, justice and activism.

Reviewing the few studies that have paid attention to readers' responses to biographies has offered some insight into potential points of significance for further research. Specifically, it has highlighted the tension between expectations and perceptions of biographical texts as straightforwardly factual, and the heterogeneity of readers' actual engagement. It has also indicated that biographical texts can be valuable prompts for broader discussions around gender equality, and has incited important questions around biographies as sources of inspiration. How do readers conceive of inspirational-ness? Where is the boundary between being inspirational and being realistic? Clearly, more studies exploring children's responses to biographies are needed, as are studies tending to children's engagement with feminist media more broadly.

Children's Responses to Nonfiction

As aforementioned, most of the research exploring children's responses to nonfiction has taken place in educational settings (mainly in the US) with the primary purpose of supporting teachers in utilising the genre to its full capacity (Barone and Barone, 2016; McClure and Fullerton, 2017; Zarnowski and Turkel, 2012). Some studies, for example, have explored how nonfiction texts can be used as mentor texts to support students with their writing (Dawes et al., 2019; Dorfman and Cappelli, 2009; Sanders and Moudy, 2008). While I have procured three more studies than I did for my review on children's engagement with biography, there remains a dearth of research focusing on children's engagement with nonfiction where the objectives are not orientated towards assessing educational outcomes and attainment. Again, I focused my search using key words and

phrases, this time including 'information texts' and variations of 'nonfiction' ('non-fiction' and 'non fiction').

My review contains some of the points of significance identified in my review of studies tending to readers' responses to biographies. Similar to Armstrong (2005), some studies identify readers' personal interest in the topic as a key driver of engagement (Alexander and Jarman, 2015; Maynes, 2018; Smith, 2004). Most notably, though, many of the studies highlight the tension between assumptions around nonfiction as a site for efferent reading, and readers' responding in ways that extend far beyond an efferent style (Alexander and Jarman, 2015; 2018; Graff and Shimek, 2020; Heller, 2006; Khieu, 2014; Maynes, 2018; Shimek, 2021; Tower, 2002). The only point of significance I have identified in this review that does not seem as prominent in the biography literature pertains to the impact of collaborative or communal reading on children's experiences of reading nonfiction (Alexander and Jarman, 2015; Shimek 2021; Maynes, 2018). In these nonfiction studies, the authors draw on their own data and build on reader response studies involving fiction texts to suggest that readers' engagement with other readers impacts their meaning-making.

Joy Alexander and Ruth Jarman (2015), Danielle Ford and colleagues (2006), Mary Heller (2006), and Susannah Smith (2004) provide insight into how participants in their studies perceived nonfiction and its purpose. For all, the understanding that nonfiction is factual and for learning, was predominant. Investigating the nonfiction reading habits of six boys over a two-year period in the UK, Smith (2004) found that all participants suggested the purpose of reading nonfiction was to find information. Heller (2006) explains how she set up a book club for girls (aged six and seven) at a school in the midwestern US to examine their responses to nonfiction texts. Participating in 12 sessions, the girls read the texts, engaged in group discussions, and responded through writing and drawing. Heller (2006) notes that, prior to beginning, the girls demonstrated familiarity with the term 'nonfiction': ' "Nonfiction is true; it's stuff you learn; it's factual; it's important" ' (p. 361). Similarly, in their exploration of how 45 girls (aged eight and nine) experience reading science texts in the US, Ford and colleagues (2006) found that the girls' sense of purpose in reading the texts was closely connected to learning: 'Their understanding of school science may be intertwined so deeply with their understanding of reading science that they may not be able to imagine science reading outside of a school-based purpose of

learning' (p. 82). In these studies, participants had clear expectations for the texts: they were factual and their primary purpose was for learning.

In their (2015) article, Alexander and Jarman reflect on their experiences of working with 46 young panellists (aged between 8 and 14) who participated as judges for the 2011 Royal Society Young People's Book Prize (an annual prize awarded for the best science information book). They note that a 'sizable number believed that narrative was inappropriate for science and that it was a genre in which it was harder to highlight information and facts' (Alexander and Jarman 2015: 127). They also recall one participant's warning that blending story and fact could be confusing for younger readers: ' "they might think it's fiction instead of teaching the facts about the world" ' (Alexander and Jarman 2015: 127). Given nonfiction picturebooks no longer tend to communicate knowledge 'in an essentially descriptive, explicative, authoritative, objective and unquestionable way, but in a deliberately open-ended, innovative, creative, subjective and revisable manner' (Grilli 2020: 12), this is an intriguing observation, for it suggests readers' expectations of nonfiction might preclude engagement with texts that are less traditional and more experimental.

However, this is not what Mary-Louise Maynes found in her (2018) exploration of how children make meaning when engaging with poetic nonfiction picture books, which she categorises as a type of hybrid text. In very broad terms, hybrid texts cross boundaries, artfully integrating types of narrative (such as poetry) and information (Bintz and Ciecierski, 2017). Maynes (2018) analysed the responses of four pairs of children, aged 9 and 10, at an East Midlands school in England. Each pair engaged with the texts (their conversations were recorded) and Maynes interviewed them afterwards. Interestingly, Maynes notes that seven out of eight participants did not express resistance to the texts' ambiguous style:

> Comments about the reliability, truthfulness and the genre of the text reflected what could be described as the children's awareness and tolerance of ambiguity […] With the exception of Cory all of the children were willing to accept that the author could combine truth and fiction in one text (Maynes 2018: 124).

One of the study's most striking findings is 'that the children understood the nonfictional nature of the texts but responded first to their aesthetic and emotive qualities' such as

the visual imagery and more 'literary' content (Maynes 2018: i). Arguably, the style of these texts, where poetic language 'generates ambiguous meanings and invites diverse readings and interpretations' (Maynes 2018: 31), is more likely to evoke more aesthetic responses compared to texts that use a lot of scientific terms. As Grilli (2020) suggests, contemporary nonfiction, especially in picturebook form, 'cares not only about triggering an intellectual but also an emotional, affective and aesthetic reaction in children before the world, considering this not a secondary or alternative aspect, but a necessary part of the learning process' (p. 14).

Jennifer Graff and Courtney Shimek's (2020) exploratory study involved observations of how children aged between four and ten responded to contemporary nonfiction in two schools in the southeastern US. Similar to Maynes (2018), they found that readers seemed to embrace the texts' ambiguous qualities. One of their conclusions is that contemporary nonfiction is particularly effective in prompting engagement that goes beyond the efferent:

> While nonfiction children's trade books published prior to 2000 were innovative and may have shifted the role of the reader on occasion, many were primarily designed to provide information readers could take away from them (Galda and Liang, 2003). Contemporary nonfiction children's literature builds upon these innovative designs and more frequently encourages readers to physically and emotionally respond to the information and to consider how they currently are experts and people who can enact change (Graff and Shimek 2020: 227).

Graff and Shimek (2020) provide five short examples of what they term, readers' 'remixed responses', positing that these remind us of the possibilities for children's engagement with nonfiction when they are not bound exclusively to 'demonstrating understanding of traditional genre characteristics or substantiating the main ideas and supporting details of nonfiction' (p. 231). For example, Graff and Shimek (2020) describe how, having been inspired by the humorous tone in *Look Up! Bird-Watching in Your Own Backyard* (Cate, 2013), three students collaborated to infuse a piece of their written work about robots with puns and jokes. They tested their material and sought feedback from others, ultimately aiming to give readers an opportunity to think about the information in a fun and engaging way. Graff and Shimek's (2020) article is a compelling reminder of the merits and value that can be garnered from research exploring children's responses to

nonfiction when education is not the sole objective, and where readers' remixed responses are embraced.

A different study by Alexander and Jarman (2018) set out to investigate what kinds of pleasure reading science information books can yield for children. They gathered data from 2014 to 2017 during a school-based reading challenge in which children (aged between 8 and 14) read a selection of contemporary science information books, described as 'wonderfully attractive, high-quality productions with an undoubted *wow!* factor' (Alexander and Jarman 2018: 83). Questionnaires were administered to almost 200 participants and teachers, with a small sample from each school being interviewed. Although this study did not involve the researchers observing readers' responses to the texts in real time, the children's reflections on their experiences of reading are insightful:

> There was evidence that the children had responded to the books not only at an intellectual level, but also at an emotional level, with a high percentage reporting feeling awe and wonder and a desire to find out more: "I think the physics books and the chemistry books were very 'wow' but then the biology books you were just, well how does the body do this? How is all this there? You'd be amazed" (13-year-old girl); "Now I love science and I just want to read more about it. I was just like, Oh I have to read more of these. When you lift up a science book it tells you loads of new facts that you've never known before and you're just like, phow, I didn't know that" (9-year-old girl) (Alexander and Jarman 2018: 82).

Here, the authors' use of the words, 'awe' and 'wonder' clearly evince emotional expression. They also describe the synergy between these more aesthetic responses with more efferent styles of reading – note that the nine-year-old girl expresses excitement about the facts in the science book – concluding that 'learning by stealth was more powerful when it was accompanied by an emotional response, such as awe and amazement' (Alexander and Jarman 2018: 131).

However, studies utilising more traditional, less 'ambiguous', or non-hybrid texts also call attention to readers' aesthetic responses when engaging with nonfiction. For example, Heller (2006) selected 10 books written in expository prose by Seymour Simon for her nonfiction book club. Published in 2002, these books follow the more traditional style of nonfiction, with large chunks of text accompanied by explanatory photographs or illustrations. Prior to beginning the club, Heller (2006) wondered, 'would the children's oral and written responses to nonfiction information books be grounded in the facts

learned from their readings? Or would their responses be narrative in nature?' (p. 359). Heller (2006) observed that although participants responded efferently (their responses were connected to the new information they acquired, with 70 per cent of their conversational turns involving the telling and retelling facts), they also responded aesthetically:

> They were in awe of the splendor of the planets in our solar system and the beauty of an erupting volcano. They laughed at the sweetness of the baby animals and lovable wild bears and expressed wonder at the massive killer whales. They shuddered in fear of blazing fires, devastating earthquakes, and violent weather patterns (Heller 2006: 365).

Like Alexander and Jarman (2018) Heller uses the words, 'awe' and 'wonder' to highlight participants' aesthetic responses. She also notes, 'every response was emotional, because the girls were wildly enthusiastic about everything we read and talked about' (Heller 2016: 366). In other words, the girls' aesthetic and efferent responses co-existed, 'interacting synergistically' throughout the reading events (Heller 2006: 365).

It is thus unclear how contemporary nonfiction texts, which now go 'far beyond facts, readily available elsewhere, to awaken curiosity, inspire awe, and nurture community' (von Merveldt 2018: 232), impact readers' engagement in light of expectations that nonfiction is 'for' efferent reading. Alexander and Jarman's (2015) analysis suggests the new style might be an impediment to engagement, whereas Graff and Shimek (2020) and Maynes' (2018) analyses reveal readers embracing the texts' more ambiguous and experimental qualities. However, it is clear that, regardless of how 'traditional' a nonfiction text might be, readers can and do engage from both aesthetic and efferent stances.

Finally, and as aforementioned, some of these studies discuss the impact collective reading (reading with others) can have on children's experiences of engaging with nonfiction (Alexander and Jarman, 2015; Maynes, 2018; Shimek 2021). Though the studies, with the exception of Maynes (2018), who discusses this at length, only make fleeting reference to collective reading, they all contend that readers' meaning-making is impacted by engagement with other readers. For example, as part of a five-month-long case study of young children's multimodal and collective responses to nonfiction picturebooks, Shimek (2021) analysed a nine-minute video clip of three six- and seven-

year-old boys making sense of a nonfiction picturebook. Her primary objective was to understand what multimodal resources readers use to respond and construct meaning from texts (modes of communication that are not language-based, such as gesture, gaze and body movement). Shimek (2021) concludes that 'the boys' readings show how connections between readers, their lived experiences, and the picturebook's content recursively emerge, disappear, and re-emerge, sometimes with slightly altered interpretations or understandings' (p. 159). In addition to illuminating the recursive, back-and-forth, fluid nature of the boys' responses, Shimek's analysis explicitly highlights interactions between readers as a contributing factor to their meaning-making.

The notion that dialogue among readers is a key, contributing factor in how readers make meaning is not a new idea, with many scholars paying attention to this particular aspect of the reading experience (see Arizpe, Noble and Styles, 2023; Braid and Finch, 2015; Chambers, 1993; Maine, 2015; Pantaleo, 2011, for examples). Through dialogue, meanings are negotiated, resisted and reviewed, and new meanings are developed. It therefore stands to reason that the impact of readers' engagement with other readers should be taken into account when exploring responses to all texts in group settings. As I discovered, this was no easy feat when exploring readers' responses via videoconferencing; a limitation I return to in my concluding chapter.

In summary, studying the small corpus of research on children's engagement with nonfiction has revealed similar points of significance identified in my review of readers' engagement with biographies. Clearly, children engage with nonfiction in a multitude of complex and varied ways, even when they affirm the texts are primarily for information-retrieval. The significance of this observation should not be minimised. Not only does it help expand the possibilities of the genre and children's experience with it, but realising the breadth and richness of children's multifaceted responses to nonfiction helps affirm young readers as active, engaged participants in the reading process. This said, my review has also highlighted the need for greater insight into how contemporary styles of nonfiction might be affecting or impacting children's engagement. Although Graff and Shimek (2020) and Maynes' (2018) studies point to readers tolerating and even embracing the texts' ambiguous and hybrid qualities, Alexander and Jarman (2015) observed some resistance from readers as the style jarred with their expectations of the

genre. Finally, this review has highlighted the importance of considering readers'
engagement with others when exploring how they make meaning.

Children's Responses to Popular Feminist Texts

Besides being biographical texts and nonfiction texts, contemporary biographies about
women may also be regarded as popular feminist texts. Popular feminist texts can be
described as a range of phenomena that circulate in the mainstream and commercial
media, espousing messages of empowerment, and celebrating the achievements of
women and girls in an often individualised and depoliticised context (Gill, 2016;
Rottenberg, 2019). Lamentably, despite girls comprising the target audience for many
popular feminist texts, there is very little research tending to young people's engagement
with, and negotiations of, this type of media (as noted by Jackson, 2021; Keller and
Ringrose, 2015; and Wood and Litherland, 2018).

For this review, I systematically searched for literature using various combinations of
words and phrases, including 'girls'; 'children'; 'response'; 'feminism'; 'popular feminism';
'celebrity'; 'media'; 'films'; 'movies'; and 'role models'. This yielded only three relevant
studies, two of which explore girls' engagement with celebrity feminism (Jackson, 2021;
Keller and Ringrose, 2015) and one focusing on girls' experiences of costume playing as
the character, Rey, from Star Wars (Wood et al., 2020). While this small corpus of studies
reveals very little about children's responses to and engagement with popular feminist
texts, it does provide insight into some of the ways girls might be engaging with
contemporary narratives of 'empowering' and 'inspirational' women.

Celebrities who declare themselves feminist are an integral component of the 'popular
feminist terrain' (Jackson 2021: 1077). They themselves can be read as popular feminist
texts, as can the media they produce, which spans a range of spaces including television,
pop music, social media, broadcast media and literature. Jessalyn Keller and Jessica
Ringrose (2015) were the first to publish research examining teenage girls' responses to
celebrity feminism, which they describe as 'a form of popular feminism made visible
recently by young celebrity women eager to publicly claim a feminist identity' (p. 132).
Keller and Ringrose present their findings from two separate research projects involving
interviews undertaken with five girls belonging to a feminist club at a London secondary

school, and eight girls engaged in feminist politics as bloggers in the US. They conclude that while the girls often problematised and questioned 'the ability of celebrities to represent the complexities of contemporary feminist issues […] including systemic inequalities, racialised sexualisation, and a lack of feminist education', many articulated the benefits of having feminist identities and discourses within popular culture (Keller and Ringrose 2015: 134). In other words, the girls expressed scepticism about representations of feminism by celebrities, but also acknowledged the benefits attached to celebrities' heightened visibility.

Jackson (2021) has also been a strong proponent of the need to expand our understandings of girls' engagement with, and perspectives on, popular feminism. In her (2021) article, Jackson marks 2014 as 'something of a pinnacle in feminism's mediated presence and popularity as a succession of celebrities declared themselves to be feminists' (p. 1072). Drawing on her research with New Zealand feminists (aged 15 to 18) in high school feminist clubs, Jackson explores how members constructed celebrity feminism in relation to their own meanings of feminism and feminist identification. She conducted focus groups with 30 young feminists and used a Foucauldian-informed feminist poststructuralist approach to analyse the discourses, deriving three constructions of celebrity feminism: 'basic', 'trendy' and 'non-activist'. Jackson (2021) notes that constructions of celebrity feminism as 'basic' recognise the shortcomings and limitations of celebrity feminism (participants used descriptors such as 'shallow', 'easy' and 'surface'), but acknowledge that it plays an important 'initiation' role in 'getting people in' to feminism (pp. 1079-80). The 'trendy' construction highlights girls' fears that 'feminism is under threat from the meanings of celebrity feminism as "trendy" and "glamorous" ' (Jackson 2021: 1084), and 'non-activist' speaks to the girls' construction of feminism as requiring action, with celebrities often existing 'as exemplars of the gap between talking about feminism and "doing" feminism' (Jackson 2021: 1085). One of Jackson's (2021) main findings is that 'girls more often constructed celebrity feminism as the "other" to a "deeper" feminism – one concerned with intersectional address, feminist collectivity, and political activism' (p. 1088).

The three constructions of celebrity feminism Jackson (2021) develops resonate with Keller and Ringrose's (2015) findings. Most notably, the girls Keller and Ringrose (2015) spoke with also saw the visibility of feminism in popular culture as advantageous, while

simultaneously recognising its shortcomings. Furthermore, just as Jackson's (2021) participants expressed weariness about celebrity feminism being 'trendy', Keller and Ringrose (2015) highlight girls' fears that representations of feminism by celebrities risk turning feminism into 'fashion'. It is interesting to consider these findings in the context of contemporary biographies about women. Although there is an attempt to showcase the lives of less well-known women, the texts often include celebrities and other famous women who young readers are likely to recognise. Furthermore, as the biographies are limited to just one or two pages, the texts are arguably susceptible to critiques that they lack depth. Contemporary biographies about women therefore provide an auspicious opportunity for further exploration of how children might be responding to popular feminist texts.

It is important to note that participants in both of these studies were either members of feminist clubs or feminist bloggers. In Jackson's (2021) study, participants are described as being well-educated girls from largely advantaged families. In Keller and Ringrose's (2015) article, the underpinning data is from two studies, one of which was undertaken in a fee-paying, performing arts school in central London. The particularities of these contexts are not lost on Jackson (2021), who asserts that further research is required with girls of different social and cultural backgrounds to explore whether and how mediated popular/celebrity feminism figures in their understandings of feminism (p. 1088). I agree, though I would contend that explorations into *children's* engagement with these types of texts, including boys, is also necessary. Boys may not be the substantive target audience for feminism, but they are not immune to consuming popular feminist media. In my experience of conducting this study, I found some of the boys' responses to be incredibly challenging, but also deeply insightful. This is a point I return to in Chapter 8 when reflecting on two of the boys' responses that could be interpreted as them experiencing the biographies as resistant outsiders, raising urgent questions about how boys can be engaged with feminism so that they see themselves, not as excluded others, but as productive participants.

The final study in this review is authored by Rachel Wood, Benjamin Litherland and Elizabeth Reed (2020), who provide a compelling analysis of how nine girls (aged 5 to 10) and their parents experience costume playing as Rey from the *Star Wars* trilogy. 'As a questing heroine with mysterious origins and powerful control of the 'Force' [...] Rey can

be contextualized within a neoliberal version of popular feminism' (Wood et al. 2020: 547). The authors draw on the work of Amy Ratcliffe (2016) who describes Rey as a 'girl who can do anything', to suggest that such framing serves to inspire children (often girls) 'to imagine their selves and futures in new, enabling and empowering ways' (Wood et al. 2020: 546). The researchers administered an online questionnaire and invited the girls to draw a picture of themselves dressed as Rey. The study sought to understand what role dressing as a character like Rey might play in the everyday lives of the girls, their parents, and families. Though the researchers conclude that their analysis reveals ambiguity about the ways in which girls were using Rey costume play, they affirm that 'participants demonstrated a clear awareness of Rey's brand, repeatedly identifying in drawings and written responses core qualities of bravery, strength and kindness' (Wood et al. 2020: 548). This finding is evocative of López Estrada's (2019) observation that the university students who engaged with *Good Night Stories* repeatedly referred to the women as 'inspiring, amazing, extraordinary, warriors, athletes, independent, strong, bold, and emancipated' (p. 232). There thus seems to be scope for further exploration as to whether there is a common vernacular or a particular type of discourse that is employed in popular feminist texts, and drawn upon by consumers in response.

Close examination of these three studies has not only reified the need for further research into children's responses to and engagement with popular feminist texts, but it has helped identify two particularly promising avenues for inquiry. The first relates to children's interpretations of well-known feminist figures and evokes questions such as: How do children perceive them? What impact do they have on their views and experiences of feminism and feminist identities? This also connects to the issue of inspirational-ness that I touched upon in the first part of this chapter – do children perceive them as inspiring? What does 'inspiring' mean to them? The second avenue for inquiry centres on discourse. While ample attention has been given to identifying and analysing discourses employed across expressions of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2015a; 2018a; Dejmanee, 2018; Orgad and Gill, 2022; Wood and Litherland, 2018), there has been little attempt to make sense of how these discourses are utilised and negotiated by consumers.

Conclusion

Despite the paucity of research around children's responses to biographical texts, the wider genre of nonfiction, and popular feminist texts across other types of media, this review casts light on some shared points of significance and a number of areas requiring further exploration. Firstly, not only is greater attention to children's nonfiction long overdue (Crisp et al., 2021; Goga et al., 2021; Grilli, 2020; Sanders, 2018), but this review suggests the genre's recent evolution in terms of style, formatting and aesthetics might induce a different style of response (Alexander and Jarman, 2015; Graff and Shimek, 2020; Maynes, 2018). Studies centring children's engagement with contemporary nonfiction texts are therefore integral to furthering these initial inquiries. Secondly, many of the reader response studies highlight that children engage with nonfiction in a multitude of complex and varied ways, even when they seem to perceive the texts' purpose as being primarily for efferent reading. Thirdly, and with reference to biographical texts specifically, it appears these can serve as valuable springboards for broader discussions around gender equality and 'inspirational' role models. This finding resonates with my review of studies exploring children and young people's responses to popular feminist texts, where unanswered questions around young people's perceptions of, and the value they ascribe to feminist role models, abound. Finally, two of the studies (López Estrada, 2019; Wood et al., 2020) highlight the evocation of discernible discourses being drawn upon by consumers of popular feminist texts, revealing a need for greater understanding of how consumers are utilising them, and what this can tell us about the broader landscape of children's engagement with (representations of) feminism and expressions of feminist ideas.

Exploration of children's responses to contemporary biographies about women provide an ideal context from which to extend research across these different areas of scholarship. The books are biographical texts, they sit within the broader genre of nonfiction, and they can be considered objects of popular feminism. In the following chapter I explain how I undertook this exploration, outlining my methodological approach and describing how the COVID-19 pandemic affected my research design.

Chapter 5. Methodology

Introduction

I begin this chapter with a brief note on reflexivity before outlining the study's research questions and discussing the critical interpretivist paradigm within which it is grounded. I then provide details of the study's theoretical foundation, poststructuralism, and explain my overall methodological approach. As will become apparent, my initial data gathering plans changed significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussing the study's redesign, I describe how I recruited participants, the methods I used for data gathering, and my approach to analysis. Ethical questions and issues permeated every stage of the research process; they were ongoing and innumerable. Thus, while there is a sub-section dedicated to research ethics, discussions of ethical issues are interwoven throughout.

A Note on Reflexivity

In *Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice,* Patricia Leavy and Anne Harris (2019) draw on the work of Megan Boler (1999) to explain how, in the women's liberation movement, the slogan, 'the personal is the political', symbolised the re-conceptualisation of women's experiences (including their emotions) as political. They describe the slogan's continuing impact on feminist scholarship, arguing that reflexivity can be seen as 'an outgrowth of the social justice movements' (Leavy and Harris 2019: 118). It was in her landmark text, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* that Boler (1999) called for a 'feminist politics of emotion' (p. 109). Boler argued that such an approach was needed to disrupt and challenge ideologies that uphold 'patriarchal binaries of emotion/reason that silence and dismiss emotions within realms of learning and knowledge creation' (Boler cited in Boler and Zembylas 2016: 22). Thus, engaging with emotion as a subject of research and/or as reflexive praxis is regarded as integral to the creation and development of knowledge in many areas of feminist scholarship.

Engaging in reflexive praxis is certainly synonymous with this study's ontological and epistemological underpinnings, which I discuss in detail below. Ontology 'refers to theories about the nature of reality or being, and epistemology to theories about the nature of knowledge and knowledge production' (Braun and Clarke 2021: 166). Ontologically, I do not perceive there to be one reality that can be investigated. Instead, I

am interested in exploring individuals' understandings and how these understandings are expressed. Epistemologically, it is my belief that all knowledge is valuable knowledge – my emotions, intuitions and hunches are not exceptions. They should not be dismissed as 'invalid' or 'unrigorous'. As the researcher, I have been 'the primary "instrument" of data collection and analysis' (Watt 2007: 82) and, in any research study, reflection on the research 'instruments' is integral to the presentation of transparent and robust findings.

Central to this reflection has been a consistent, conscious awareness of my own positionality. Not only have I simultaneously inhabited multiple roles throughout – something I reflect on at numerous points – but I am, as everyone is, an individual with various intersecting axes of identity: I am a white, middle-class, queer, able-bodied, cisgendered woman. My positionality has undoubtedly affected my engagement with this project, including my interpretation of the data. Researchers cannot step outside of their own positionality. Attempts to embrace a detached, neutral position free of one's values, emotions, perspectives and experiences are futile. Therefore, researchers must be as transparent as possible – 'as possible' because much will inevitably escape consciousness – about how their positionality impacts their work. Discussing their experiences of facilitating a doctoral writing group at a UK university, Emily Danvers and colleagues (2019) interrogate normative constructions of research writing, with a particular focus on the eschewal of personal reflection. Inspired by their ruminations, I have endeavoured to embrace the 'queering of taken-for-granted norms of research writing' (Danvers et al. 2019: 35), engaging in reflexive dialogue through the entirety of this thesis. By offering insight into my own positionality, feelings, questions and ruminations, my hope is that the meanings derived from my writing are as emplaced and informed as possible.

Furthermore, and as Louise Holt (2004) reminds us, 'fully conscious agency is rarely accorded to the researched', and so it is 'useful for researchers to admit the partiality of both their accounts and self-knowledge' (p. 15). My accounts are inevitably partial and fragmented. After all, there are limits to reflexivity – 'it may be impossible to grasp the unconscious filters through which we experience events' (Mauthner and Doucet 2003: 425). This is because not all motivations are conscious and not all of one's self is knowable (Holt 2004: 15). Presenting my work with a level of vulnerability and humility is thus part of my commitment to facilitating the formation of research relationships that are as egalitarian and non-hierarchical as possible. From the study's ontological and

epistemological standpoints, writing reflexively is thus indispensable to the production and presentation of rich, valuable research. This said, Linda Finlay (2002) reminds us that 'it is all too easy to fall into an infinite regress of excessive self-analysis at the expense of focusing on the research participants' (p. 532). I have tried to offer transparency about my position and my relationship with the subject matter throughout, while concomitantly ensuring that the participants and their perspectives remain central.

Research Questions

The study has been guided by one main research question:

> How do eight children, aged 7 to 10, respond to and engage with four biographical compendiums about women published between 2016 and 2020?

Supporting research questions are:

1. What are the children's interpretations of the texts?
2. What are the implications of engaging with the texts in relation to the children's aspirations and sense of identification/exclusion with the issues?
3. How does the children's engagement with the texts impact or inform how they make sense of gender/gendered subjectivities?
4. How might the children's engagement with the texts inform their use in pedagogic contexts?

Research Paradigm, Ontology and Epistemology

Having reviewed more than 40 widely available research texts, Noella Mackenzie and Sally Knipe (2006) conclude that paradigms 'receive varied attention in research texts. The role of the paradigm can, therefore, appear somewhat mysterious' (p. 2). I use the term 'paradigm' to refer to that which 'functions at a higher level than methodology' (Newby 2014: 47). It is an umbrella term that signals the theoretical and practical approaches within which the study exists. Linking research philosophy and the practice of research, a paradigm determines the relationship between the research and 'truth'. This study is grounded within a critical interpretivist paradigm. 'Interpretivist', like 'paradigm', is a contested term. I use 'interpretivist' as a descriptor to delineate the idea that

exercising objectivity and 'discovering' a single 'truth' is deemed neither possible nor desirable. 'Critical' signals the study's political motivations and underpinnings. As I go on to discuss, the study draws upon participatory and feminist principles with the aim of increasing visibility of children's responses to and engagement with politically-motivated, feminist content.

Indeed, my ontological position is that there is no single, observable reality that can be investigated or measured. Instead, understandings can be explored. As Lorraine Ling (2020) explains, 'What emerges then from research is not knowledge in the sense of an understanding of reality, but an individual, evidenced understanding of the subject researched' (p. 39). In the case of this study, one of its primary aims is to explore, and thus seek to understand, participants' understandings of and responses to the texts and wider issues. What this means, in practice, is that the understanding(s) I arrive at are inevitably different from the understanding(s) another researcher would arrive at. Similarly, and in accordance with reader response theory, the participants' understandings of and responses to the texts are also uniquely situated.

My epistemological standpoint holds that knowledge is subjective, shifting, context-specific and intricately intertwined with language. I perceive language to be an active phenomenon. It is not a conduit through which reality can be observed and understood. Rather, language plays a crucial role in creating realities and generating knowledge. Therefore, and as I delineate in my section on data analysis, gathering knowledge about participants' understandings and interpretations of the texts inevitably involves paying attention to language.

Poststructuralism: A Key Theoretical Tenet

As I go on to discuss, poststructuralist theory has been a guiding force in how I have designed, developed and carried out this study. It has also provided the theoretical foundation for my analysis of the data, being the central tenet upon which other theories I draw on depend, including reader response theory, and critiques of popular and neoliberal feminisms. As with most bodies of work, poststructuralism has a multitude of competing definitions, variants and dimensions. Its definitional elusiveness seems particularly fitting given that 'as a style and a form of thought it submits to self-reflexive

criticism the identity, clarity, and fixedness of delineation itself' (Bourg and Kleinberg 2019: 490). Perhaps in part because of its cyclically futile relationship with language – its reliance upon it and simultaneous interrogation of its constitutive force – poststructuralism has been critiqued for being destructive, nihilistic and negative (St. Pierre 2000: 482). When Jacques Derrida (1976) declared 'there is nothing outside of the text' (p. 163), some saw this as a preposterous denial of reality (Bowman 2015: 1). Conversely, I see poststructuralism as an illuminator of realities, and use it as a tool to highlight how language functions as a constitutive force.

In the broadest sense, poststructuralism is a theory/group of theories concerned with the relationship between language and the production and re-production of meaning(s). This notion of re-production is central, for according to poststructuralist critique, language is deemed subjective and meanings are always shifting and context-specific. Positioned firmly within the interpretivist paradigm, poststructuralism thus troubles any claim to a single 'truth'. One of the 'truths' poststructuralism is credited with problematising is that of binaries; a problematisation that has informed my methodological approach. The more I read the more sceptical I became of writing that uncritically positions researchers and participants as binary opposites, held in hierarchical straitjackets in which power is held exclusively by the researcher. Michel Foucault (1997a), whose work I draw on throughout this thesis, writes, 'In a great many cases, power relations are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and allow an extremely limited margin of freedom' (p. 292). Although acknowledging that power relations are often 'perpetually asymmetrical', Foucault opens a space that allows slippage and resistance to occur. While the 'margin of freedom' might be slight, it is never entirely absent. Power imbalances that exist in researcher/participant relationships (here, further compounded by adult/child relationships) do not totally interdict the participant's capacity to act. Understanding power in this way means accepting that while I 'cannot jump *outside* the situation, and there is no point where [I am] free from all power relations' (Foucault 1997b: 167), I can be reflexive about my inevitable participation in these relationships. In the context of this research project, this has meant being alert to opportunities in which I could use my own capacity to act to widen the 'margin of freedom' where possible.

As noted above, poststructuralism has also provided the theoretical foundation for how I have interpreted and made sense of the data. Again, this study is not concerned with

locating a single truth about how children read contemporary biographies about women. This is not even deemed possible. It is concerned with exploring the idiosyncrasies of participants' readings, celebrating these readings as legitimate and valuable knowledges, and attempting to make sense of these readings in relation to a wider set of issues, structures, and phenomena. As traces of the participants' readings – for this is all we can ever have access to – expressed through their use of visual and verbal languages are the primary site of analysis, I required a theoretical foundation to enable analysis of how these languages operate. Poststructuralism, with its roots firmly planted in the knotty and complex realm of language and discourse, offers particularly fertile ground for such an inquiry. It also dovetails nicely with Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, which highlights the constitutive role of language in both the text *and* the reader, and how these 'transact' to create meaning(s).

Methodological Approach: A Fusion of Influences

Any study is delivered through the implementation of its methodology, which I see as 'the assembly of research tools and the application of appropriate research rules' (Newby 2014: 53). Fields of research such as feminist research and participatory research, and academic disciplines such as education and geography, do not necessarily have a dominant methodology. Usually, there are competing methodologies, though these often share similar underlying principles (Newby 2014: 72). Hence when I refer to 'feminist research' or 'participatory research' I am pointing to the underlying principles that those fields of research tend to share across methodologies.

Methodologically, this study is upheld by a fusion of participatory and feminist principles. Likely because they have been built upon similar histories, feminist research and participatory research involving children lend themselves particularly well to a synergistic approach.

> In much the same way as feminists exposed the political and ideological processes underpinning 'knowledge' about women, since the 1990s, academics, researchers and practitioners committed to a positive rights agenda for children have sought to 'undo' a range of prevailing 'social truths' about children and childhood (Coppock 2010: 437).

Feminist and participatory methodologies are cross-informing and share many similarities. Most notably, both are social justice driven. Feminist research, which emerged out of a critique of androcentric bias within the sciences and social sciences (Hesse-Biber 2012: 5), seeks ways forward to a better world in which critical scholarship 'plays an active role in inspiring and enacting social change' (Leavy and Harris 2019: 6). Participatory research involving children materialised out of the realisation that children were habitually and unjustly 'excluded from the production of knowledge about their own lives' (Coppock 2010: 437). Thus, both methodologies value personal narratives and experiences as key sources of insight, and fostering egalitarian relations with participants/partners is seen as indispensable to exploring the meanings that women, children and other marginalised or silenced groups give to their worlds.

My methodological approach has also been inspired by the principles of facet methodology, which I briefly describe below before proceeding to discuss how the study has been informed by some of the underlying principles of participatory research involving children and feminist research, respectively.

Taking Inspiration from Facet Methodology

Jennifer Mason's (2011) work on facet methodology has been an inspiring and reassuring anchor throughout this research study. I often returned to Mason's work when I experienced moments of panic; when I worried that my approach was not 'credible' enough, and that dabbling in both feminist and participatory methodologies might lead some readers to render my findings 'invalid'. Facet methodology is an 'orientation and an approach' that Mason developed in collaboration with colleagues at the Morgan Centre, a branch of the UK National Centre for Research Methods. In facet methodology, the overall object of concern (the research phenomenon) is imagined as a gemstone. The facets in the gemstone are carved by the researcher, and they are conceived as 'different methodological-substantive planes and surfaces', casting and refracting light in a variety of different ways (Mason 2011: 77). Together, the carvings 'create a strategically illuminating set of facets in relation to specific research concerns and questions' (Mason 2011: 77). One of the defining principles of facet methodology is that sometimes the smallest facets 'create particularly intense or brilliant shafts of light and colour' (Mason

2011: 77).[7] This is consistent with an interpretivist paradigmatic approach, which 'involves the possibility of multiple discernible realities, multiple renderings and multiple individual locations, none of which is more or less legitimate' (Ling 2020: 38). Regardless of size, legitimacy is procured through 'producing a defended, evidenced interpretation of the subject of research' (Ling 2020: 40).

According to Mason (2011), researchers should have 'a pluralist disposition in relation to method: a willingness to cross conventional boundaries and to bring together alternative ways of generating knowledge' (p. 83). Researchers

> … need to make inventive and even ingenious decisions about which might be particularly compelling lines of enquiry and this cannot be done with deductive reasoning and following predefined methodological procedures alone. Facet methodology explicitly draws imagination, creativity, inventiveness and intuition into research practice (Mason 2011: 80).

Ironically, although Mason and her colleagues describe facet methodology as an 'orientation', reading about this innovative approach gave me the courage to become comfortable with disorientation. For example, and as I discuss in the following section on how the study needed to be redesigned as a result of the pandemic, I often felt disorientated when I was exploring different disciplines in search of tools and methods that I could draw upon and refashion. Yet, this disorientation was indispensable to devising a new set of tools that could effectively explore the study's research questions. Accordingly, although I did not follow facet methodology as an 'approach' in the stringent sense of the word, it did influence how I approached the study's methodology and redesign.

Participatory Principles

This study's theoretical underpinnings orientate its methodology towards a participatory approach. Poststructuralist theories are premised on disrupting hierarchical binaries and 'taken-for-granteds', and promoting egalitarianism. Participatory research similarly strives to dismantle binaries and reduce power imbalances. Within the realm of childhood

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[7] Mason's work is, in part, indebted to Laurel Richardson's and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre's (2005) concept of crystallization. Conceiving of the phenomena under investigation as a crystal, Richardson and St. Pierre describe crystals as 'prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays casting off in different directions' (p. 963). Therefore, what the researcher sees depends on their angle of repose.

research, this was inspired by a growing recognition that children's views and perspectives needed to be privileged. As Imelda Coyne and Bernie Carter (2018) explain, it was not until the 1990s 'that the lack of research with children became increasingly recognised by researchers' (p. 3). This was a result of changing views of childhood – 'children's agency and capacity to be active contributors to research about their lives' began to be recognised – and the publication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child led to increasing acknowledgement of children's rights by key stakeholders in research (Coyne and Carter 2018: 4). As a result, researchers have created and explored new ways of engaging with children and young people, and there has been 'increasing emphasis on participatory research with them to uncover the richness of their worlds' (Coyne and Carter 2018: 4). Crucially, at the heart of this endeavour is the notion that research must be undertaken with children, not on children. Children are treated as experts in their own lives and are thus encouraged to direct (elements of) the research in ways that they see most appropriate (Roberts 2017: section 5, para. 8).

Within the field of children's literature, the titles of the 2017, 2019 and 2023 International Research Society for Children's Literature congresses ('Possible and Impossible Childhoods: Intersections of Children's Literature and Childhood Studies'; 'Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature'; and 'Ecologies of Childhood', respectively), indicate that the field is becoming increasingly concerned with real child readers 'as rightful commentators on cultural phenomena' (Chawar et al. 2018: 114). Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles (2016) similarly note that, since their 2003 study which explored children's responses to picturebooks, much has changed: 'interest in what happens when children interact with visual texts has taken off in exciting ways with new research, edited volumes and doctoral theses devoted to the subject' (p. xv). However, despite this increased interest in real child readers, studies that profess to take a participatory approach remain scarce (Blackford, 2004; Chawar et al. 2018; Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2019; Hawkins, 2010; Mikkelsen, 2005). Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2016b), a proponent of participatory approaches within the field of children's literature, observes that while innumerable scholars often indicate the need to address the question of real children in children's literature studies, 'they stop at that very point' (p. 25). She fervently argues that

> … if children's literature studies is to become a socially relevant academic practice addressing the complexity of children's interactions with literature, we need a substantially more radical approach enabling the redefinition of the power differentials between adults and children at the level of research itself by fostering intergenerational dialog as an imperative complementation of well-established literary criticism (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2016b: 167).

Yet, opportunities for 'intergenerational dialog' are not abundant. The way societies and institutions are structured often impede children from representing and disseminating their perspectives widely, at ease, and to 'the right people'. It seems clear that we need to develop new methodologies to 'enable the joint child-adult co-construction of culturally, socially and politically contextualised knowledge about children's engagements with literature' (Chawar et al. 2018: 114).

As Beauvais (2015) argues in her felicitously titled book, *The Mighty Child: Time and power in children's literature,* the child reader is powerful 'in some sense of the word power', because 'the implied child reader of children's literature *might* be taught by the children's book something that the adult does not yet know' (p. 3). Beauvais (2015) is careful to emphasise the slipperiness or 'fuzziness' of power relations: 'The adult agency, even when didactic, is not necessarily powerful; the child figure, even when turned into a projector-screen for adult desires, is not automatically deprived of power' (p. 3). Therefore, rather than ignoring the power that child readers inevitably have, more expansive, creative work *with* children needs to be undertaken to help bring some of this power or 'might' to light, and help redefine the power differentials, as advocated for by Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2016a; 2016b; 2019).

Looking beyond the field of children's literature, there are numerous models presenting possible levels for participatory research with children. In her compelling article reflecting on children and young people's participation in sensitive research, Melanie McCarry (2012) summarises the works of Pia Christensen and Alan Prout (2002), Roger Hart (1992) and Phil Treseder (1997). McCarry suggests that the frameworks put forward by Christensen and Prout (2002) and Hart (1992) are hierarchically progressive – they strongly imply that researchers should aim to move towards higher levels of participation for children and young people, which will equate to higher levels of participant empowerment. Comparatively, Treseder's (1997) model involves 'degrees' of participation. Treseder suggests 'that the level and type of participation should be

directed by that which is most appropriate rather than simply trying to have full participation as the goal' (McCarry 2012: 58). Ultimately, McCarry (2012) argues that 'equating participation with empowerment is overly simplistic and may actually be counter-productive' (p. 58). Mason (2017) similarly suggests that involving participants in research designs might not always be the most ethical course as 'some participants may not wish to have the burden or responsibility of research decisions that they think you should make' (p. 168). Mason (2017) warns that researchers should not 'expect creative or participatory approaches to be a panacea', explaining that these could be 'anxiety provoking' or even 'disempowering' if participants feel exposed or that they lack the appropriate creative talents (p. 168). Indeed, making any assumptions about how an individual, let alone a group of individuals, might respond to a particular experience is unwise. Moreover, when such assumptions are linked to notions of empowerment within a research context, the consequences can be deeply unpleasant for participants.

The notion of (dis)empowering participants is suffused with ethical complexity. Like power, empowerment is not a commodity, transferable from one person to another. 'Giving' participants greater autonomy and/or responsibility in the research process does not automatically equate with 'giving' them empowerment. In fact, to claim you are going to empower someone is, in itself, disempowering, as Lesley-Anne Gallacher and Michael Gallagher (2008) state:

> The very notion of 'empowerment' implies that, without aid and encouragement from adult-designed 'participatory methods', children cannot fully exercise their 'agency' in research encounters. In this way, advocates of 'participatory methods' risk perpetuating the very model that they purport to oppose (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008: 503).

Since these earlier models (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Hart, 1992) for participatory research were developed, models in which greater levels of participation were equated with greater levels of empowerment, the conversation surrounding participatory research has become more nuanced. Recognising that power negotiations are constantly shifting within the research process, Holt (2004) argues that ethical issues, such as consent and privacy, can be most effectively tackled by adopting 'empowering research relations' with participants (p. 14), offering some suggestions for how this might be achieved. Primarily, Holt implores researchers to undertake conscious performances that resist dominant discourses of hierarchical adult/child relations, and to engage with children's experiences

and cultures with empathy. She draws on theories of identity, following Judith Butler (1990), to argue that we are all beings-in-becoming, that our subjectivities are fluid, and that we all exist within complex networks of power. Researchers must do the best that they can to work within this reality, endeavouring to form empowering relations by focusing on connection as opposed to difference.

Along a similar trajectory, Fionagh Thomson (2007) questions why we persist in using fixed definitions of identity when it comes to research with children, given that identities are increasingly recognised as 'constructed through a diverse web of overlapping subjectivities, and that identity is something we "do" not "have" ' (p. 207). Thomson (2007) argues, 'If our research design predefines individual's identity we risk fixing those identities by unconsciously already outlining in our own minds what we expect from this social category' (p. 214). By 'using such categories uncritically child researchers are at risk of reproducing the very social relations they hoped to avoid' (Thomson 2007: 215). Any reference to 'children' must therefore be accompanied by an awareness that all individuals, regardless of age, are constantly in a state of becoming. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) prompt readers to refrain from seeing this 'immaturity' in terms of 'something lacking, but rather in terms of potential' (p. 511). Indeed, viewed in this way, 'dualistic notions of powerful researchers and vulnerable participants, competent adults and incompetent children' can be undermined (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008: 511). All individuals within the research process can be seen as connected to one another through their shared immaturity and becoming-ness.

Of course, we must reckon with the fact that children occupy a marginalised position in society. Children 'are less able to protect themselves than most adults' and social institutions rely upon adults to protect children' (Thomas and O'Kane 1998: 337). In such instances, power can and should be used productively to challenge its oppressive forms. Within the context of a research study, it is imperative that one does not deny the power imbalances that exist between (adult) researcher(s) and (child) participant(s), or even imagine that they might be entirely destructible. Rather, I would agree with Holt (2004) that one must draw on them productively in order to aid the formation of 'empowering research relations' (p. 14).

John Wall (2019) presents a compelling argument for how this might be achieved, for how one might use one's position of power productively to connect and create empowering research relations without undermining participants' agency. He suggests that empowerment be seen as 'inter-dependent', proposing 'childism' as a lens for critiquing the adultism that pervades scholarship and societies. Different from Peter Hunt's childism, which invites adults to read as children (1991), and Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's childism, which is defined as prejudice as against children (2009), Wall's childism 'asks researchers to interpret hegemonically suppressed lived experiences into more expansive social understandings for all' (Wall 2019: 11). It suggests,

> … in a similar way to recent forms of feminism, that the more fundamental problem for children and youth is not just how children and youth themselves are understood and related to, but also the social and political foundations on which children's lives and experiences are already imagined and pre-constructed (Wall 2019: 4).

However, as Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Macarena García-González caution, conflating the marginalisation of women and that of children 'risks obscuring differences between how gender and age work' (2023: 1045). Deszcz-Tryhubczak and García-González argue that consideration must be given to the 'intersectional positions' that produce the category of the child in the first place, asking 'how it is classed, gendered, racialized abled', in addition to reflecting on 'how ageism directed against children functions differently from sexism and racism, if only because children may potentially exit the category by growing up, while members of other oppressed groups do not' (2023: 1045). Importantly, they also call attention to the fact that 'the category of the marginalized child entails a potential reverse: the child will grow up and may have an ageist attitude to new generations of children' (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and García-González 2023: 1045). Therefore, while drawing connections between childist and feminist approaches is helpful to an extent, there are important and complex differences. Deszcz-Tryhubczak and García-González' recent suggestion that feminist new materialisms could assist in navigating this complex ground as there would be less focus on the child as a human body of a certain age and more attention given to exploring the assemblages – shaped by human and more-than-human relationalities – in which such a figure is produced, offers a promising way forward for the field of children's literature and beyond (2023: 1046).

For Wall, critiquing 'the social and political foundations on which children's lives and experiences are already imagined and pre-constructed' requires recognising the unequal power relations between adults and children that both create and maintain them (2019: 4). Drawing on the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), he explains how, from a poststructuralist standpoint, if it is 'subalterns who must speak on behalf of subalterns, women on behalf of women, the poor on behalf of the poor', it follows that children must speak on behalf of children (Wall 2019: 10). However, this is problematic given that 'seven-year olds are on the whole unlikely to gain university research positions from which to explicate their own subaltern alterities' (Wall 2019: 10). Thus, childism raises the question of how feasible self-empowerment really is. It recognises that the 'subaltern is not empowered in-dependently, much less merely dependently, but rather inter-dependently: as a distinct member of a human community that is inextricably interconnected. Such is the case for any subaltern, child or adult' (Wall 2019: 10). For Wall, self-empowerment materialises through connection with others. Hence it seems that adopting empowering relations in participatory research must involve a level of inter-dependence between researcher(s) and participant(s). It is unreasonable to expect a child or children to self-empower without connecting with others – self-empowerment is fundamentally bound up with empowerment from others (Wall 2019: 10). If this can occur in a way that does not undermine or oppress, there is potential for meaningful relations to be formed. This requires yielding to the assertion that there 'is a need to face up to deploying less offensive forms of power in order to transform more oppressive ones' (Kesby 2007: 203). If such work can anticipate 'its own limits and situatedness' in a genuinely collaborative process then it can be effective (Kesby 2007: 203).

All of this suggests that, ironically, if the pendulum swings too far in the direction of 'participation', self-empowerment may become unattainable. It becomes unattainable because a level of dependence between the participant(s) and the researcher(s) is needed if self-empowerment is to be achieved. My view is that research participants can experience self-empowerment through engaging in an inter-dependent relationship with the researcher(s), without their agency being undermined. Mike Kesby (2007) reminds us that according to a poststructuralist understanding of agency, agency 'is not simply a static, inherent capacity' (p. 202). Rather, individuals 'derive the materials necessary to effect self-reflexivity, identity formation and agency from available resources' (Kesby 2007: 202-203). One can have agency and be in a constant state of becoming. For

example, it was not until I studied English Literature and Language at undergraduate level that I was given tools – theories and support with utilising them – to read texts critically. This was a truly emancipatory experience. I did not experience it as submitting to 'a hierarchical world of intelligence' (Rancière 1991: 8) in which I became dependent on my seniors to transmit their knowledge to me. I did not feel that my agency had been undermined. Rather, having been shown the tools, the potential ways to use them, and the possibilities that could abound from this, I had the freedom to critically read texts and, by extension, the world. I was able to start developing my own critical worldview. In this scenario, my dependency on my seniors did not diminish my sense of empowerment but, rather, it elevated it.

Ultimately, this research study was of my design. I established the methodological approach, formulated the research questions, and devised the data gathering plans. The fact that I 'consulted' with participants to seek their suggestions for research activities and interview questions might be regarded as 'tokenistic' (Horgan 2016: 3) and not participatory at all. However, the study was undergirded by many of the core principles of participatory research. I was highly conscious of hierarchy, attempting to alleviate hierarchical imbalances where possible; and was guided by the belief that all knowledge is valuable knowledge, as well as by a desire for participants to benefit from the research. I resolved that following these key principles, focusing on researcher-participant connectivity rather than difference, and trusting that I could utilise my power productively to facilitate participants' empowerment, was 'participatory enough'. As Michael Gallagher (2008) so eloquently writes, 'the question is not how to avoid using power, but how power can be used to resist domination' (p. 147). I sought to use my power to challenge structures that preclude children from presenting and disseminating their perspectives on books that are, ironically, written for them.

Feminist Principles

In *Living A Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed (2017) presents ten principles for the feminist killjoy. Ahmed (2017) describes the feminist killjoy as someone who refuses to be the master's tool, someone who exposes 'the violence of rods, the violences that built the master's dwelling, brick by brick' (p. 256). For Ahmed, principles are not a set of rules, but a starting point: 'When I think of feminist principles, I think of principles in the original

sense: principle as a first step, as a commencement, a start of something' (Ahmed 2017: 256). Throughout this research process, I have embraced Ahmed's exposition of principles as starting points. As Leavy and Harris (2019) explain, 'feminist research is multiperspectival, and is conducted from numerous distinct epistemological and theoretical perspectives' (p. 42). However, recurrent principles in the literature include recognition that we are not simply gendered bodies, but that we simultaneously occupy race, sexuality, social class and other positionalities; reflexivity around the notion of objectivity; consideration of one's own position in relation to participants and a commitment to redressing power imbalances where possible; and concern with social change and its real-world applications (Leavy and Harris, 2019). Rather than following a prescribed set of methodological rules for feminist research, I have taken the above principles as my starting point, each of which I discuss below.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality has been transformative for feminist research practice. Crenshaw introduced the term in 1989 to elucidate the destructive homogenisation of women's experiences:

> The value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when *white* women speak for and as *women* (Crenshaw 1989: 155).

By asserting that the experiences of Black women are not analogous to those of white women, Crenshaw called attention to individuals' multiple, intersecting axes of identity. Alluding to the 'multidimensionality of Black women's experience', Crenshaw (1989) went even further, emphasising the heterogeneity and complexity that exists across individuals who share characteristics (p. 139). Yet, intersectionality existed long before Crenshaw provided this term. As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2020) explain, the central ideas of intersectionality are neither new nor confined to North America and Europe. For example, Savitribai Phule, an influential first-generation modern Indian feminist used intersectionality in the 19th century as an analytic tool without naming it as such (Collins and Bilge 2020: 3-4). Nonetheless, Crenshaw's coining of the term 'intersectionality' arguably heightened feminist researchers' awareness of the multidimensionality of individuals' identities and experiences, further solidifying it as a key tenet of feminist research practice.

The development of girl-centred research and the establishment of Girls' Studies as a field of critical inquiry in the 1990s was vital in validating age as an important axis of identity. Prior to this, girls were marginalised in youth research, and feminist scholarship paid little attention to age and generation (Kearney 2009: 5). Discussing the rise in collaborative and transgenerational research within the field of Girls' Studies, Mary Kearney (2009) notes that, as minors, young girls 'are barred from many of the activities and social institutions that might expand their power and improve their lives' (p. 21). Kearney (2009) argues that collaborative research with girls presents an opportunity for 'facilitating girls' confidence, communication, cooperation, and critical consciousness' (p. 21). Seeking to explore the experiences of children, specifically, my study recognises age as an important, intersecting axis of identity. As discussed in the previous section on participatory principles, this has had implications for my methodological approach. Given children occupy a marginalised position within society on account of their age, undertaking research with children requires additional and specific considerations. I have also drawn on intersectionality as an analytic tool, paying attention to how participants' responses might have been informed by intersecting axes of identity, particularly age, gender and race.

The rejection of objectivity is fundamental to interpretivism and poststructural forms of feminism, and many, though not all, approaches to feminist research. Even feminist research grounded in postpositivism or empiricism can be seen to problematise objectivity in the sense that it often seeks evidence to further feminist causes by challenging assumed knowledge, or knowledge developed under patriarchal systems. Underpinned by poststructuralist theories, this study repudiates any notion that there is knowledge 'out there' to be collected, that there is one essential truth that can be discovered and documented. Rather, knowledge is perceived to be multifarious and linguistic practices are deemed to have constitutive force. ' "Data" do not stand as transparent evidence of that which is real' in poststructuralist feminist research (Davies and Gannon 2011: 313). As Elizabeth St. Pierre (2000) puts it, poststructural feminists 'move resolutely toward faint intelligibilities they hope will enhance the lives of women' (p. 479). St. Pierre's description of poststructural feminist research findings as 'faint intelligibilities' is befitting for characterising the aims of this research study. Guided by the rejection of objectivity, this study opens a space for exploring the idiosyncrasies of participants' responses to texts, idiosyncrasies that would otherwise remain

imperceptible. The result is not a series of grand generalisations, but a compilation of 'faint intelligibilities' that can inspire new possibilities through questioning and reflection.

As noted earlier, approaches to participatory research and feminist research share many similarities. One point of alignment is 'the emphasis placed on relationships, both between the researcher and participants and the relationship the researcher has with herself during the process' (Leavy and Harris 2019: 112). Leavy and Harris (2019) explain that this emphasis on fostering egalitarian relationships with participants is grounded in a belief that many feminist researchers hold – that the researcher/researched dichotomy creates otherness, ultimately privileging the researcher (pp. 99-100). Much feminist research thus seeks to reduce power imbalances between researcher and participant, determined to avoid the reproduction of hierarchical and patriarchal dynamics. Being reflexive about one's own positionality and the relationship one has with oneself is integral to this endeavour. This involves researchers being attentive to emotional and bodily responses, and being mindful of the multiple roles they inhabit. As discussed at length in the previous section on participatory principles, I have been reflexive about how my positionality may have impacted my relationships with participants and have been thoughtful about how I could use my position of power productively. Furthermore, and as I demonstrate when presenting my findings and analytic discussion in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, I have considered how the various roles I inhabit, including researcher, facilitator, woman, feminist, adult and educator, might have informed my interpretation of the data.

Feminist research is critical scholarship: 'it is not just abstract scholarship that analyses how things are, but rather it suggests ways forward to a better world' (Leavy and Harris 2019: 6). My study explores how children engage with a type of popular feminist media with a view to developing insights to inform pedagogic practice and to contribute to understandings of how children are engaging with (expressions of) feminism and feminist ideas. In this respect it is, unequivocally, critical scholarship. However, although I have drawn on feminist principles throughout I have not always felt like a 'good' feminist researcher. It is here where my final, guiding feminist principle comes in – Ahmed's notion of the feminist killjoy.

The biographical compendiums participants engaged with in this study are not only well-intentioned, but they are important for a variety of reasons. They contribute to developing more comprehensive understandings of women's histories and world histories, they provide examples of what is possible, and they go some way to ameliorating the gender disparities endemic in children's publishing. However, through undertaking critical content analysis of the texts (see Chapter 6) I have called attention to what I perceive to be some of the texts' problems and shortcomings. In doing so, and to use Ahmed's phrase, I have felt like a feminist killjoy. At conferences, my research has sometimes been met with scepticism and defensiveness. Some delegates who proudly professed they had bought these books for their children, nieces and grandchildren, seemed perturbed by my critical content analysis. Perhaps they interpreted it as an affront to their own judgement. Perhaps they viewed the admirable and positive intentionality behind their publication as negation for some aspects that could be deemed problematic.

Although utilising the texts to instigate conversations about how children and young people are responding to and engaging with popular and neoliberal forms of feminism, I have, at times, felt like a 'bad' feminist for focusing my attention on the well-intentioned works of other feminists. Ahmed (2017) advises, 'choose your battles wisely' (p. 244). Had I chosen wisely? Would this be three years well spent? Was this the work of a 'good' feminist? By repeatedly returning to the principles Ahmed sets forth for being a feminist killjoy, I have been able to remind myself of the value and necessity of this research. To me, part of being a feminist killjoy means recognising and celebrating progress that has been made while remaining vehemently committed to fighting for a more equitable world. I regard seeking the perspectives of children, upon whom expectations are placed to do this world-changing work, as an important part of this commitment. In the context of this research study, undertaking my own critical content analysis (see Chapter 6) has been indispensable to the study's integrity. Hence, in addition to taking heed of the principles discussed above, embracing the position of feminist killjoy with care and reflection has been a significant component of my feminist approach.

COVID-19: A Change in Direction

Initially, I had planned to explore children's responses to and engagement with the texts by undertaking group reading sessions and individual interviews in an after-school learning centre. However, the distancing measures implemented to contain the spread of COVID-19 necessitated that I find a new way to explore children's engagement with the texts at a physical distance. The process of redesign was not simply a case of transferring the intended methods onto an online platform – the COVID-19 pandemic raised many ethical questions and dilemmas. Yes, I was met with the practical challenge of exploring children's engagement with the texts without actually seeing this engagement in person, but I also grappled with the question of whether seeking participants to engage with the study would even be appropriate, given the circumstances.

As the pandemic swept the world, panic about children's education quickly proliferated. In the UK, speculation over whether schools would close and what this might mean for children's education maintained a primary position in media reporting (McGuinness, 2020; McIvor, 2020; Richardson and Sellgren, 2020). When, on the 18th of March, 2020, it was announced that UK schools would close with almost immediate effect, panic about how children would continue their learning and how those who were due to sit exams would proceed to higher education, seemed to escalate. For reasons that extended far beyond anxieties surrounding children's education, the pandemic was a difficult, unpredictable, and frightening time. Many faced challenges in terms of job security, housing, health (mental and physical) and caring responsibilities. In 'ordinary' times it is always important to remember that although studies can be all-consuming for researchers, 'for participants they may touch only fleetingly upon their lives representing just one commitment amongst many' (Weller 2012: 123). COVID-19 brought this reality into even sharper focus. Was it really ethical for me to seek participants for this study at this time, to ask families to think about and engage with 'another thing'?

I resolved that if I only considered individuals who were known to me, I could make an ethically-sound judgement as to whether an invitation to participate would likely cause further stress and anxiety or be a welcome opportunity to do something different. While I could not know the full extent of families' circumstances, I would at least have some contextual knowledge. Of course, this approach came with its own ethical dilemmas,

including the issue of consent. Discussing the dynamics of friendship and friendliness in the context of feminist research, Gesa Kirsch (2005) reminds us that when participants are friends of the researcher, they rarely exercise their rights to refuse to answer particular questions or to walk away from the interview altogether, 'because they may empathize with or want to "help" the researcher' (p. 2165). Given that the families would know me, I was aware that parents/guardians might feel obliged to be supportive of the study and thus encourage their child's participation. I weighed the potential risks associated with undertaking a purposeful strategy (Creswell 2013: 158) such as this, versus undertaking a non-purposeful strategy, concluding that if I continuously checked the children's willingness to participate throughout the research process, the former would be more appropriate.

I was confident that, with careful and ongoing consideration, I could redesign the study in a way that could be enriching for the participants and their parents/guardians. Through my work as a maths and English tutor I was acutely aware that some parents/guardians were already feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility of schooling their child/children from home, unsure of how to navigate or choose from the ever-increasing number of resources being made available to them. Thus, given that I would not be able to be physically present when the children engaged with the texts, it felt important to design something that would require little or minimal support from parents/guardians. I also wondered whether I could redesign the study so that participants might experience it as an opportunity to follow individual curiosities with a sense of autonomy and freedom. I began to feel excited about the possibilities of being more creative, innovative, and exploratory. With an ever-increasing number of ethical deliberations to consider and a growing sense of excitement about the significance that this redesigned study might have for both participants and the wider research community, I set about finding and developing alternative methods to address my research questions.

Research Tools and Methods

The terms 'method', 'tool', and 'instrument' are often used interchangeably to describe the means by which data is captured, gathered or constructed to investigate a set of research questions. Examples include participant observations, focus groups, experiments and interviews. However, while 'tool' and 'instrument' are synonymous from a

definitional perspective – the Oxford English Dictionary (2023) defines a 'tool' as 'a thing (concrete or abstract) with which some operation is performed; a means of effecting something; an instrument' – 'method', although defined in similar terms, can also be used to denote the procedure or process through which something is performed. If the interview is the research tool, the 'method' also takes into account the way in which the interview is carried out, for example, semi-structurally, through use of some open-ended questioning. This is the rationale according to which I use these terms. However, when referencing other works, I use the term(s) preferred by the cited author. In some instances, 'method' is often synonymous with 'tool'.

Svend Brinkmann (2015) argues that even the more or less standard approaches to qualitative inquiry found in many countries, disciplines and textbooks – what he calls 'Good Old-Fashioned Qualitative Inquiry (GOFQI)' – are not themselves altogether firmly established in the broader sphere of research (p. 620). Brinkmann (2015) argues that they live 'by constant self-destruction and resurrection like a phoenix' and asks, should one 'think twice before deconstructing these emerging practices too soon, before they get firmly established?' (p. 621). Mason (2017) touches upon the same dilemma, acknowledging that qualitative research has fought hard to establish 'the significance of words and text against the grain of the mighty quantitative paradigm' (p. 167). She ultimately resists the notion that everything exists or is expressible in language, hence her call for other, creative approaches, moving beyond traditional interviews and focus groups. I similarly found myself questioning whether a withdrawal from 'GOFQI' would be an affront to, or undermining of, ongoing endeavours to justify qualitative approaches to the public and to funders. However, despite these concerns, it strikes me that utilising and developing alternative tools and methods for *doing* is an essential part of developing new and innovative ways of *knowing*. Further, visual methods arguably provide 'a different way of knowing and telling which is more inclusive than the privileged world of number-and word-based research' (Prosser and Loxley 2007: 63). Thus, inspired by literature on creative and innovative methods, especially the works of Mason (2011; 2017), Helen Kara (2020) and Leavy (2015; 2018), I devised the reader response toolkit specifically for the purposes of this study. I used the toolkit in conjunction with individual interviews and group reading sessions via Zoom, each of which I discuss below. Figure 1, taken from one of the participant information sheets (Appendix 1), shows the chronological order in which participants engaged with the various aspects of the study.

Figure 1 – Excerpt from one of the participant information sheets

Reader Response Toolkit

The primary purpose of the study remained unchanged – to explore how children, aged 7 to 10, respond to and engage with biographical compendiums about women – but the research needed to be undertaken at a physical distance. Looking outside of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was already a growing appetite for 'distance' methods to be further considered and developed within the social sciences, especially amid rising concerns regarding climate change and the detrimental environmental effects of excessive travel (Hanna, 2012; Hanna and Mwale, 2017). Deborah Lupton's (2020) 'Doing fieldwork in a pandemic (crowd-sourced document)' proved to be an invaluable resource as I sought inspiration from different fields and disciplines. The document contains a multitude of ideas for how to undertake research by avoiding in-person interactions, including the use of cultural/mobile probes; a method developed by Bill Gaver and colleagues in 1999. Working with three different community sites across Europe, the researchers explored how 'novel interaction techniques' could 'increase the presence of the elderly in their local communities' (Gaver et al. 1999: 22). As part of their investigation, the researchers provided each elder with a package of maps, postcards and other materials to provoke responses from them. They write, 'We weren't trying to reach an objective view of the elders' needs through the probes, but instead a more impressionistic account of their beliefs and desires, their aesthetic preferences and cultural concerns' (Gaver et al. 1999: 25). For example, participants were asked to mark areas on a map where they go to meet people and where they like to daydream; to take photographs of desirable and boring things; to answer questions written on postcards, and to record their television and radio use in a diary. Developed in a design context, the purpose of the probes was not 'to capture what is so much as to inspire what might be' (Boehner et al. 2012: 185). In other

words, the approach was devised with the view that it could be 'valuable in inspiring design ideas for technologies that could enrich people's lives in new and pleasurable ways' (Gaver et al. 2004: 53).

While my study sought to capture something about the present, that is, children's engagement with the texts, rather than to inspire ideas for the future, I was very much drawn to the tool's creative and versatile qualities (Couceiro 2020: 36).[8] That the cultural probe method lent itself to being participant-led was particularly appealing. Surprisingly, the method has scarcely been used within an educational context, excepting the relatively rare studies by Ole Sejer Iversen and Christina Nielson (2003), Sónia Matos and colleagues (2022), Antonia Spiridonidou and colleagues (2010), and Peta Wyeth and Carla Diercke (2006) (Couceiro 2020: 36-37). All of these studies used cultural probes in an attempt to enhance the design and development of educational resources. For example, using probes with children aged 11 to 13 in Australia, Wyeth and Diercke (2006) asked participants to design a science toy that would help them understand their science homework, to produce a piece of writing describing the work they would like to do when they grow up, and to rate subject areas on two scales: enjoyment and ease. The aim was to use the children's contributions to help 'design appropriate, usable and, most importantly, inspirational educational technology for cooperative scientific enquiry' (Wyeth and Diercke 2006: 385). Wyeth and Diercke conclude that the probes were not particularly effective in achieving this end as the children were reluctant to engage in activities such as brainstorming exercises, writing journals and creating collages. They surmise that the success of such activities is likely dependent upon support from others because 'they do not translate well to individual, autonomous activities' (Wyeth and Diercke 2006: 387). However, Wyeth and Diercke did find that children were best able to provide insights when activities were creative and appealed to a sense of fun. I decided that if participants were involved in the process of designing activities, the cultural probe method could be effectively appropriated. Hence I designed the reader response toolkit, with participants, as a tool for capturing their responses to the texts.

This said, it is impossible to *fully* capture how a reader is responding to a text. Response is complex, messy, partially-visible, partially-invisible, and always affected by the process of

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[8] As I contributed to a 'rapid response' publication during the pandemic, where I outlined how I redesigned my study (Couceiro, 2020), I make reference to this publication throughout this section.

eliciting and obtaining it. Nonetheless, researchers and practitioners have persisted in attempting to understand readers' responses to texts, with most scholarship drawing on empirical data involving face-to-face interaction, usually in schools or educational settings. However, the tide is turning, and researchers are increasingly finding ways to explore response in new and innovative ways (Arizpe 2023b: 162). Popular tools for data gathering tend to include arts-based methods such as creative writing and drawing, group discussions, interviews, participant observations, and read aloud sessions. The reader response toolkit contributes to this exciting and expanding field, offering another tool for exploring readers' responses and engagement from a physical distance. Although as an isolated tool the reader response toolkit could be critiqued for providing only a partial and fragmented view of the dynamics between readers and texts, I found that when used in conjunction with participant interviews and group reading sessions it facilitated the production of 'meaningful and relevant data' (Mason 2017: 176). I return to the significance of this contribution in .

I sent participants an electronic version and a hard copy of the reader response toolkit (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Photographs of the reader response toolkit (hard copy)

Prior to sending the toolkits, I invited participants to offer suggestions for activities. I hoped that participants' inclusion in designing the reader response toolkit would translate to their feeling included, positively affecting their level of investment in the study and confidence to respond in ways that were meaningful for them. In its final configuration

the toolkit comprised of all participant suggestions and some of my own, and included three sections: 'art and performance', 'writing and scribbling', and 'building and creating'. Each section contained six brief descriptions of the participants' suggestions. For example, in 'building and creating', activities included designing a board game, making masks or hand puppets, and creating a scene from one of the biographies using a shoe box (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Excerpt from the reader response toolkit (building and creating)

The electronic version also included a short introductory video, in which I reminded participants that there were no expectations regarding how many activities they 'should' do, and encouraged them to engage only with those that were appealing to them. I also emphasised that the toolkit was a springboard for ideas and that they were welcome to respond in any way(s) they liked. All the activities involved the participants creating something (herein, these creations are referred to as 'artefacts'), and participants sent photographs and videos of their artefacts to me via email. A list of the participants' artefacts is presented in Appendix 5.

It is often observed that in research studies involving child participants, especially in educational contexts, a child might respond in ways that they feel are 'correct' or 'pleasing' to the adult researcher (Greene and Hill 2005: section 4, para. 5). David Buckingham (2009) cautions that utilising visual or 'creative' methods does not mitigate this risk – these methods are not in themselves any more 'empowering' than other methods, they are not uniquely placed to give participants a 'voice' (p. 648). Consideration of this point prompted my recollection of a moment when I was instructed, along with the rest of the year one class at my Catholic primary school, to draw a picture of how I imagined heaven looked. Feeling the weight of expectation to produce

something that looked somewhat aesthetically pleasing I drew the only thing I could – a boat. The teacher interpreted my picture as an insightful reference to the narrative of Noah's Ark. Little did she know, Noah's Ark was not at all present in my imaginings of heaven. My eagerness to both please my teacher and manage my anxieties about my lack of artistic capabilities was at the expense of creating a genuine representation of my thoughts on heaven. For me, drawing was not 'a direct or transparent means' of self-expression (Buckingham 2009: 648) and I did not find the experience at all empowering.

For such reasons, ensuring there was a range of activities for participants to choose from was a priority, not because being able to choose is inherently or unproblematically empowering as noted earlier in this chapter, but because having options can foster a greater sense of participant autonomy and potentially alleviate anxieties regarding one's capabilities (Hortsman et al. 2008: 1010-1011). I had hoped that, given the circumstances under which the artefacts were to be produced – away from the watchful eye of the researcher, with participants having autonomy to choose and approach activities in ways that were comfortable and meaningful for them, in their own time and space – anxieties might be minimised and inhibitions relinquished. In this respect, the reader response toolkit was not designed to be 'child-centred' or 'child-friendly', but 'research participant-centred' (Punch 2002: 337).

Informal feedback gathered from participants at the end of the study suggested that, for the most part, participants did feel at ease when engaging with the activities and they were grateful to have had choice. However, one parent, Fiona, did disclose that when her child attempted a third activity, it 'ended in tears'.[9] Fiona said, Darcy 'has very high expectations about some things and won't turn them in unless they're perfect' (excerpt from field work diary, 19-10-2020). This is a powerful reminder that while, as researchers, we must do our utmost to anticipate and prevent any potential participant discomfort, we will not always succeed. Yet, it is our duty to be reflexive and to remain committed to finding ways of minimising that possibility.

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[9] All names have been replaced by pseudonyms, which I agreed with participants.

Interviews on Zoom

Participants took part in an initial 30-minute, individual interview either shortly before or shortly after receiving the books in the post. The primary purpose of these initial interviews was to build rapport and trust with participants through informal discussions about their reading habits and preferences. Participants then attended two group reading sessions before receiving the reader response toolkit. Following engagement with the toolkit, participants attended a final, individual interview lasting between 45 minutes and an hour. We discussed the artefacts they had created, their responses to the texts, and their reflections on taking part in the study.

As I had experience of tutoring children via Microsoft Teams, I was aware of the unique challenges that communication via videoconferencing presents. In addition to the potential technical issues, for some, the prospect of using technology and engaging in a virtual space can be daunting or anxiety-provoking. For example, Naomi Hay-Gibson (2009) discusses how participants 'may feel embarrassed or nervous to be on camera' (p. 43). In my study, I did not observe any participant to be anxious, embarrassed, or particularly nervous, though this could have been because I knew five of the eight participants very well. The three participants that I did not have a prior relationship with did appear a little nervous at the beginning, though any nerves seemed to quickly subside. As I watched the recording of the first reading session following Lucas' initial interview, in which he had appeared a little nervous, I wrote in my field work diary: 'It was great to see Lucas so confident and engaged; all signs of nervousness from the Initial Interview seem to have dissipated' (excerpt from field work diary, 20-11-2020). Furthermore, all participants had been engaging in digital learning due to the COVID-19 school closures and so, arguably, had a new-found confidence and competence with communicating online.

Comparing her experiences of conducting in-person interviews and focus groups before the pandemic in Ukraine, and switching to online interactions during, Marnie Howlett (2022) positively reflects:

> … online methods actually enabled a more symmetrical relationship with my participants. […] As I conducted the interviews and focus group from my home in London, my participants were also able to 'enter' or observe my personal

life in ways that would not be possible had I been in Ukraine (Howlett 2022: 394).

Howlett's reflections resonate with my own experiences. On occasion, participants engaged with my surroundings by asking about the LEGO creations on the shelves behind me, for example. Although we were disconnected in that we sat behind our respective screens, engaging with our respective copies of the texts, in our respective homes, 'sharing' our personal spaces in this way seemed to engender a quiet, intimate relatedness. The interviews and group reading sessions felt very relaxed. We engaged in conversation unrelated to the study before and after, and sometimes during the sessions.

However, technological issues did arise, and there were moments when audio and visual quality was poor. This impacted one participant, Mickael, in particular. I felt increasingly uncomfortable and guilty every time I had to say, "I'm sorry, I couldn't quite hear you. Could you say that again?" The flow of conversation was inevitably affected, and I imagine Mickael probably felt frustrated at times. In this instance, these technological difficulties were compounded by the fact that Mickael connected via audio only, and so it was impossible for us to observe each other's nonverbal language. As a result, Mickael's interview transcripts include a lot of overlapping speech as we both struggled to anticipate when the other was about to speak.

Even in the other interviews where participants were connected visually as well as audibly, the restricted field of vision likely impacted my ability to pick up on some nonverbal cues. As Janet Cater (2011) notes, 'web cameras normally provide just a "head shot" so researchers will not be able to observe body language' (p. 16). Although I was constantly observing for signs of discomfort, I could not know whether a participant was shaking their leg or tapping their foot under the table. All I could do was remain vigilant, continue building rapport and trust, and remind participants of their right to withdraw consent at any time.

Having read widely about conducting research using online videoconferencing tools, I had anticipated this difficulty and prepared accordingly. However, the restricted field of vision yielded another issue that I had not anticipated. At times, I was unable to see what page, or even what text, participants were engaging with. I frequently asked participants to show me what page they were looking at if the text was beyond the camera's purview,

but this came at the expense of interrupting their engagement and the flow of conversation. I will never know what may have been on the tips of their tongues during those moments. I discuss this, alongside other limitations, in my final chapter.

Highlighting that the quality of listening matters when undertaking qualitative research, Bronwyn Davies describes the interview not as 'a fixed object or method', but as 'an entangled, creative unfolding of new ways of being and seeing for both interviewer and interviewee' (Davies cited in Masschelein and Roach 2018: 261). Framing the interview as an 'unfolding' is helpful in that it highlights its ephemerality – each interview was a singular moment that offered 'flashes of insight' (Mason 2011: 76) into the participants' multiple and shifting responses to and engagement with the texts. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning I had a set of guiding questions that I referred to (see Appendix 6), but I tailored my questioning depending on participants' responses to ensure they were 'relevant to the individual experience of the participant' (O'Reilly and Dogra 2017: 4). I aimed to ask questions that were as open as possible, allowing participants autonomy to take their answers in any direction they liked. In addition to asking questions, I also used what Janet Evans (2009) terms 'speculative ponderings' (p. 183), for example, "I wonder why these authors have chosen to only include women". This indicated to participants 'that I didn't have answers – quite simply because there were no right or wrong answers – we were simply sharing our thoughts and ideas' (Evans 2009: 183), and they were usually eager to share with me in return.

The main interviews consisted of six main discussion points:

- the artefacts participants had produced;
- their initial responses to the texts and how these developed;
- their perspectives on the texts' inspirational capacities;
- peritextual features;
- any specific biographies they wanted to discuss; and
- their reflections on taking part in the study.

Beginning with discussion of participants' artefacts was valuable for three reasons. Firstly, as Samantha Punch (2002) explains, children 'tend to lack experience of communicating directly with unfamiliar adults in a one-to-one situation' and so 'using task-based

methods can enable children to feel more comfortable with an adult researcher' (p. 330). While the participants did not appear uncomfortable, it was clear that they enjoyed telling me about what they had produced. Often, their excitement and engagement helped to create an easy-going and lively atmosphere for the rest of the interview.

Secondly, discussion of the artefacts functioned as a springboard for further dialogue about the texts and broader issues. As the example below demonstrates, asking Sofia about her drawing of Policarpa Salvarrieta (Figure 4) provided insight into her motivations for engaging with this particular text and her interpretation of it, in addition to prompting broader discussions around censorship and what is 'appropriate' for children to consume.

Figure 4 – Sofia's drawing of Policarpa Salavarrieta

Louise:	*And why did you choose, um, this (briefly holds Good Night Stories in front of the camera) story, Sofia, for your drawing?*
Sofia:	*Umm, because I really like the illustration and also because (smiling slightly) like my best best best best friend, her mum is from Colombia as well.*
Louise:	*(Smiling and nodding) Ahhh OK, interesting! […] So, tell me about this woman, what do you think of her?*

Sofia: *(Intermittently glancing down at her drawing or Good Night Stories?) I think she's like really confident as she didn't let her being a woman in those times like stop her because in those times it would obviously be like, kind of hard, to be like a female in those kind of times because they, like always said kinda like oh you have to do this or, you can't do that 'cause you're a woman and stuff. So, and I really like that um, she said that Columbia should be kind of like their own country, and not like, like be ruled by this, King, that wasn't even from the same country.*

Louise: *Yeah! It's crazy isn't it? And (short pause) do you know what happens to her in the end?*

Sofia: *(Short pause) Well, in the end (smiling slightly and looking upwards, as if she is thinking) it says kind of like, um, 'I am a young woman and I'm not scared of you' or something like that I think, and, so yeah, she basically kind of like saved her country. It didn't say that she actually did, but, at the same time it does kind of sound like it.*

Louise: *(Nodding) I totally agree Sofia, because the way it ends, it's, really quite positive isn't it? It says, (reading from the text) 'She looked them straight in the eye and said, "I'm a young woman, and you can't scare me." Policarpa still inspires women and men from Colombia and from all over the world to fight for freedom and justice without fear'. So, I finished reading this and was really interested to know, what actually happened to her, after she got caught. Umm, would you like me to tell you what happened?*

Sofia: *Yes please.*

Louise: *OK. Now this is just some research I did on the internet so, (shrugs her shoulders) I don't know how true it is but apparently, umm, once she got caught, that's what she said, but then she got executed. (Short pause) So she got killed.*

Sofia: *Yeah (inaudible) imagine!*

Louise: *Why do you think they left that part out of the story?*

Sofia: *(Smiling slightly) I think since like little kids would also like, read it, it would be kind of, it says, 'Good Night Stories' so kinda like, for like when your*

parents read you to bed, it would be kind of weird turning (or trying - inaudible) to like put that in this story book.

Finally, discussion of the artefacts provided a vital ingredient for data analysis. When child participants are invited to participate in arts-based activities, the art they produce can be regarded as a text and analysed in its own right (Brown, 2018; Noble, 2023; Pantaleo, 2005). Alternatively, or additionally, the resultant artefact can be used as a stimulus for discussion and this discussion, together with the artefact itself, forms the main data (Allen, 2011; Pahl, 2009). In keeping with the study's investment in participatory principles, I decided to adopt the latter approach. As I discuss in my section on data analysis, researchers must be careful not to prioritise their own interpretations and potentially 'silence or misrepresent the voices of children' (Barker and Weller 2003: 50). Here, 'the voices of children' were manifest in what they had created, and so inviting them to tell me about their processes (for example, what role their parents/guardians played, if any), intentions, interpretations, and reflections, was crucial for attempting to make sense of their expressions.

Group Reading Sessions on Zoom

Following their initial interview, each participant attended two group reading sessions. There were four participants per group. As highlighted in some of the studies reviewed in Chapter 4, the value of collaborative or communal reading is well established, as engaging in dialogue with others is perceived to be an important part of meaning-making (Arizpe, Noble and Styles, 2023; Braid and Finch, 2015; Chambers, 1993; Maine, 2015; Pantaleo, 2011). However, I had a suspicion that encouraging and facilitating group interaction on Zoom could be challenging. Participants did not know one another, and while I could have organised a series of group sessions to help build a stronger sense of trust and familiarity, I was conscious of not over-burdening participants. Ultimately, I settled on facilitating two reading sessions with each group and thought carefully about how I could use icebreaker activities to make participants feel as comfortable as possible to engage with one another. While there were certainly challenging aspects, the resulting data was rich, offering some insights into how participants co-constructed meaning.

The general format was as follows. Prior to the reading sessions, I asked each participant to select one biography they would like to share and discuss with the group. In the sessions, I asked participants to let the group know which biography they had chosen and why, before I proceeded to read the biography aloud. Participants followed along and we discussed the text afterwards. I also experimented with using some of the in-built features on Zoom, such as the annotation tool. During the first group's second reading session I shared an image of one of the chosen biographies and asked participants to circle the illustration that stood out to them the most. Though there is high potential for such tools to foster engagement and interaction between participants, this attempt was unsuccessful. Some did not have the required version of the software downloaded, while others were unsure of which buttons to press.

After every reading session (and interview), I watched the recording within one or two days. In fact, I found this to be one of the primary benefits of using Zoom. The ease of watching the recordings, almost instantaneously, allowed me to review and develop my own practice. After observing the chaos that ensued when I invited participants to annotate the image, for example, I decided not to incorporate this in subsequent sessions. Other actions I set for myself following reviews of the recordings included using more 'speculative ponderings' (Evans 2009: 183), checking participants understood all vocabulary in the texts, and finding ways to facilitate/encourage group interaction. The latter soon emerged as my primary objective. After the very first reading session I wrote the following in my field work diary:

> I am wondering whether it's possible to achieve more of a 'focus group' style on Zoom – the participants seemed comfortable to answer my questions, but interaction with one another didn't really happen. How can you facilitate this for next time? … To avoid it being four interviews in one space…? Today was free-flowing conversation… Use more task-based things next time? (Excerpt from field work diary, 11-09-2020).

Nicola Daniels and colleagues (2019) report the same challenge when reflecting on their use of Zoom to conduct focus groups with academic researchers and health-care practitioners: 'the nature of an online environment has the potential to produce detached statements from participants as opposed to interactive exchanges' (p. 2). Like Daniels and her colleagues, I quickly realised that serendipitous, ad-hoc conversations or engagements could not occur 'on the side' as they might do in face-to-face, group

settings. Further, strict turn-taking was a requirement as it was impossible to hear more than one person talking at once. Although this type of 'turn-taking' is arguably democratic – more domineering characters are less likely to dominate discussions – it nonetheless incites a somewhat contrived and mechanical structure of conversation (Couceiro 2021a: para. 3).

The initial lack of interaction between participants may have been compounded by participants potentially feeling that it was 'wrong' to enter into dialogue with one another while I, the adult researcher, was asking questions of them, the child participants. As much as I wanted to avoid 'dominance of adult instigated questions' and be seen as a 'co-participant' (Braid and Finch 2015: 116) – that is, I wanted to make clear that that I was not omniscient, that I did not hold adjudicating rights to their responses and that all our responses were equally valid – it was almost inevitable that participants would perceive me as the leader. Certainly, it would have been unreasonable to expect participants to discuss the texts with one another without any prompts or guidance. Therefore, I tried to orientate the conversations through use of questioning, while also implementing strategies to encourage engagement with one another as opposed to exclusive engagement with me. I took heed of recommendations offered by other researchers (Daniels et al., 2019; Lobe, 2017) and developed my own set of action points for subsequent reading sessions (Couceiro, 2021a). One of my strategies was to summarise participants' contributions and to ask the rest of the group for responses in relation to these. I also invited participants to ask each other questions. Although no one took up this invitation, participants' engagement with one another did increase as the sessions progressed. My hunch is that this type of open invitation, in combination with other strategies I implemented, did aid in increasing participant engagement with one another. However, I think there would have been more participant-initiated, interactive exchanges had participants had more time to build relationships and get to know one another.

The Participants

For participants to be able to contribute to exploration of the research questions at the heart of this study, I devised the following criteria:

- that the children are living in the United Kingdom;

- that they are between 7 and 10 years of age;
- that upon learning about the study they want to participate; and
- that they have access to the required technology (an electronic device such as a tablet, laptop or desktop computer; a mobile phone with the capability to take and send photographs via email; an internet connection with reasonable bandwidth).

As discussed earlier, I decided to only invite individuals who were known to me to take part. I had been tutoring five of the participants for around six months and the other three were introduced to me through friends. Taking the view that it was important to consider how COVID-19 might be affecting families, I decided that only inviting individuals I knew would provide some context from which to reflect on whether an invitation to participate would likely incite further stress. Yet, this approach had a number of disadvantages, including that it drastically decreased the potential level of participant diversity. This is particularly regrettable given that the pandemic has revealed and exacerbated many existing socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and gendered inequalities (Paton et al., 2020). With regard to children's education, it has been evidenced that school closures have widened the attainment gap between children from lower- and higher-income families, as children from lower-income households often live in conditions that make home schooling difficult (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022; Twist et al., 2022). Participants in my study received four books for free and had the opportunity to engage in discussions and activities that may have positively affected their own academic lives. It is lamentable that my redesigned study had exclusionary elements that arguably contributed to the exacerbation of these inequalities. The perspectives offered by the eight participants are incredibly valuable, contributing to our understandings of how young people are engaging with children's biographies and with objects of popular feminism more broadly. However, I maintain that exploring a plurality of perspectives and interpretations of texts such as these is needed. Fortunately, my hope that the group would not consist of girls, exclusively, materialised serendipitously.

The study's redesign could also have led to some individuals being excluded on account of its technological requirements. Virtual methods, such as using Zoom for interviews, are often lauded for their inclusionary potential (Archibald et al. 2019: 4). However, simply

transferring methods online has exclusionary consequences as not everyone can access the necessary technology (Hanna and Mwale 2017: 261). The individuals I invited to participate did not have difficulty accessing technology which is, in itself, indicative of the exclusionary issues discussed above.

In terms of the requirements that participants be living in the UK and aged between 7 and 10, I wanted the parameters of the project to be clear and manageable. For example, having an understanding of the context within which these biographical texts exist has been crucial – had the context extended beyond the UK, this could have become unwieldy. The same would likely have been true for extending the age bracket. I opted for ages 7 to 10 because the texts are marketed towards this age group and, arguably, by this age, children are often able to communicate with reasonable levels of confidence and ease.

Figure 5 provides a brief biography of each participant, the purpose of which is to provide a sense of their backgrounds and interests. Some details, which may have been helpful, have been omitted to ensure anonymity. All names have been replaced by pseudonyms, which I agreed with participants.

Harry

Harry is eight years old and lives in Scotland. He is learning to play the piano and enjoys reading, especially murder mystery books. He also loves witches and attends drama classes.

Conor

Conor is 10 years old and lives in Scotland. He has many interests, including playing video games, learning about nature and animals, swimming, fencing and capoeira. He is a keen reader and mostly enjoys fiction texts.

Darcy

Darcy is seven years old and lives in Scotland. She has a dog called Kai, whom she adores. While she does not love reading, she likes David Walliams' books and books with female protagonists, such as *Pearl Power*.

Sofia

Sofia is 10 years old and lives in Scotland. She enjoys art, drawing and creative crafts, and reading all types of texts. She has a deep appreciation for the artwork and illustrations in books.

Orla

Orla is nine years old and lives in Wales. Orla loves learning new facts and baking. She first learnt to read in Welsh. Orla is an avid reader, loves history, and has a keen interest in Ancient Egypt.

Lucas

Lucas is 10 years old and lives in Scotland. He enjoys reading fiction books, especially the works of David Walliams. He also enjoys skateboarding and gaming.

Mickael

Mickael is 10 years old and lives in Scotland. He loves nonfiction, learning new facts, and creating things out of LEGO.

Olivia

Olivia is nine years old and lives in Scotland. She loves reading fiction, especially books by David Walliams. She did not always enjoy reading, but as her confidence grew, she found herself enjoying it more and more.

Figure 5 – Participant biographies

The participants were split into two groups of four. Harry, Conor, Darcy and Sofia took part in the study during September and October 2020. Mickael, Orla, Lucas and Olivia took part during November and December 2020.

Data Analysis

Data analysis 'is an inherent and ongoing part of qualitative research' (Spencer et al. 2014: 270). I have experienced this 'ongoing'-ness as a fusion of informal and formal analytic practices. Informally, I began analysing the data when I began gathering the data.

I wrote extensively in my field work diary, highlighting data that felt instinctively interesting and important, and making notes of ideas to pursue and literature to consult. I also spent a lot of time running and ruminating over the data. Like Sandra Faulkner (2018), 'I often find connections between seemingly disparate ideas, work out and create new problems, and write good lines in my mind as I run' (p. 108). Sometimes, the fog would lift, and a data point that had seemed destined to remain in the realm of unintelligibility suddenly became intelligible. I would stop to record a voice note on my phone before racing home to put pen to paper. I did not abandon these informal practices when I started systematically analysing the data. In fact, continuously engaging with these informal practices opened up the data in exciting ways, undoubtedly benefiting my formal, systematic process.

Before describing how I developed my formal process, which involved piloting some analytic approaches with a small section of the data, I begin by presenting my approach to transcription. This was an integral part of my analysis and therefore warrants some extended discussion.

Transcription

Transcribing does not only mark the beginning of a formal process of reviewing and reflecting on data. Transforming audio or video data into a written text is an act of creation. There are implications for what one chooses and how one chooses to transcribe data, for example, how one chooses to use punctuation and colloquialisms. Transcribing is an interpretive and a political act (Green et al. 1997). As Susan Tilley (2003) explains, 'similar to the discovery of fingerprints, through dusting at the crime scene, a transcriber's interpretive/analytical/theoretical prints become visible on close examination of the transcription process and the texts constructed' (p. 752). Here, I offer detail about my interpretive, analytic and theoretical prints. I outline how I approached transcription, discuss some of the ethical implications, and reflect on what impact my decision-making might have had on my subsequent, formal analysis.

Consistent with my epistemological stance, I do not view transcripts as 'true' reflections of a 'real' world event. I see transcribing as an act of creation, but '*hearing* particular words and utterances is not the same as *imagining them* or *inventing* them' (Hammersley

2010: 560). My transcripts are neither imagined nor invented *de novo*. They are partial, re-mediated accounts of the interactions between the participants and me. In fact, as the recordings themselves are mediated constructs, 'transcription is perhaps best thought of as a *re-mediation* of a mediated view' (Gibson and Brown 2009: 20). The transcripts are two points removed from the original event. This is not to say that the transcripts are useless; that they are too far removed from the original event to be useful for analysis. Yes, we must not treat them 'as sacred and infallible texts', but we can make sure our interpretations are grounded in our experience of observing the events by drawing on field notes and background knowledge of the participants (Hammersley 2010: 565).

I decided to transcribe the interviews and reading sessions in chronological order. I wanted to immerse myself in the data as fully as possible and it seemed logical to transcribe/'re-live' data gathering as it unfolded. I quickly developed a codebook of transcription conventions (Appendix 7) and a nine-step process (Appendix 8); the penultimate step of which was particularly important: to add any relevant notes from my field work diary or any relevant knowledge I had relating to the participants. 'Context cannot be stripped from talk, and therefore ought not to be stripped from transcripts either' (Lapadat 2000: 209). Using comment boxes to annotate the transcripts with relevant excerpts from my field work diary proved very helpful during analysis as it reminded me of details I may have otherwise forgotten.

In practice, I did not straightforwardly and mindlessly follow my nine-step transcription process while adhering to my codebook of conventions. Rather, transcribing the data felt like an endless torrent of decision-making. The 'reality of a multidimensional communicative event does not easily lend itself to reproduction in the two-dimensional realm of the printed page' (Bird 2005: 242) and there are ethical questions to consider as a result. For example, I continuously grappled with the question of whether to include all non-standard utterances, for example, 'ummm' and repeated words. I worried that omitting all non-standard utterances would devitalize the data. Furthermore,

> … it seems counterintuitive to remove the very details that qualitative inquiry is known and appreciated for. The pronunciation, non-verbals and irregular grammar that are parts of everyday speech can offer important insights into a participant's life and meaning-making that could add richness that would otherwise be lost (Oliver et al. 2005: 1286).

Indeed, what if a participant's, *"ummm"* was indicative of their thinking and I had removed it prematurely? However, Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale (2018) warn that the 'publication of incoherent and repetitive verbatim interview transcripts may involve an unethical stigmatization of specific persons or groups of persons' (p. 154). As children's language use is often regarded as something that requires development to reach the standards of the adult 'norm', I have been especially conscious of how my printed representation of participants' spoken words might impact readers' consumption, understanding, and interpretation of those words. I became increasingly concerned that including such expressions might affect readers' perceptions of participants and their credibility, and I was concerned that *what* the participants said might be undervalued because of *how* it is represented in print. Ultimately deciding not to alter participant quotes when citing from the transcripts, I thus hope readers remain mindful that all verbal interactions, regardless of the individual's age, can look 'remarkably disjointed, inarticulate, and even incoherent when committed to the printed page' (Poland 2001: 633).

Judith Lapadat (2000) notes that 'a key purpose of transcription is to facilitate the researcher's "seeing" ' (p. 214). I took an excerpt from my first transcript and revised it, removing all non-standard utterances that I felt were irrelevant for my analysis. When reading my original version (which included the non-standard utterances), I found it easier to 'see', to conjure a closer and clearer recollection of the exchange itself. As I read the revised version, I struggled to find this same level of proximity and clarity. It did not sound at all how I remembered the participants to be. As my purpose for creating the transcripts was to aid me with analysis, I resolved that I should create the transcripts in a way that would take me back, as closely as possible, to the exchanges that took place in 2020. I thus decided to continue transcribing the data as intended, including all non-standard utterances and not punctuating the transcripts according to grammatical rules for standard written English. For example, though a comma would normally be placed after a fronted adverbial, I have not inserted a comma if the speaker did not take a breath. Generally, I use commas to indicate a very short pause (shorter than a short pause, which is signalled by (…)) and I have only used full stops where I have interpreted the speaker to have finished their sentence.

It is not only the re-presentation of spoken words and non-spoken behaviours that influences how data is interpreted. The way transcripts are formatted is also influential (Ochs 1979: 47). For example, the standard 'script' format 'tends to impose a contingent relation between immediately adjacent utterances of different speakers' (Ochs 1979: 47). However, in the interviews and group reading sessions I conducted, I noticed that this contingent relation was not always present. This was possibly a result of technological 'lags' and mis-hearings. Also, there was often overlapping speech, which I experienced as being, in large part, due to the difficulties of interpreting speakers' intentions via Zoom. For example, the absence of eye contact made it more difficult to gauge when someone might begin speaking. Using a columnar format was helpful in this regard as I was able to depict overlapping speech more clearly (see Appendix 9 for an example). A columnar format also encouraged me to suspend my expectation that utterances between speakers are usually dependent on a previous utterance. In practice, this meant that I was more diligent in considering whether an utterance was intended as a response to a previous utterance, and thus whether it should be interpreted with respect to that previous utterance.

However, one of the limitations of using a columnar format is that, unlike a vertical format, it 'gives the impression of asymmetry between the speakers, with the leftmost speaker appearing to be the most dominant' (Edwards 2005: 321). Leftness is always associated with prominence and temporal priority in English language transcripts, for example, each line begins at the left margin and moves towards the right (Ochs 1979: 50). In accordance with my principal research aims and analytic intent – to highlight and explore children's perspectives on *their* literature – I formatted the transcripts with the participant(s) in the leftmost column(s). Placing participants in the leftmost column(s) was part of my ongoing reflexive practice regarding my participation in these researcher/participant, adult/child relationships. This formatting decision did not eliminate power asymmetries, but it did encourage me to see the participant(s) 'as a point of orientation' as opposed to myself (Ochs 1979: 51) when reading and analysing the transcripts.

Of course, 'transcribers are not necessarily conscious of every interpretive choice and its representational consequences' (Bucholtz 2000: 1446) and while I have done my best to

elucidate the process here, there are many decisions that will have inevitably escaped my consciousness.

Developing My Approach to Formal Analysis

I wanted to tell a rich and comprehensive story about how participants responded to and engaged with the texts, and I judged Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach to thematic analysis to offer a robust yet flexible method for doing this. Their process 'for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset' (p. 4) involves six phases:

1. data familiarisation;
2. data coding;
3. initial theme generation;
4. theme development and review;
5. theme refining, defining and naming; and
6. writing up.

However, given that I viewed the participants' responses as being, in part, affected by discourse and effects of discourse, it seemed logical to consider discourse analysis as an additional tool. One of the benefits of Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis is that it can be combined with other analytic approaches. For example, Braun and Clarke highlight the work of Gareth Terry, who provides examples of research studies in which he followed the standard process of reflexive thematic analysis before entering a second level of analysis, informed by a discursive approach. Terry (2021) notes that

> … the primary attention of the analysis is still towards the construction, interpretation and reporting of themes. This means that you get to tell a rich story about a given dataset, as well as identifying and drawing out specific discursive features of interest (Terry cited in Braun and Clarke 2021: 255).

To assess what a discursive approach could offer my analysis, I decided to work with a small section of the data (the transcripts of two main interviews and one reading session) before proceeding to analyse the entire dataset. I followed the first three phases of Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis, starting with familiarisation. In an attempt to 'become deeply and intimately familiar with the content' (Braun and Clarke 2021: 35), I

read and re-read the data. I also found it helpful to experiment with more creative approaches, including writing analytic memos and poems. During phase two (data coding), I tried different coding methods, including in vivo coding ('the terms used by [participants] themselves' (Strauss 1987: 33)) and codes/categories developed by reader response scholars (including Sipe's (2008) categories of response: analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent and performative). While 'in vivo' coding was a helpful starting point for capturing semantic meanings, it limited my ability to explore more conceptual levels of meaning. Similarly, while reader response codes/categories were helpful for capturing participants' *type* of response, they did not offer insight into the *content* of their response. I eventually decided to develop a mixture of semantic and latent code labels with the aim of 'capturing single meanings or concepts' (Braun and Clarke 2021: 35). As per phase three (initial theme generation), I developed some candidate themes (an initial clustering of codes under a potential theme) (Figure 6).
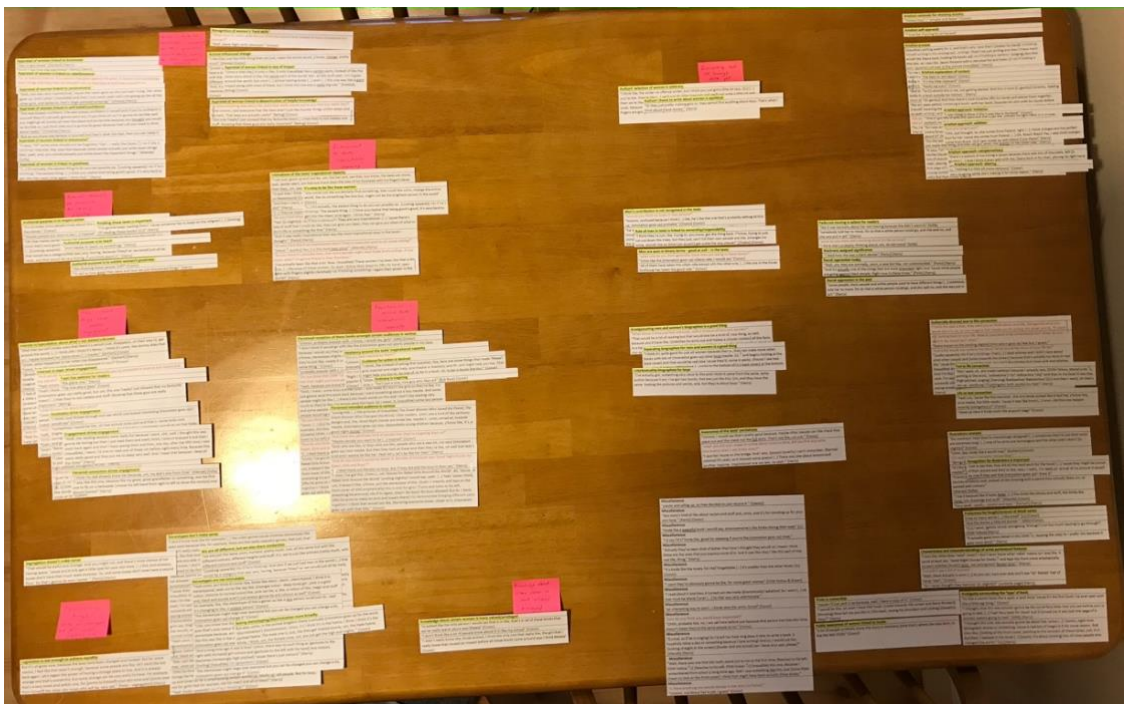
Figure 6 - Developing candidate themes in the exploratory phase

Given that, at this point, my primary objective was to explore what additional benefits discourse analysis could offer, I paused and selected one candidate theme to analyse discursively. There are many different approaches to discourse analysis. I resolved that attending to discourse with a number of different tools as opposed to one single tool; and so taking texts apart, unravelling and interrupting them, could open up a space for

thinking creatively and uninhibitedly about what discourse 'is doing'. As a starting point, I found James Paul Gee's (2011a; 2011b) tools to be sufficiently flexible to attend to the data's heterogeneity. Gee provides 27 tools – specific questions to ask of the data – for analysing language-in-use, that is, for considering *what* realities are being built through language, *how* these are being constructed and what the implications or effects of this might be. Drawing on some of these tools and incorporating questions from Carla Willig's approach to Foucauldian discourse analysis (2013), I developed a set of questions (Appendix 10) to operationalise my approach. When reviewing the code labels and their associated data for a candidate theme, I selected and utilised the most applicable questions from my list.

The theme I selected for the pilot analysis centred on the women in the texts being appraised, predominantly, for their characteristics, and rarely for their specific actions or 'hard skills'. Undertaking discursive analysis of this theme deepened my understanding of how participants made sense of how the women are represented in the texts. I asked questions such as, how is language used to build up or lessen significance for certain things and not others, and what circumstances make a certain discourse possible? Consideration of these questions highlighted the presence of neoliberal discourses of empowerment (see Chapter 7), offering some explanatory power to the lack of attention given to the women's specific actions. After all, the accentuation of individualised character traits within neoliberal discourses of empowerment tends to dovetail with the eschewal of collective, direct, tangible actions (Banet-Weiser, 2015a). I felt satisfied that this additional layer of discursive analysis had provided deeper understanding of the theme, and thus decided to move on from this exploratory phase utilising the approach I had developed.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach to thematic analysis in combination with a second level of discourse analysis allowed me to distil and summarise the diverse meanings dispersed across the dataset, while also attending to any important discursive features and patterns within the themes. Although another researcher would likely have developed a different set of themes, found different points of discursive significance, and crafted a different analytic story, the story I tell is 'the strongest story' I have been able to craft (Braun and Clarke 2021: 140) and, importantly, it is one that I believe does justice to the diverse meanings dispersed across the dataset.

Ethics

Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam (2004) distinguish two different dimensions of ethics in research: procedural ethics and 'ethics in practice' (p. 262). They define procedural ethics as the actions taken to acquire approval from an ethics committee, whereas 'ethics in practice' are 'the everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research' (p. 263). In this final section I provide details of the procedural steps I took to ensure the deliverance of an ethically sound study, before shifting attention to my ethics in practice, which has been underpinned by a 'relational ethics' (Ellis, 2007). There are numerous issues I could have reflected on in this section, but I have chosen to conclude by discussing issues of consent; issues which permeated both my procedural ethics and ethics in practice, and thus offer an example of the indispensability of both.

Procedural Ethics

I obtained ethical approval from The University's College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The study was conducted in accordance with the British Education Research Association's (BERA) (2018) ethical guidelines and the University of Glasgow's Code of Good Practice in Research (2018). I also took great care to adhere to The University's data management policies and the Data Protection Act (2018), completing a Research Data Management (RDM) plan and a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA). The DPIA was reviewed by The University's Data Protection and Freedom of Information (DPandFOI) Office. Engaging with these policies, guidelines and procedures was not only an important pre-requisite for carrying out the study, but it served as an important mechanism for appraising my own preparation and planning, prompting my thinking around key issues such as risk, confidentiality and consent, and ensuring research integrity.

'Relational Ethics' as 'Ethics in Practice'

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) note that 'procedural ethics cannot in itself provide all that is needed for dealing with ethically important moments in qualitative research' (p. 262). Ethical issues that are impossible to anticipate will inevitably arise. They see 'ethics in practice' as a continuation or extension of procedural ethics, and reflexivity as the bridge between them: reflexivity 'is closely connected with the ethical practice of research and

comes into play in the field, where research ethics committees are not accessible' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004: 273-74). In other words, being reflexive – that is, embracing a continuous criticality of one's own practice, the participants, and the research process and context – can help ensure ethical practice is upheld in the field.

Caroline Ellis (2007) proposes 'relational ethics', (closely connected to an ethics of care, feminist ethics, and feminist communication ethics) as a third dimension of ethics in research (p. 4). Ellis (2007) writes that relational ethics

> … recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work […] Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations (Ellis 2007: 4).

To me, relational ethics is not separate from ethics in practice. Rather, it is a sensibility one can embrace to attend to ethics in practice, and to which reflexivity is central. Throughout, I endeavoured to be reflexive about how I could embrace the connectedness that Wall (2019) and Holt (2004) emphasise to be so important for creating and sustaining empowering relations between adults and children; an emphasis that resonates strongly with Ellis' (2007) call for researchers to acknowledge their 'interpersonal bonds to others' (p. 4). Leavy and Harris (2019) maintain that 'developing ethically minded and appropriate relationships' is dependent on researchers' balancing the multiple roles they inhabit (p. 113). In other words, building relationships that are based on mutual respect, dignity and connectedness is only possible when these roles are negotiated appropriately and when researchers take stock of the ways in which they are similar and dissimilar from participants (Leavy and Harris 2019: 115). During data gathering, I inhabited numerous roles including researcher, facilitator, feminist, caring adult and 'co-participant' (Braid and Finch 2015: 116). It is also possible that participants perceived me to be an educator and/or an omniscient adult. Forging connectedness when balancing these roles and perceived roles and choosing when to allow one – and which one – more latitude, was not easy.

In the following section, I discuss ethical issues relating to consent that arose throughout the course of data gathering. I begin by outlining some of the procedural steps I took to acquire and continuously check for consent. I then draw on two examples to elucidate my

intent to embrace a relational ethics by upholding the values of respect, dignity and connectedness, while negotiating my various roles and perceived roles.

Reflection: Issues of Consent

To acquire consent, it was necessary to approach the parents/guardians first as I needed to obtain their permission to speak with their children. Ultimately, 'children's participation in any research project is dependent on adult gatekeepers' (Harden et al. 2000: section 2, para. 4). I subsequently spoke with the children to tell them about the study, explaining what it would entail and answering their questions. Participants and their parents/guardians then received the participant information sheets (see Appendix 1, Appendix 2 and Appendix 3) and the consent form (Appendix 4) via email. I created two versions of the participant information sheet in consideration of different reading abilities and one for parents/guardians, highlighting that their assistance might be required to help their child access Zoom, to email photographs, etc. I also created separate versions for the families I knew through tutoring, which included a sentence stating that the study was entirely separate from our tuition sessions and would not affect their membership at the learning centre in any way. I acquired voluntary informed consent electronically and re-obtained consent verbally at the start of each interview.

As discussed earlier, I was aware of the possibility that parents/guardians might pressure their child(ren) to participate on account of their own desire or sense of obligation to be supportive of the study. I also wondered whether parents/guardians might encourage participation due to anxieties regarding their child(ren)'s relative lack of formal schooling as a result of COVID-19 – their participation being one way to ensure engagement with educational activities. In an attempt to mitigate these risks, and in keeping with the plans I had submitted as part of my procedural ethics, I checked the children's willingness to participate during the initial interviews and emphasised the importance of participant consent to the parents/guardians. I also explained to the parents/guardians and the children that they could spend as much or as little time engaging with as many or as few of the activities as they liked. The importance of acquiring 'ongoing' consent when undertaking research with children has been widely discussed (Dockett and Perry, 2007; Flewitt, 2005; Hill, 2005; Simons and Usher, 2000) but the study's design precluded me from being present to continuously monitor consent when the children engaged with the

reader response toolkits in their homes. Thus, reiterating the voluntary nature of participation and the ongoing right to withdraw to parents/guardians was vital.

However, it seemed that participants may have felt pressured to participate to a greater extent by fellow participants as opposed to parents/guardians – something I had not anticipated when attending to the procedural ethics. For example, in a group reading session it became known that Olivia had finished reading one of the books that Lucas was half-way through. Upon realising this, Lucas appeared somewhat despondent. It was not a conscious thought, but I felt instantly compelled to allow my caring adult role to take centre stage. I felt compassion towards Lucas, finding myself reassuring him that he *really* could read as much *or* as little as he liked. Perhaps he viewed me as the omniscient adult, researcher, educator (or combination of all three), who was likely to be disappointed that he was 'behind' the others. Perhaps Olivia also viewed me in a similar light and, as a result, felt compelled/obligated to impress me hence her announcement that she had finished the book. I respectfully praised Olivia's efforts, not wanting her to feel unappreciated. Yet, on reflection, this may have unhelpfully (particularly for Lucas) fortified any perceptions that my primary role was that of an educator who needed to be impressed (given that praise is usually seen as a clear marker for success, often used by educators to motivate and engage students). Maintaining connectedness with both Lucas and Olivia felt impossible, as my attempt to honour Lucas' dignity by emphasising that he had done nothing wrong by reading half the book could have impelled Olivia to feel that her efforts in reading the whole book had been undermined or disrespected. I cannot change how I responded in this moment – and if I could, would a different response even have been preferable? – but I did reflect on it, and I certainly felt an increased consciousness of the complexities around appropriately fostering connectedness with research participants.

There was only one individual who did not consent to participate during the procedural ethics stage. They asked questions regarding how much they would be expected to read, how much of their time was required and whether they would be paid. I remember feeling deeply impressed by the respect and consideration they had for their own time and efforts. With regard to payment, my understanding is that it is generally discouraged in research that might be regarded as educational (BERA 2018: 19) as 'participation is often considered to be implicitly beneficial to the participant' (Makar and O'Brien 2013:

111). Others argue that offering payment might place children under parental pressure to participate (Cree et al. 2002: 52), while some advocate that providing payment is an acknowledgement of participants' time and contributions (Shaw et al., 2011). I told this individual that they could keep the books, valued at around £40, to which they asked whether they could exchange them for cash. When I explained that I did not think the ethics committee would allow this, they said something to the effect of, "*touché!*", and I inferred from their tone that they thought I was trying to deceive them; that they thought there was a card I was trying to play and that while they had no card to play in return, they were not going to accept the play without me being aware of their suspicions.

Of course, I respected their ultimate decision not to participate, and this exchange affirmed my belief that relations of power between adults and children are neither unidirectional nor simple. It was a clear demonstration that relations of power are shifting and that, generally, although adults appear more powerful than children, this does not 'preclude multiple points of resistance and confrontation at which children are able to exercise power over adults' (Gallagher 2008: 143). In this particular moment, I felt that the roles of adult/researcher, child/potential participant were shaken. This individual had sagaciously made known their awareness of the power imbalances that existed in our relationship, and they then seemed to loom larger than ever. Although I felt a sense of disconnection (I did not know what the guidelines were regarding payment, leaving me feeling vulnerable and exposed), I also felt a strong sense of connectedness. There was something both comforting and electrifying about the realisation that this individual was not only aware of, but willing to call out, my participation in imbalanced systems/relations of power that exist between adults and children.

Throughout the course of data gathering it became increasingly apparent that even though I had attended to procedural ethics with extensive care and thought, my work was not done. The procedural process simply instigated what became a long journey of embracing, to the best of my ability, a practice of relational ethics in the field. Though I did exercise reflexivity, and I did act from my heart *and* mind (Ellis 2007: 4), this practice was not straightforward. My inability to write about issues of consent as anything other than a series of reflections and unanswered questions is testament to the complexities I encountered, though they are intended to provide at least some insight into my general

approach and disposition when engaging with what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) term the 'everyday ethical issues' (p. 263) that pervade qualitative research.

Presentation of Findings and Discussion

As discussed above, I analysed my data in response to the study's main research question and supporting research questions (1-4):

> How do eight children, aged 7 to 10, respond to and engage with four biographical compendiums about women published between 2016 and 2020?

1. What are the children's interpretations of the texts?
2. What are the implications of engaging with the texts in relation to the children's aspirations and sense of identification/exclusion with the issues?
3. How does the children's engagement with the texts impact or inform how they make sense of gender/gendered subjectivities?
4. How might the children's engagement with the texts inform their use in pedagogic contexts?

The first supporting question is concerned with participants' interpretations of the texts, while questions two, three and four are concerned with participants' engagement with the texts. Of course, this distinction is artificial. These areas of inquiry are not mutually exclusive and there are many points of connection across them. Yet, the five themes I developed during my first level of analysis (reflexive thematic analysis) can be broadly categorised according to these two areas (Table 1).

Theme	Interpretations	Engagement
1. Appraising women's *being* rather than their *doing*		
2. Affirming and challenging inspirational-ness		
3. Literature for learning		
4. Justice as fairness		
5. Permissive questioning		

Table 1 - Relationship between the themes and the research questions

In the interests of communicating my findings in a way that clearly addresses the research questions, I have chosen to present my findings across two chapters, interweaving my analytical discussion throughout. In Chapter 7, I attend to themes one and two (which are broadly focussed on interpretations), and, in Chapter 8, I attend to themes three, four and five (which are broadly focussed on engagement). When citing speech from the transcripts I use italics to clearly demarcate that these are the participants' (and occasionally my) words.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided details of the study's methodology. I have outlined my methodological approach, re-presented the research questions, discussed how the study was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, described my data gathering and analytic processes, and provided insight into some of the most pertinent ethical issues I encountered. Before presentation of my findings and analytic discussion (Chapter 7 and Chapter 8), the following chapter offers a glimpse into the four biographical compendiums participants engaged with in this study. I identify some of the characteristics and hallmarks they share, offer an overview of each individual text, and provide a summary of my own critical content analysis.

Chapter 6. Introducing the Biographies

Introduction

Favilli and Cavallo's *Good Night Stories* (2016) and Pankhurst's *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (2016a) set the precedent for contemporary children's biographies. Author and editor Paul Laity (2018) noted that *Good Night Stories* 'prompted a slew of copycat efforts', with the style, tone and format having been widely imitated since 2016 (para. 2). The WorldCat library database has catalogued over 12,000 biographies in their juvenile literature section since 2016 (OCLC, 2023) and Peters, the UK's leading supplier of children's books for schools and public libraries, has catalogued close to 10,000 (2023). Indeed, many bookstores in the UK have a shelf, if not an entire section, devoted to inspiring children through presenting the lives of others.

As the 'blueprints' for this proliferation of children's biographies, I resolved that both *Good Night Stories* (Favilli and Cavallo, 2016) and *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (Pankhurst, 2016a) should be included in the study. I also selected Pankhurst's more recent publication, *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* (2020), as nearly a third of the biographies celebrate collective action (a focus on collectivity is distinctively lacking in earlier publications) and Harrison's *Little Leaders: Visionary Women Around the World* (2018), which contains a wider range of lesser-known women from diverse backgrounds. Conscious of not wanting to overwhelm participants with too many texts, four seemed like the optimal amount and, together, the corpus provided an ample variety of women for participants to choose from when engaging with the texts.[10]

Below, I offer an overview of the texts. For each, I include some contextual information and details of its aesthetic design; note any unique peritextual features or literary devices that are employed; and cite some of the biographies presented therein. I conclude this chapter with a summary of my own critical content analysis of the texts. While this might appear tangential or perhaps even irrelevant – my participants' responses are the key

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[10] As I refer to these texts repeatedly throughout my findings and discussion chapters, I cite them in abbreviated form: *Good Night Stories*; *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*; *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet;* and *Little Leaders*, omitting the authors and dates of publication. No page numbers are included in my references to *The Fantastically Great Women* texts, as they do not have pagination.

focus of the study, after all – my analysis of their responses has inevitably been affected by my own reading of the texts. Therefore, and in accordance with my commitment to reflexive practice (see Chapter 5), I offer an abridged version of the critical content analysis I carried out prior to data gathering.

An Overview: Characteristics and Hallmarks

Before discussing the idiosyncrasies of each text, it is worth noting some similarities that they share. All four texts utilise 'reality effects' and 'the biographeme'; two devices that Beauvais (2020) identifies in her analysis of nine picturebook biographies published between 2005 and 2016. Beauvais (2020) describes reality effects as an 'aesthetic of believability' rather than the portrayal of an 'inherent truth' (p. 64). For example, in Rosa Parks' biography in *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World,* there is an illustration of two women talking on the phone about boycotting the buses. As one of my participants noted with reference to this illustration, *"it's not complete fact"* (Mickael). While it is plausible that two women did speak on the phone to discuss the boycott, it is not necessarily an 'inherent truth' (Beauvais 2020: 64).

Beauvais (2020) describes biographemes as 'moments where a person's existence appears intensified, compressed into a small space, packed with symbolic meaning and narrative force' (p. 68). Again, all four texts utilise this device to a greater or lesser extent, with pivotal or key moments in the women's lives being accentuated. For example, in Mária Telkes' biography in *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* (Telkes was a Hungarian inventor and scientist), the moment she invented the first solar-heated house, is central. The double-page spread is filled with an illustration of the Dover Sunhouse and Telkes is depicted in the foreground with a speech bubble that reads, 'my invention was a solar-heated house. I worked with some other AMAZING women to build it'. Telkes had a long and varied career, developed a number of technologies, and received many awards, honours and accolades. However, it is this singular moment that is accentuated in her biography. It is 'packed with symbolic meaning and narrative force' (Beauvais 2020: 68), with the text extolling its influential power in changing the world and transforming people's everyday lives.

Another similarity that the texts share is their use of direct address, with the authors using imperative verbs and rhetorical questioning to connect with readers. As Graff and Shimek (2020) explain, direct address 'is increasingly common in contemporary nonfiction. Addressing the reader as *you* at the individual and collective level connects readers to abstract and concrete concepts, guides readers' imaginations, and inspires readers to take action' (p. 226). In *Good Night Stories*, readers are told to 'dream bigger, aim higher, fight harder and, when in doubt, remember you are right' (n.p.). The *Fantastically Great Women* series includes rhetorical questions such as, 'How will you speak up for our planet?' (Pankhurst, 2020) and 'How will you change the world?' (Pankhurst, 2016a).

Aside from utilisation of the above literary devices, all four texts are comparable in that they present biographies of women with a variety of interests, and from a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Finally, and as aforementioned, the authors of the texts are unambiguous in their intent to inspire readers to take action. Through direct address, clear expectations are placed on readers to 'be inspired' by the biographies and, crucially, to respond by doing something.

Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women

Good Night Stories was funded through the crowdfunding website, Kickstarter, and remains one of their most funded children's books (Kickstarter, 2023). In fact, it is accompanied by two of its sequels, *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2* (2017) and *I am a Rebel Girl: A Journal to Start Revolutions* (2018) in Kickstarter's top five funded children's books of all time (Kickstarter, 2023). In the preface of their initial book, *Good Night Stories*, Favilli and Cavallo (2016) write:

> Now that you're holding this book, all we can feel is hope and enthusiasm for the world we're building together. A world where gender will not define how big you can dream, how far you can go. A world where each of us will be able to say with confidence: "I am free." (Favilli and Cavallo 2016: xii).

This messaging is indicative of the broader aim Rebel Girls reports today. A digital media company and children's publisher, Rebel Girls 'believe in empowering girls to dream big'

and state that 'amplifying stories of real-life, extraordinary women can pave the way for a more equal world, and that when she sees it, she can be it' (Rebel Girls, 2023).

Good Night Stories contains one hundred biographies, in alphabetised order, with one biography per double-page spread. Examples include Ashley Fiolek, Rosa Parks, Isabel Allende and Poilcarpa Salavarrieta. On the left side of the double-page spread, the name of the woman is presented as the title, with her area of speciality displayed underneath. For example:

ADA LOVELACE

MATHEMATICIAN

A written biography of the woman follows and at the bottom of the page there is a footer, detailing the dates of the woman's life and her country of origin. The right side of the double-page spread displays an illustration of the woman and the name of the illustrator (the illustrations were produced by 60 female artists, hence their diverse styles). Most of the biographies also include a quotation by the woman, overlayed on the illustration.

This is the only hardback book participants received. It has a smooth matte finish and an attached, satin ribbon bookmark. Of its peritextual features, two are noticeably unique: 'Write your story' and 'Draw your portrait' (a blank, double-page spread for readers to write their own story and draw their own portrait) (pp. 202-03) and 'Rebels Hall of Fame' (a list of 'rebel girls and boys who were early believers in *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* on Kickstarter') (pp. 204-08).

Little Leaders: Visionary Women Around the World

Little Leaders shares many similarities with *Good Night Stories.* There are less biographies (40 compared to 100), but these are also presented across double-page spreads, with the illustration on the right-hand side and the written text on the left-hand side. The woman's name appears at the top, as a title, with her area(s) of speciality; the dates of her life; and her country of origin, detailed in the subtitle below. Like in *Good Night Stories,* the introduction employs direct address to galvanise readers into action: 'I hope these

biographies inspire you to create, invent, imagine; to try new thing; to make mistakes; to ask questions' (n.p.).

One notable difference is that the contents pages in *Little Leaders* only lists the women's names, not their area(s) of speciality. In fact, the text diverges from both *Good Night Stories* and the *Fantastically Great Women* texts in that it explicitly celebrates the women's multiple interests. Many of the women have more than one area of speciality listed in the subtitle of their biography, for example, Wang Zhenyi is noted to be an astronomer, poet and mathematician (pp. 4-5); Hedy Lamarr, an actress and an inventor (pp. 28-29); and Sister Corita Kent, an artist and an educator (pp. 42-43). Furthermore, in the introduction, Harrison discusses the value of bringing the arts and sciences together, concluding, 'When you look at the world with many points of view, it can lead to real innovation and create true potential for the future' (n.p.).

Following the 40 biographies there is a range of peritextual features, including a list of sources, further reading, and a glossary. There are also a few pages dedicated to 'more little leaders', where 18 women are briefly presented through a small illustration and short biography (two to three sentences). Like Pankhurst, Harrison illustrated the text in addition to researching and writing the content, and so the artistic style is consistent throughout. The front flap includes a bookmark that readers can cut out, and two of Harrison's other books (*Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* (2017) and *Little Leaders: Exceptional Men in Black History* (2019)) are advertised on the back cover.

Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World

As aforementioned, Pankhurst, author of *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*, is a distant relative of British suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst. Reflecting on how this association has influenced her work, she writes:

> Emmeline's astounding story has followed me all my life and has undoubtedly influenced my work. That connection certainly led to a conversation that made me realise that a book really should exist that told the stories of great women from history in an accessible way for young readers (Pankhurst 2023: para. 7).

Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World contains biographies of 13 women, including Anne Frank, Marie Curie, Rosa Parks and Amelia Earhart. The double-page preface includes a small illustration of each woman, positioned along a swirling arrow that culminates in a short piece of text enclosed in a circle. The text begins with the rhetorical question, 'How did they become so fantastically amazing and great?!' Each biography is presented across a double-page spread and Pankhurst employs a range of devices including humorous asides, rhetorical questions, direct address, and a range of colours, fonts and graphics. Most of the biographies also include directional indicators, including arrows, dotted lines and pointing hands. The end matter includes a glossary ('Fantastically Great Words') and a 'Gallery of Greatness' – a double-page presenting illustrations of the 13 women, each offering a piece of advice. For example, Marie Curie is depicted holding a jar of radium with a speech bubble containing the imperative, 'Ask questions!' tailing from her mouth.

Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet

Published four years after *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*, *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* (2020) focuses on nature and the environment, presenting women who have used 'their skills and voices to look after our marvellously beautiful world' (Pankhurst 2020: n.p.). It follows the same format as the 2016 text and Pankhurst employs similar literary devices. However, comparative to *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World,* this text presents more collective biographies. Nearly a third of the biographies celebrate collaborative action, for example, the Chipko movement in India, Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, and Eileen Kampakuta Brown and Eileen Wani Wingfield in South Australia.

Unlike *Good Night Stories* and *Little Leaders,* which are more traditional in their formatting (each biography contains a single block of text and an individual portrait), both *Fantastically Great Women* texts could more easily be categorised as picturebook biographies or nonfiction picturebooks, as the visual/textual strategies used to communicate knowledge are 'deliberately open-ended, innovative, creative, subjective and revisable' (Grilli 2020: 12). In their research on how evolution is represented within nonfiction picturebooks, Eve Tandoi and Erin Spring (2022) identify many opportunities for 'radial reading' (p. 113) (a term they borrow from Margaret Meek and Jerome

McGann). They describe how 'each image and its accompanying text is designed to catch the eye and act as a self-contained 'nugget' of information. These nuggets invite readers to explore the rhizomatic structure of information across the double-page spread' (Tandoi and Spring 2022: 113). Opportunities for 'radial reading' are clearly identifiable in both *Fantastically Great Women* texts, as the biographies present discrete 'nuggets' of information through use of speech bubbles, and self-contained blocks of text and illustrations. Numerous participants described the *Fantastically Great Women* texts as 'cartoony'.

My Critical Content Analysis: A Snapshot

Before commencing data gathering, I undertook a critical content analysis of the four texts.[11] This was a crucial component of the study as it enabled me to reflexively explore my own interpretations. Developing an awareness of my own analytic orientation proved invaluable when undertaking formal data analysis, as I repeatedly asked myself how my interpretations of participants' responses might have been affected by my own reading of the texts. Of course, my interpretations were coloured by my textual analysis to a certain extent, but having this analysis as a clear point of reference was a helpful self-checking tool. Furthermore, it would have been unethical not to have deeply engaged with the texts prior to sending them to participants.

I based my approach on the work of Kathy Short (2016) in 'Critical Content Analysis as a Research Methodology'. As Short (2016) notes, 'What makes a study "critical" is the theoretical framework used to think within, through, and beyond the text' (p. 4). My analysis was framed by popular feminism as theorised by Banet-Weiser (2015a; 2018a; 2018b) and poststructuralist feminist theories; a framing that is consistent with the study's broader, epistemological underpinnings. After 'immersing' myself in the texts – to experience the whole before analysing certain parts (Short 2016: 8) – I examined the texts through close reading within my theoretical framework. This reading was informed by questions such as, according to these narratives, who has power? Who has agency? What assumptions are made? I developed four main themes, each of which I summarise below.

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[11] As I contributed part of this analysis to *Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*'s special edition on girlhood (Couceiro, 2022), I make reference to this publication throughout.

Responsibilisation

Within the texts' persistent use of direct address, I identified a responsibilising undercurrent. In addition to imperative verbs and rhetorical questioning, the texts employ other directive strategies to invite, or *instruct* readers, to do and be certain things. As already noted, *Good Night Stories'* peritextual material includes a template for readers to create their own story and draw their own portrait (pp. 202-03). With the words, 'WRITE YOUR STORY' and 'DRAW YOUR PORTRAIT' emblazoned on top of the pages, readers are encouraged to take ownership and imagine a life for themselves that is worthy of being retold. Through direct address, readers are rendered individually responsible for themselves (their aspirations and successes) and, in the case of the *Fantastically Great Women* books, for the wider world. The rhetorical questions, 'how will you change the world?' and 'how will you save the planet?' are strikingly directive, and while intended to be encouraging, could be read as somewhat burdensome. *Little Leaders* embraces a softer, less-directive tone. The preface is characterised by a tentative optimism: 'I hope these biographies inspire you to create, invent, imagine; to try new things; to make mistakes; to ask questions' (n.p.). Nonetheless, the intimation that readers are expected to *do* something following their engagement with the texts, remains. At the very most, readers are responsibilised to change the world. At the very least, they are responsibilised to embrace new adventures and challenges.

Specialisation

The form and the content of these texts work together to foreground specialisation. For the most part, these women's lives are reduced to a single area of focus or achievement. In other words, specialisation is central to the women's biographies, while examples of generalisation, that is, looking beyond a single area of focus, is largely absent. The biographies tend to present summaries of the women's lives, with the primary, narrative focus spotlighting their specialism or particular area of expertise. For example, the biography of Mary Kom in *Good Night Stories* details how she decided to become a boxer when she was a child, and then follows her development in the boxing ring, culminating with a celebration of her boxing success in the Olympics (pp. 128-29). In *Little Leaders*, as one of the participants in my study pointed out, the illustrations surrounding some of the

women accentuate their area of speciality. For example, the astronomer, Vera Rubin, is surrounded by stars and planets (pp. 50-51).

This said, there are a small number of women who have more than one specialism attached to their name. For example, in *Good Night Stories*, Cora Coralina is ascribed the status of poet *and* baker (pp. 44-45). In *Little Leaders*, Wang Zhenyi is noted to be an astronomer, poet *and* mathematician (pp. 4-5). However, these examples are rare, especially in *Good Night Stories*, and the fact that the area or areas of speciality are foregrounded on the page (underneath the woman's name) is still demonstrative of its deemed importance as a central marker of identity. Although the texts' presentation of a wide variety of specialisms is impressive, the foregrounding of specialisation could be deemed problematic. Arguably, the notion that you should have one area of focus or one specialisation that defines you, is somewhat limiting.

Individualism

Fundamentally, a biography is an account of an individual's life. Therefore, that these texts are characterised by narratives of individualism and individualistic acts, is unsurprising. 'However, there is an eerie silence surrounding the wider, historical context of these women's achievements, which often involved sustained periods of collective effort' (Couceiro 2022: 10). For example, the biographies of Rosa Parks in *Good Night Stories* and *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* spotlight Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a bus in 1955. Although Parks' "no" was a pivotal moment in the American civil rights movement, 'her engagement with activism extended far beyond this singular event and, for the most part, involved collaboration with others' (Couceiro 2022: 10). Yet, these collective and collaborative efforts are barely represented in the texts.

Of course, there is only so much information that can be included in a one- or two-page biography, and individual action 'is more easily commodified' than collective action (Banet-Weiser 2015a: 186). Yet, even when collective action is presented (nearly a third of the biographies in *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* celebrate collective efforts, such as the Chipko movement in India), individual leadership tends to be the most celebrated feature of the narrative. For example, in Wangari Maathai's biography in *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet,* allusions to Maathai's

leadership ('Wangari started the Green Belt Movement'; 'Wangari put women in charge!'; 'The government didn't like Wangari helping women to feel powerful') overshadow the collective action of the movement. Although there are small illustrations of other women, these are relegated to the bottom of the page and, surrounded by illustrations of Maathai, they are depicted as followers as opposed to equal contributors to the collective cause.

Other scholars have also called attention to children's biographies that focus on individualism and disregard collective action (Echterling, 2016; Moriarty, 2021; Smulders, 2016). For example, in their respective analyses of picturebook biographies about Maathai, Clare Echterling (2016) and Sharon Smulders (2016) highlight how the representations 'reduce environmental and social movements to individual efforts' (Echterling 2016: 80), which ultimately contradicts 'one of the central planks of the Green Belt Movement: the importance of collective action' (Smulders 2016: 32). In her analysis of children's biographies about Greta Thunberg, Sinéad Moriarty (2021) explains how the texts are framed as 'hero narratives', persistently peddling celebrations of individualism and exceptionalism. She sets forth Roni Natov's (2017) concept of the 'community as hero' as an alternative, more productive model for environmental narratives, 'as it circumvents the individualism of the conventional hero narrative in favour of a celebration of the power and responsibility of the group' (Moriarty 2021: 193). Not only does this research (Echterling, 2016; Moriarty, 2021; Smulders, 2016) resonate with my own analysis, but it suggests there is both desire and scope to problematise, reconceptualise and perhaps de-individualise certain aspects of children's biography.

Extraordinariness

Representations of extraordinariness permeate the texts. For the most part, depictions of the women are one-dimensional and hyperbolically positive: 'their flaws, imperfections, failings, and defeats are only briefly touched upon if not erased entirely. The title of Pankhurst's series alone is exemplary of this hyperbolic positivity – these women are not just "great"; they are "fantastically great" ' (Couceiro 2022: 9). Although some of the biographies do present more holistic accounts of the women, common to all of the biographies is a celebration of their extraordinariness. However, running parallel to this emphasis on extraordinariness is the 'feel good' narrative that through hard work and

following one's dreams, anyone can achieve greatness, no matter how ordinary they are. In a way, and ironically, extraordinariness thus becomes synonymous with ordinariness, which ultimately invalidates the notion of extraordinariness altogether!

Representations of extraordinariness also tend to go hand-in-hand with the eschewal of systemic discrimination and oppression. As Heinecken (2016) notes in her analysis of sports advice books written by top female athletes, 'the construction of the liberated girl subject erases the social and structural inequities that continue to constrain the experiences of many girls within the US' (p. 339). Similarly, in her analysis of children's biographies about Oprah Winfrey, KaaVonia Hinton (2021) identifies persistent, colourblind racism, where Winfrey's 'childhood is depicted with little regard to structural injustices, historical context, or cultural wealth' (p. 259). In the biographical texts utilised in my study, it is not necessarily the case that structural inequities are entirely omitted from the narratives (though they are almost imperceptible in some). Many of the biographies describe women's direct challenges to macro-level inequities. However, they are narrated in a way that implies they can be easily overcome or removed entirely, through the individual actions of exceptional women (Couceiro 2022: 13). For example, the biography of Claudia Ruggerini in *Good Night Stories* begins by describing the conditions under which she grew up during Benito Mussolini's dictatorship in Italy: literature and films were censored, and people could not express opinions or vote (pp. 38-39). The text goes on to describe how Ruggerini, who 'believed in freedom and decided to fight this man with all her strength', joined a group of university students who set about publishing their own newspaper (p. 38). Then, the penultimate paragraph reads:

> Claudia was incredibly brave. She cycled around delivering newspapers and messages from one secret location to another for almost two years. One day, the regime finally collapsed. The national radio announced that Italy was free from fascism and people flooded onto the streets to celebrate (Favilli and Cavallo 2016: 38).

The implication is that through being extraordinarily brave and remaining committed to delivering newspapers, Ruggerini was largely responsible for defeating fascism. Not only does this individualistic focus elide the vast collective efforts during this period (these are briefly mentioned), but it suggests Ruggerini's extraordinariness was enough to overcome national, institutionalised oppression. Presenting narratives of aspirational individuals

who have achieved extraordinary things is incredibly powerful, but care must be taken not to eschew the realities of systemic and structural inequities, nor to suggest individuals can overcome them singlehandedly.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the texts used in this study, identifying all four texts' utilisation of reality effects and biographemes (Beauvais, 2020), and noting that all employ direct address with the clear intent of inspiring readers. In accordance with my commitment to transparency and reflexivity I have also offered some insight into my own critical content analysis of the texts, briefly describing the four themes I developed: responsibilisation, specialisation, individualism and extraordinariness. In the following two chapters I present my findings and analytic discussion.

Chapter 7. Interpretations of the Women and the Texts

Introduction

With regard to participants' interpretations of the texts, the following themes are particularly salient: appraisals of the women's *being* rather than their *doing*, and affirming and challenging inspirational-ness. These two themes will be the subject of this chapter. I begin by discussing the former, explaining how participants' appraisals of the women tended to centre their qualities and particular character traits (their being) rather than their specific actions (their doing). I discuss what this being-orientated pattern of response might suggest about participants' interpretations of the women, how this relates to expressions of their own aspirations, and the wider implications of this. With particular focus on participants' appraisals of the women as brave and confident, I view these concepts as discourses, analysing what these appraisals might mean or signal in terms of social constructions around what is possible/ideal to think about by participants in relation to the texts.

I then proceed to discuss the second theme, affirming and challenging inspirational-ness. My analysis reveals a striking tension between responses that affirm the texts and the women as inspirational, and responses which seem to challenge this inspirational-ness. Indeed, participants' affirmations of the women's inspirational-ness seem antithetical to data suggesting participants viewed the women as being too extraordinary to be relatable, and their representation as being too inaccurate to be believable. Considering both themes in tandem, I conclude this chapter by attempting to tease out this tension and suggest that the second theme offers the first a certain level of explanatory power. Namely, that participants' appraisals of the women's being rather than doing might be informed by their struggle to relate to the extraordinariness and highly specialised nature of the women's doing.

Theme 1: Appraising Women's *Being* Rather Than Their *Doing*

Throughout the course of the study, participants engaged with numerous biographies across the four texts. Our discussions of the biographies usually involved participants appraising the women. Some of their appraisals were self-initiated, though they were often prompted by my questioning, for example, *"What do you like about [insert woman's*

name]?" Their responses tended to focus on the women's qualities and character traits as opposed to what they had done.

An exchange I had with Darcy in her main interview, where she explained why she had chosen to draw a picture of Anne Frank (Figure 7) in response to Frank's biography in *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*, is illustrative of this pattern of response.

Figure 7 – Darcy's drawing of Anne Frank

Louise: *And what about your second drawing then Darcy, who's that one of?*

Darcy: *Anne Frank!*

Louise: *Mmmm. Good stuff! Do you remember what book Anne Frank was in?*

[A few seconds later in the conversation]

Louise: *So before you, um, looked at this story, had you heard of Anne Frank before?*

Darcy: *Yeah, because I look at these books quite a lot, and I, and I always thought Anne Frank was my favourite.*

Louise: *Ahh, that's really interesting. What do you like about the story of Anne Frank?*

> **Darcy:** *(long pause) (elongates) Well, she was really sma-, really really smart, and loving an- and kind.*

Darcy's appraisal of Frank focused on her being. She stated that she liked her because she was smart, loving and kind. However, the text places greater emphasis on Frank's doing rather than her being; specifically, it spotlights her writing. Frank is introduced as 'a girl who dreamed of becoming a writer' and her diary is referred to as 'a book considered to be one of the most important in history'. Frank's writing is also foregrounded through the illustrations. One delineates an excerpt from her diary and two of the larger illustrations depict Frank sat at a desk, with her diary open in front of her. Yet, when asked what she liked about the biography, Darcy's response did not include reference to her writing. According to Rosenblatt's (1938/1970) theory of response, literary works remain

> … merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings (Rosenblatt 1938/1970: 25).

Darcy's response is demonstrative of how readers transact with texts to create meanings, often in surprising and unexpected ways. Despite the text's focus on Frank's writing, Darcy arguably transformed some of the text's more peripheral elements, such as the small love hearts surrounding an illustration of Frank's cat, Moortje, and a speech bubble containing the 'people are truly good at heart', into 'a set of meaningful symbols' (Rosenblatt 1938/1970: 25) from which Frank's intelligence, love and kindness can be inferred.

The picture Darcy drew of Frank also omits reference to her writing (Figure 7). Frank is depicted in the centre of an orange backdrop (Darcy was keen to assert that this was *not* a coffin) amidst a pattern of black criss-cross lines, which she said she drew to match the background in her drawing of Eugenie Clark. Darcy reported that she depicted Frank as happy: *"I made her happy 'cause, um, all of the little pictures of her in the, um like in the squares of the book, she was all smiling, so I thought it would be quite nice to do her smiling".* Again, Darcy's response focussed on Frank's being rather than her doing. One might surmise that given its omission to Frank's writing, Darcy's drawing does not explicitly demonstrate narrative understanding of the text. However, Darcy did

demonstrate understanding in our broader discussions, and so this lack of focus on Frank's writing in both her verbal and pictorial responses suggests that Frank's being held greater salience for her than her doing. Despite Frank's act of writing being centred in the text, it was not Frank's writing that Darcy appraised.

Although poststructuralist theory evades clear definition or cohesiveness, in large part because of the 'salutary instability' it embraces (Bourg and Kleinberg 2019: 492), there are some key underlying principles, including rejection of the culturally constructed narrative of the 'self' as essential and fixed. Poststructuralism treats this narrative of a substantial self that is consistent over time as 'a philosophical conceit and historical artifact' (Bourg and Kleinberg 2019: 492), with many poststructuralists positing that we are 'subjects-in-process, subjects-in-relation' (Davies and Gannon 2011: 312). Participants' being-orientated responses highlight the pervasiveness of this narrative. Appraising the women for being many things – *"brave"* and *"confident"* being the two qualities they appraised the most – their responses are declarative of a self that is seemingly stable and timeless. The women's bravery and confidence are framed as static qualities that are enduring and, crucially, as integral to their selves. It is who they *are*.

Below, I discuss participants' appraisals of the women's bravery and confidence in turn, situating these responses within the broader neoliberal landscape where being-centred discourses operate and propagate. Not co-ordinated or instituted from 'the top', these discourses circulate through different 'apparatuses' (Foucault 1972/1980: 131) such as education (as they become increasingly embedded within UK educational policy and practice), and popular and commercial media (as they pervade expressions of popular feminism). I suggest that although participants' being-orientated responses can be explained by a range of interrelated factors, including imitation of the text's language (Sipe 2008: 115) and 'cumulative talk' (Littleton and Mercer 2013: 16), considering this pattern of response from a broader discursive perspective holds further explanatory power. Importantly, it also incites reflection on the expansive reach of neoliberal discourses that require the acquisition of certain character traits for success, and even survival.

Being Brave

Participants appraised a number of women for their bravery, including Hillary Clinton, Malala Yousafzai and Rosa Parks. For example, in preparation for the reading sessions, Lucas selected Clinton's biography in *Good Night Stories* and wrote the following to share with the group:

> *Hillary was a United Stated Of America Candidate that ran for President. She was born on October 26ᵗʰ, 1947. Hillary was a brave blonde girl with thick glasses and boundless curiosity* (excerpt from Lucas' written summary).

The line, 'Hillary was a brave blonde girl with thick glasses and boundless curiosity' is taken directly from the text (p. 70). The text also describes how, as a child, Clinton would hide inside as she was 'scared of the rough boys in her neighbourhood' (p. 70). Yet, Lucas' appraisal of Clinton stabilises her, almost freezing her in time. The implication is that Clinton *is* brave, that she has always been brave. Harry similarly spotlighted bravery in his response to Yousafzai's biography. When I asked Harry why he chose the biography of Yousafzai for the group to read in the reading session he said, *"Because she is {elongates} very brave".* He offered this response without hesitation, and his lyrical elongation of the words 'very' and 'brave' had an almost rehearsed or recitational quality to them. Similar to the utilisation of buzzwords, Lucas and Harry deployed 'brave' with distinctive ease. In poststructuralist terms, these can be read as examples of how 'stable selves' are constructed through the influence or lens of particular dominant discourses. Not only does the dominant neoliberal discourse valorising certain character traits influence Lucas and Harry's interpretations of Clinton and Yousafzai, but it influences how they construct them as distinct and stable entities.

Many of the women in the texts are reported to be confident, brave, inspirational and determined. Furthermore, and as discussed in Chapter 6, the texts utilise direct address to encourage readers to 'be' like the women. For example, in *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet*, readers are told to 'be different', 'be kind', 'be just', 'be interested'. Rosenblatt (1938/1970) reminds us that authors write 'out of a scheme of values, a sense of a social framework or even, perhaps, of a cosmic pattern' (p. 6). Her reference to the cosmos, in all its complexity and enormity, is particularly apt. These biographies have been written within a multitude of frameworks (of the genre, of society, of culture, of personal values). Indeed, as has been identified in many children's

biographies (see analyses by García González, 2020; Hinton, 2021; and Schmidt, 2013), a surplus of adjectives delineating personal qualities and character traits are commonplace for the genre. In terms of socio-cultural frameworks and as discussed in Chapter 2, these texts were produced in a neoliberal context during a time of highly visible feminist activism. In this social context, exhortations for women and girls to be certain things were, and continue to be, ubiquitous. That the texts – themselves, social products – emphasise the women's being is therefore unsurprising.

Given the texts' emphases on being, then, participants' being-orientated responses could be read as 'imitation' of the texts' language; imitation being one of the analytic responses Sipe (2008) develops in his exploration of children's responses to picturebooks (p. 115). He notes that participants either questioned the meaning of words or referred to the exact language of the text to 'prove' statements. In the above examples, neither Harry nor Lucas questioned the meaning of 'brave', nor employed it to evidence a particular point. Rather, they employed 'brave' as a descriptor to appraise the women. However, whereas Lucas' response offers an explicit example of textual imitation – he cites an exact sentence from the text – most responses that included appraisals of the women were more akin to Harry's response. That is, although participants often appraised the women by drawing on certain character traits – many of which appear frequently across the texts – it cannot be concluded that such responses are purely imitative.

In other words, while textual imitation goes some way to explaining participants' being-orientated responses, it does not tell the whole story. A group discussion of Rosa Parks' bravery reveals the potential impact of what Karen Littleton and Neil Mercer (2013) have termed, 'cumulative talk' (p. 16), which is when children repeat and elaborate each other's ideas in group discussions. In Parks' biography in *Good Night Stories*, the word 'brave' appears twice (p. 166), though the discussion suggests that participants' appraisals of Parks may have also been influenced by others' responses. When I asked Darcy why she had selected Parks' biography for the group to read she replied, *"Well, I like that she was brave".* After reading the biography aloud, I asked the others what they thought of the text:

> **Louise:** *Ah thumbs up! What do you, let's start with you Sofia, what do you like about it?*

Sofia: *Umm, I like that she was really brave (elongates) and, she stood up for her (intonation goes up) rights.*

Louise: *Hmm. Yeah, absolutely. What about you Harry I saw you've got a big thumbs up there?*

Harry: *So, um, I liked how she was a Black person.*

Louise: *You like how she was a Black person?*

Harry: *(Nodding)*

Louise: *Can you explain to me a little bit more what you mean?*

Harry: *Well, um, they are normally, umm, a wee bit like, not (intonation goes up) understanded. But some people understand her.*

Louise *Yeah!*

Harry: *Because of her (intonation goes up) bravery. So that's what I like about it (nodding).*

Louise: *Cool, ah thanks Harry. And how about you Conor, what do you think?*

Conor: *Umm, that um this story's kind of like about racism and stuff. And, umm, and it's for standing up for your skin tone.*

Notwithstanding Sofia and Conor's references to Parks *doing* something – *"standing up"* for her rights – affirmations of Parks *being* brave is a unifying thread across Darcy, Sofia and Harry's responses. Following Darcy's initial use of the adjective, 'brave', both Sofia and Harry appraise Parks for her bravery. As Littleton and Mercer (2013) explain, cumulative talk may involve elaboration of ideas, but it does not involve evaluation (p. 16). Here, Sofia elaborates on Darcy's initial appraisal of Parks' bravery by stating that *"she stood up for her rights",* and Harry offers further elaboration by explaining that Parks' bravery is what allows her to be understood. This accumulation of appraisals spotlighting Parks' bravery could have also been informed by my positive reinforcement. I responded to Darcy's appraisal with an encouraging smile and nod, and to Sofia's with the positive endorsement, *"Yeah absolutely"*. While textual imitation and cumulative talk offer two possible explanations for participants' being-orientated responses, viewing 'brave' as a discourse enables exploration of how, and to what effect, brave operates as a determinant of what is expected, and of what is socially and culturally permissible.

This particular instance is exemplary of how particular discourses gain legitimacy in particular contexts. Here, the context of accumulating appraisals of bravery in a setting participants may have perceived to be educational (where cultural expectations to say the 'right' thing abound), affects the legitimisation of neoliberal discourses that valorise particular character traits, such as bravery. Furthermore, according to Foucault (1982), discourses do not just socially construct their 'object', (for example, the notion of 'brave' considered by participants) but also their 'subject' (the very notion that we should consider someone 'brave' and evaluate them in this way). Participants' responses thus call attention to how these signifying practices also work to subjectivise us as individuals who value and evaluate particular ways of being.

In short, participants' responses are part of and informed by a broader, public proliferation of discourses that centre individual qualities, especially in fights for social justice. In particular, it is significant that I gathered this data in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which quickly became 'one of the most widely recognised and influential movements advocating to end racial inequalities, systemic racism and police brutality' (Garlen and Hembruff 2022: 4). During this time, discourses on racial diversity and anti-Blackness in media and marketing spheres intensified in response to the hyper-visibility of BLM (Sobande 2021: 135). In educational spheres, there seemed to be an increase in focalisation on Black character. Lesson plans and resources were developed to teach children about BLM, many of which included focus on influential Black figures (see www.twinkl.co.uk and www.tes.co.uk, for example). Indeed, some of the participants mentioned that they had learned about Rosa Parks as part of BLM lessons. Like the biographies utilised in this study, these informational resources highlight and celebrate character traits such as bravery and resilience. I reference the BLM movement to not only further contextualise my analysis, but to demonstrate that the discourses drawn upon by participants are part of a wider nexus of being-orientated discourses that they likely had access to and participated within.

In Darcy and Sofia's responses, it is unclear what they mean by 'brave'. Their responses are representative of countless others across the dataset, where words such as 'brave' and 'inspirational' are deployed (by me and participants) like buzzwords, devoid of clear meaning. Time and time again, we impulsively bestowed these buzzwords on the women as meritorious markers of identity. However, as I asked Harry to elaborate on this

occasion – *"Can you explain to me a little bit more what you mean?"* – we have some insight into the rationale behind his attribution of bravery to Parks. He states that Black people are normally misunderstood, but some people understand her because of her bravery. Strikingly, this response calls attention to prevailing, neoliberal discourses that disproportionately demand Black people and people of colour 'be' certain things in order to survive, where emphasis is placed on the individual and their responsibility to adapt. Although in different ways, both Darcy and Sofia's, and Harry's responses point to the valorisation of certain character traits within current neoliberalism, where individuals are inculcated into a world where the acquisition of certain character traits, including grit, confidence, resilience and bravery are deemed essential for success and survival.[12]

As touched upon in Chapter 2, bravery is a particularly critical component of the neoliberal infrastructure as it provides a convenient conduit for responsibilising individuals. Exhortations for individuals to 'be brave' in the face of systemic oppression and adversity, which neoliberalism necessarily eschews, is integral to its functionality. As Karike Ashworth and Courtney Pedersen (2022) assert in their explication of how feminine bravery has been constructed as a requirement of the #MeToo moment, 'just because women now have a "brave" voice, this does not mean they are liberated from the patriarchy' (p. 2). In fact, amplifying these individual, brave voices keeps patriarchy firmly intact; Ashworth and Pederson's analysis demonstrating that it often diverts attention away from structural issues. Children and young people are not inoculated against this type of messaging. In fact, in this study, participants demonstrated an acute awareness of it. For example, when I said to Olivia, *"um, so I remember you saying, Olivia, in one of the sessions about these books maybe being, inspiring,"* she responded, *"Yes! Well they are inspiring just to be brave and everything"*. Repeatedly, participants articulated an acute awareness of the texts' intended messaging and often appraised the texts on account of this.

However, as also highlighted in Chapter 2, these texts do not exist in a vacuum. Responsibilising discourses that centre character traits such as bravery, resilience and confidence are prevalent across children's media more broadly. For example, there has

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[12] A discussion of resilience is outside the scope of this analysis, but Angela McRobbie's (2020) book, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare* highlights how popular culture and the media cultivates, promotes and sustains a 'language of resilience'. McRobbie calls attention to how young people are often implicated in these calls to 'bounce-back' and be resilient.

been a significant shift in Disney's portrayal of female characters in recent years, with content analysts identifying the establishment of intelligence, bravery and strength as key character traits in their princesses (Robinson II et al. 2020: 514). The branding of corresponding merchandise promises self-esteem and empowerment for young female consumers. The characterisation and marketisation of Rey from the contemporary Star Wars trilogy offers a prime example. Exploring how girls and parents experience costume playing as Rey, Wood and colleagues (2020) found that participants 'demonstrated a clear awareness of Rey's brand, repeatedly identifying in drawings and written responses core qualities of bravery, strength and kindness' (p. 548). The researchers (2020) note:

> Rey's ability to 'do anything' makes her 'inspirational' to girls and young women (Ratcliffe 2016). The implication of this framing is that the (imagined) girls in the audience will develop the resilience (Gill and Orgad 2018a) to overcome sexism and inequality, and become the idealized, flexible (Harris 2004) heroine of their own story (Wood et al. 2020: 547).

Presenting narratives of 'inspirational' women who have achieved extraordinary things, the biographies participants engaged with in my study are elemental in this market for empowerment. Similar to the framing of Rey, the implication of how the women in the texts are framed is that readers will consume, be inspired, and achieve empowerment as well. However, it is clear that participants' being-orientated responses, such as Darcy and Sofia's appraisals of Parks' bravery, are informed by and embedded within much broader discourses of character-driven, individually-focussed responsibilisation.

This is not to say that encouraging bravery is a bad thing. As Orgad and Gill write in their (2022) exposé of highly gendered confidence messaging across media and popular culture, 'Our aim is not to argue *against* confidence in some straightforward way – after all, who could possibly be against confidence? […] Instead, we interrogate the *cultural prominence of confidence*' (p. 4). In a similar vein, I am not arguing against bravery. I am not denying that the actions Rosa Parks took were, indeed, powerfully courageous. However, it strikes me that participants' being-orientated appraisals of the women in these texts is evocative of children's wider interpellation into a neoliberal landscape of individual achievement that is predicated on the procurement of particular character strengths, including bravery. This pattern of response calls for reflection on responsibilising discourses that overlook strategic, collective action – doing – in favour of enigmatic notions of being.

Though we have some insight into the meaning Harry ascribes to bravery in his appraisal of Parks, his response is similarly indicative of the prominent position particular character traits occupy within the neoliberal context. Strikingly, Harry's response also calls attention to the racialised dimensions of neoliberalism. Neoliberal economics continue to promise prosperity to the underclasses, of which Black people and people of colour are disproportionately represented, without providing the necessary support to enable its materialisation. Concomitantly, this same neoliberal logic holds these individuals personally responsible for their 'failure', blaming their lack of education and deficient dispositions (not being [insert quality] enough) (Clay, 2019). As Harry's response intimates, neoliberalism places a greater burden on Black people to *be*. He calls attention to Parks' Blackness – *"I liked how she was a Black person",* stating that, normally, they are *"not understanded".* He goes on to explain that *"some people understand her. Because of her bravery".* In other words, Parks is made intelligible through her bravery. Connecting Parks' Blackness to her bravery, Harry's response is powerfully evocative of how bravery is deployed as a constitutive force to not only explain Black experience, but to bring it into being.

However, there is tension between Black people's historic and contemporary assertions of bravery to claim their existence, and of white people's demands of Black bravery to prove (the value of) their existence. Bravery has been and continues to be used by Black people as a discourse of racial empowerment. In 1982, the landmark Black feminist anthology, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* was published. This was a pivotal moment in Black Women's Studies. As Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith (1982) note in the introduction:

> Merely to use the term "Black women's studies" is an act charged with political significance. At the very least, the combining of these words to name a discipline means taking the stance that Black women exist—and exist positively—a stance that is in direct opposition to most of what passes for culture and thought on the North American continent (Hull and Smith 1982: xvii).

Not only does the anthology claim Black women's existence, its title claims Black women's existence through an assertion of bravery – *But Some of Us Are Brave.* Almost 30 years later, *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women's Studies* (2009) was published, declaring braveness as an enduring requirement for Black women's existence. As Eudine Barriteau

(2009) writes, 'society remains racist and sexist, is still driven by capitalist patriarchal racism, which means that merely to exist as a black woman requires bravery' (p. 423). For Black people, bravery remains an essential criterion for survival. While Harry's response affirms that Parks met this criterion – *"Because of her bravery"* – it also calls attention to the demands white people place on Black people to be brave, among a multitude of other things, in order to be 'understood'.

Francesca Sobande (2019) discusses this with reference to 'Black Excellence' in her critical discursive analysis of 10 marketing examples that employ, what she terms, 'woke bravery'. Sobande (2019) unpicks how global brands foreground women's bravery to indicate their support for female empowerment and gender equality, while concomitantly reinforcing 'individualistic and classed notions of what constitutes excellence and "valuable" Black life' (p. 2732). One example she offers is Gatorade's 2015 advertisement, Unmatched, featuring Serena Williams, who 'is undoubtedly positioned as being brave' (Sobande 2019: 2733). The advert depicts Williams' journey from playing tennis on the hardscrabble courts in Compton to her success as one of, if not the, greatest athlete of all time (Sobande 2019: 2733). Sobande (2019) explains how transcending environments is often positioned as a feature of Black Excellence, which is usually 'attributed to Black people who are regarded as being notably self-determined and exceptional, when faced with adversity' (p. 2732). However, Sobande (2019) writes that although Black Excellence 'encompasses the experiences of Black individuals, whose personal and professional status is regarded as challenging stereotypical and white supremacist assumptions of their incompetence and inferiority', it can also reinforce oppressive notions of what constitutes a valuable Black life (p. 2732).

In his ethnographic exploration of Black youth participatory action researchers' political identity development, Kevin Clay (2019) skilfully explicates how, even when discourses of empowerment are taken up by Black people, they are often co-opted by white people as tools to legitimate Black people's existence. Specifically, he identifies a politicised discourse that he terms 'Black resilience neoliberalism (BRN)'. The project took place in a midsized city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the US and Clay's analysis focuses on the discourses utilised by eight Black youth during project meetings in the first two weeks. Clay (2019) writes that 'BRN rests in claims like ''We can't blame the government; we know they're not going to do anything for our [Black] communities; it's up to us'' ' (p. 82).

This, he writes, risks 'setting up structural racism as a taken-for-granted constant and valorizing or normalizing the act of enduring or strategically overcoming it' (pp. 77-78). Clay (2019) describes how adages celebrating Black Americans' inherent strength and determination (which were born out of the civil rights movement), have since been reauthored in the form of personal resourcefulness and resilience, often as a means of facilitating Black empowerment (p. 76). He goes on to explain:

> The more drastic appendage of this reauthorization, however, has been leveraged as a critique of Black folks who, for whatever reason, cannot summon the will and long-suffering demonstrated by their enslaved, maimed, and generally despised ancestors to mettle their way through all manner of state-sponsored obstacles, dehumanization, or terror (Clay 2019: 76).

Harry's response demonstrates a clear awareness of this 'critique of Black folks', asserting that they *"are normally, umm, a wee bit like, not understanded"*, while also recognising that Parks is afforded a certain level of protection on account of her bravery – Parks is understood *"Because of her bravery".* As Clay explains, the commendation of Black people who demonstrate exceptional resilience, strength and bravery facilitates critiques of 'other' Black people who, apparently, do not. Character traits such as bravery and resilience are thus weaponised against Black people, used as a type of litmus test to determine their intelligibility. They also serve to reinforce responsibilising discourses that demand Black individuals deal with structural racism and oppression.

Discussing the factors that mould readers' responses to texts, Rosenblatt (1938/1970) writes, 'Some state of mind, a worry, a temperamental bias, or a contemporary social crisis may make us either especially receptive or especially impervious to what the work offers' (p. 35). It is impossible to fully know participants' states of mind or temperamental biases, but the BLM movement – a contemporary, though longstanding, social crisis – is likely to have informed how participants responded to Parks' biography. Specifically, I have argued that the discourses surrounding and embedded within this movement, discourses that fortified, extended and challenged already-existing discourses of racial empowerment and of Black Excellence, are identifiable in participants' appraisals of Parks' bravery. Furthermore, that neoliberal discourses that pervade expressions of popular feminism and employ buzzwords to signal desirable character traits and qualities, are also palpable. The latter is especially apparent in relation to participants' appraisals of the women's confidence.

Being Confident

In addition to bravery, participants appraised the women for their confidence. Like bravery, acclamations of confidence are used within neoliberal discourses to instrumentalise self-responsibilisation. It is not just that confidence is a desirable trait of the good, productive, neoliberal citizen. Confidence *is* part of the power source that enables self-responsbilisation to function – according to these discourses, one cannot be self-responsible without being confident. Instituted as a requirement for achieving personal empowerment, confidence is also a condition of neoliberal feminism. As Banet-Weiser (2018a) states, 'If there is a common theme among different iterations of popular feminism, it is clearly "confidence." […] popular feminism positions confidence as a skill to be learned so that women can be more successful in life' (pp. 92-93). One has only to look at mugs with, 'may you have the confidence of a mediocre white man' printed on the front, or necklaces engraved with the words, 'she believed she could, so she did', to grasp Banet-Weiser's point. Girls and women are positioned as fully-responsible for purchasing and mastering the skill of confidence, and only through mastering this skill can they achieve empowerment.[13]

Participants' responses to the texts are indicative of the authority that confidence, like bravery, holds in this current context. Harry's response to the biography of Brazilian poet and baker, Cora Coralina, in *Good Night Stories* (pp. 44-45), beautifully encapsulates this point. When I asked why he had chosen to focus on this biography when engaging with the reader response toolkit he candidly replied that he was flicking through *Good Night Stories,* saw Coralina *"and was like, she looks old! Let's read her story to put her out of her misery!"* Upon asking what he liked in particular about the biography, he said:

> *She was always confident. She was always confident in herself and if you're confident in yourself then it's actually gonna work out. If you think oh no I'm gonna do terrible well, you might go all jumbly all over the place and be terrible because you thought you would be terrible so, just think that you're gonna be great because that's all you need to think about really.*

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[13] Interestingly, Banet-Weiser's (2022) most recent research explores how contemporary television shows, documentaries and films centring female con artists depict women's confidence as haphazard, insecure and deluded. She uses examples such as *The Dropout*, a documentary about founder and CEO of Theranos, Elizabeth Holmes, to illustrate how this type of media depicts female confidence as undesirable and dangerous.

Not only does Harry commend Coralina for her confidence, but he applies the confidence he perceives her to have in the text to life outside the text. He repeatedly uses the pronoun 'you' to promote the personal benefits one can enjoy of being confident (*"if you're confident in yourself then it's actually gonna work out")* and the potential consequences of not being confident (*"you might go all jumbly all over the place"*). In fact, in his response, confidence is assigned pre-eminent status – *"just think that you're gonna be great because that's all you need to think about really".* In other words, confidence is the silver bullet, and Coralina is a shining example of confidence-in-action.

However, the accentuation of individualised character traits within neoliberal discourses is problematic because it always – and, because of its purposes, necessarily – dovetails with the eschewal of structural problems, injustices and inequities. When engaging with the reader response toolkit, Sofia chose to focus on the biography of Colombian spy, Policarpa Salavarrieta in *Good Night Stories* (pp. 162-63). Salavarrieta, who lived from 1795 to 1817, was a seamstress who spied for the revolutionaries during the Spanish Reconquista. When I asked Sofia what she thought of Salavarrieta she replied:

> *I think she's like really confident as she didn't let her being a woman in those times like stop her because in those times it would obviously be like, kind of hard, to be like a female in those kind of times because they, like always said kinda like oh you have to do this or, you can't do that 'cause you're a woman and stuff.*

Sofia stated that Salavarrieta's life was difficult on account of her gender – *"it would obviously be like, kind of hard, to be like a female in those kind of times"* – and tenders her confidence as an antidote. That is, Sofia interprets that it was only through being confident that Salavarrieta was able to 'be a woman' at the turn of the 19th century. This response is striking in that it exemplifies the contemporary normativeness of ascribing responsibility to an individual character trait for surmounting historic, systemic inequality.

The salience Sofia ascribed to Salavarrieta's confidence is also identifiable in the artefacts she produced: a drawing of Salavarrieta (Figure 4) and a video of Salavarrieta (a hand puppet Sofia had made) delivering a monologue.

Figure 4 – Sofia's drawing of Policarpa Salavarrieta

Sofia described how she imitated part of Salavarrieta's illustration in the text: *"I tried to draw it like, (folds her arms briefly) like in the same pose like with the folded arms".* When I asked why she thought the illustrator had chosen to depict her with folded arms Sofia replied, *"I think in the picture makes her look a bit more confident".* It is noteworthy that Sofia chose to imitate this part of the illustration, while making it clear that she adopted her own style for Salavarrieta's other features: *"And, yeah I also did like the eye in my own way obviously, the nose, the mouth".* Sofia's decision to imitate this particular feature – which she interprets as illustrative of her confidence – is indicative of the narrative importance Sofia ascribes to this particular character trait. Moreover, whereas the illustration in *Good Night Stories* only includes Salavarrieta's upper-body, Sofia's drawing shows her lower-body and depicts her with a slightly raised hip; a stance that, due to culturally constructed notions of body language, heightens a reading of her body language as 'confident'.

Sofia's desire to ensure her creations portrayed Salavarrieta's confidence was also evident in the editing decisions she made for her video. She explained that she had made a hat for the hand puppet, but decided to make the video without it as *"it looked more like a clown hat it made her look kind of clowny".* Clearly, having an appearance of clownery was not in keeping with Sofia's interpretation of Salavarrieta, and wearing a

"clown hat" would have arguably undermined the powerfully confident character she perceived.

As discussed in [Chapter 2](#), exhortations to 'be confident' are manifest within neoliberal discourses extending beyond iterations of popular feminism, including within the realm of education. Specifically, emphases placed on developing qualities such as grit, resilience and confidence are part of a recent resurgence of character education in the UK and beyond (Spohrer and Bailey, 2020). In fact, there is an interdisciplinary research centre called the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, which purports to act as a 'leading informant on policy and practice' in character education (Jubilee Centre, 2017a), upholding 'performance virtues', including confidence, determination and resilience (Jubilee Centre 2017b: 3-5). Lee Jerome and Ben Kisby (2022) undertook analysis of a selection of the centre's resources, including the *Knightly Virtues* pack, which contains a series of stories about heroic individuals with the objective of enhancing 'virtue literacy' (p. 250). Concluding their analysis of a case study of Rosa Parks, they write:

> … the focus on individual character and virtues actually distorts the narrative, focusing the pupils' attention on the personal, emotional dimension to the story (falling in love, being brave and standing up) and away from the political dimension (marrying an activist, educating oneself in activist methods, becoming a political organiser) (Jerome and Kisby 2022: 253).

The same argument can be levied at the biographical compendiums used in this study. As discussed earlier, imitation of the texts' language (Sipe, 2008), (which is suffused with celebrations of individual character traits), might partly account for participants' focus on the women's being. However, I reference Jerome and Kisby's analysis as further attestation that participants' being-orientated responses do not exist in isolation. Though they may not be familiar with these specific resources, as students of UK character education participants' responses are nonetheless coloured by this context. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic provided an additional layer of augmentative force to the importance of cultivating self-confidence in education, and the detrimental effects of its potential demise. Newspaper articles and other media reported concerns that students' self-esteem and confidence suffered as a result of the pandemic (Adams, 2022; Hankinson, 2021). Children have not been immune to this public conversation. As Rosenblatt (1938/1970) explains, the reader's experience is moulded by 'selective factors'

('the various problems and satisfactions of his own life') (p. 35). In other words, participants' constructed meanings are both *effects* and *affects* of a broader set of circulating discourses. I have suggested that in this particular context, participants' being-orientated responses are embedded within a broad, neoliberal discursive landscape where exhortations to be brave and to be confident circulate ferociously, especially in the realm of education (heightened as a result of the pandemic) and across expressions of popular feminism.

This said, Sofia's appraisal of Salavarrieta did not focus exclusively on her confidence. She also noted, *"and I really like that um, she said that Columbia should be kind of like their own country, and not like, like be ruled by this, King, that wasn't even from the same country".* This response clearly recognises and celebrates Salavarrieta's doing. However, when I later asked if she knew what happened to Salavarrieta, Sofia replied:

> *(Short pause) Well, in the end (looking upwards and smiling slightly, as if she is thinking) it says, kind of like, um, 'I am a young woman and I'm not scared of you' or something like that I think, and, so yeah, she basically kind of like saved her country, it didn't say that she actually did, but, at the same time it does kind of sound like it.*

Here, Sofia's appraisal of Salavarrieta's actions is clouded by uncertainty. She paused before responding and used the hedge, *"kind of",* three times. According to Sofia's interpretation, what Salavarrieta did remains unclear: *"she basically kind of like saved her country, it didn't say that she actually did, but, at the same time it does kind of sound like it".* This perceived ambiguity surrounding Salavarrieta's actions could offer further explanatory power for Sofia's emphasis on an aspect of Salavarrieta's being (her confidence) as opposed to her doing. As this chapter aims to elucidate, the discursive prominence that character traits like confidence and bravery enjoy across a range of contexts makes them easy to access. In his theorisation of different procedures that can control and delimit discourse, Foucault (1981) writes:

> … there is scarcely a society without its major narratives, which are recounted, repeated, and varied; formulae; texts, and ritualised sets of discourses which are recited in well-defined circumstances; things said once and preserved because it is suspected that behind them there is a secret or treasure (Foucault 1981: 56).

Character traits like bravery and confidence are certainly 'treasured' in this current moment, and the repetition and recitation that Foucault calls attention to facilitates ease of access. Like low-hanging fruit, they are easy to grab onto. They have been 'reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices, such as pedagogy, of course; and the system of books, publishing, libraries' (Foucault 1981: 55). Comparatively, Salavarrieta's actions are, for Sofia at least, difficult to access, as she remains unsure of what Salavarrieta *"actually did"*.

Contradictions and Tensions

As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, all data sets contain contradiction, and a researcher's overall conceptualisation of patterns 'does not have to smooth out or ignore the tensions and inconsistencies within and across data items' (p. 19). As I go on to explain, this study's poststructuralist perspective presumes the existence of contradiction, deeming it neither possible nor even desirable to 'resolve' all contradiction. In relation to this particular theme, I have identified some data items that exist in direct tension – at times, participants *did* appraise the women for their actions – that warrant further exploration.

The first example I discuss, in which two participants appraised Marie Curie for her actions, raises a multitude of valuable questions: Why did some participants' responses focus on the women's doing and not others? What discourses and/or experiences did they have access to? Why were some women's doings appraised while others were not? Is there something different about how their 'achievements' are represented in the texts? In the second example I demonstrate how grappling with seemingly contradictory data enriches my analysis, ultimately strengthening my suggestion that participants' appraisals of the women's being is intimately linked with neoliberal discourses.

In their individual interviews, both Orla and Mickael appraised Curie for her doing. Orla mentioned that she really liked her biography in *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*, and when I asked her to elaborate, she replied:

> *I just think, sh- it's amazing that she found two umm, two new elements. Ray-, um, polon-, polonium and radium. And, I just think, I just think it's fascinating that, um, she, she managed to find out, them. And she wi-, she won two Nobel Peace Prizes.*

Orla's response includes specific details of Curie's doing – she discovered two new elements, polonium and radium. Mickael's appraisal of Curie also referenced her scientific work. As part of his engagement with the reader response toolkit, Mickael chose to redesign the front cover of Pankhurst's *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (Figure 8). Explaining why he had chosen to include Curie and Emmeline Pankhurst on the cover, Mickael said:

> *Well I put umm (short pause) uhh (long pause) Marie Curie because, well, in my opinion it was quite a, large advance in technology. And, on her you might have noticed I, put a little extra black pen, on there to emphasise the fact that she was ill.*
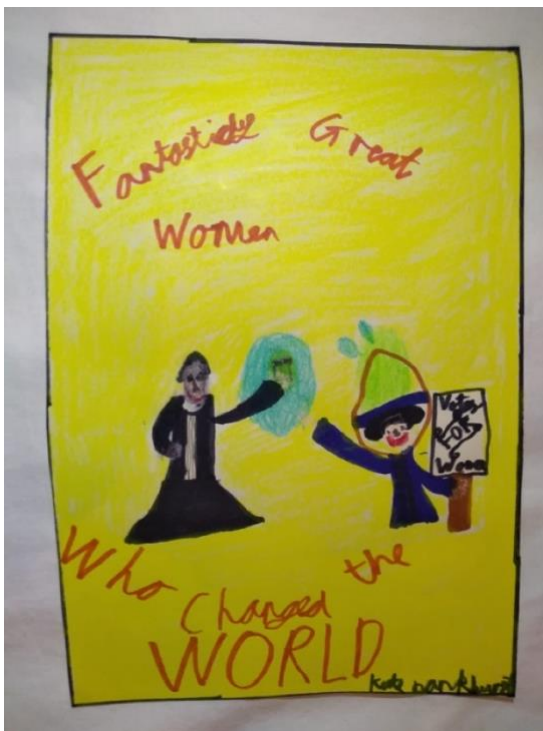
Figure 8 – Mickael's front cover of *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*

Like Orla, Mickael attributed significance to Curie's scientific advancements – *"it was quite a, large advance in technology".* However, through emphasising her illness – *"I, put a little extra black pen, on there to emphasise the fact that she was ill"* – he also drew attention to Curie's perseverance in the face of adversity. For Mickael, Curie's doing seems even more impressive in light of her sickness. In fact, one could argue that while his response recognises Curie's doing, it is accompanied by an inadvertent appraisal of her being (her perseverance).

Nonetheless, it is intriguing that it was in response to Curie's biography that Orla and Mickael focussed on actions. Unlike the biography of Salavarrieta, where Sofia identified ambiguity in the account of what she had actually done, Curie's actions are fairly explicit in the text. In the centre of the double-page spread there is a large illustration of Curie presiding over her test tubes and distillation flasks. In a speech bubble she reports, 'WOW! I have discovered two brand new elements – polonium and radium!' Might the prominent and clear presentation of Curie's doing offer some explanatory power for Orla and Mickael's appraisals? Perhaps, although among the cascade of adjectives appraising the women's being, many of the biographies do centre the women's actions.

In response to Curie's biography, Harry said, *"But as you know she believe in yourself and that's what she had, then you can make it successful and even though she was sick, she believed in herself so she did it"*. Attributing Curie's success to her self-belief, Harry's response is markedly being-orientated in comparison. Might Orla and Mickael's discursive repertories, analytic abilities and/or socio-cultural experiences offer some explanatory power for their doing-orientated responses to Curie's biography? Again, this is possible, though, for the most part, Orla, Mickael and Harry's appraisals of the women do fit with the general pattern of being-orientated response delineated within this theme. Ultimately, there seems to be no obvious explanation for these contradictory data items. Further exploration might be valuable for unpicking these tensions, though this study's poststructuralist outlook would contend that such tensions are inevitable. Although there are 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1972/1980: 131), or norms that have been established through the construction of dominant discourses such as the insistence on an essential and stable self, there are alternative discourses; other possibilities in circulation. In other words, although there is ardent emphasis on cultivating certain character traits to achieve 'success' in our current historical moment, this does not mean discourses foregrounding action are inoperative.

There are some seemingly contradictory data items that are easier to 'smooth out' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 19). For example, when comparing the women, participants' appraisals tended to focus more on their actions and achievements, rather than their character traits and qualities. Explaining why he liked Ingeborg Beling's biography in *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* (Beling was an ethologist who investigated bees), Conor compared the impact of her work to Anita Roddick's work (Roddick founded the

Body Shop and was an environmental activist and campaigner). Conor said that Roddick's work, whose biography appears in the same compendium, had impact on "*certain parts*" such as animal testing, but Beling's actions had an impact on the "*whole part of the world*". Without prompt, Conor measured the women's success according to the size of their impact and evaluated that Beling was more successful. Similarly, Mickael compared the actions of the suffragettes with those of the suffragists: *"Well, the suffragettes were violent. The suffragists, were, a lot more, democratic and less violent in their actions".* Mickael concluded that, although *"the suffragettes seem to take all the glory […] the suffragists did quite a lot as well".*

Arguably, the formatting of these texts, with the women's biographies presented in a continuing series, incites comparative responses. In biographical compendiums focusing on a particular topic, such as *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet*, readers have even more scope for comparison as the women presented share a common passion, goal and/or interest. However, what is intriguing about these comparative responses is that participants focussed on the women's doing as opposed to their being. Although, on the surface, this may appear incongruous with the pattern of being-orientated responses, it is undoubtedly the case that comparison and competition is symptomatic of contemporary neoliberalism. Neoliberalism cries scarcity. Resources are scarce and so competition must ensue. Individualism and 'getting ahead' thus emerge as core principles, with competition and comparison emanating as compulsory by-products. These doing-orientated responses are part of the same discursive landscape that privileges certain character traits and qualities; certain ways of being.

As McRobbie (2020) highlights, exhortations for girls to be perfect 'emboldens itself with a feminist message, as if success is a kind of feminist duty to oneself and for the sake of other women' (p. 45). Yet, paradoxically, this 'feminist duty' to succeed is predicated on intense competition and unrelenting comparison with others. The introduction to Sarah Projansky's (2014) *Spectacular Girlhood: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* strikes at the heart of this imperative to compare. Projansky (2014) begins by acknowledging 'the ways in which media produce some girls as spectacular while belittling others' (p. 1), drawing on the work of Anita Harris (2004) to remind us that children learn from a young age that there are two types of girls: the 'can-do' girl and 'at-risk' girl. Though her work refreshingly focuses on 'alternative figures', Projansky recognises the dominance of this

dichotomy (2014: 9). More recent scholarship verifies its persistence, with Emily Bent (2020) suggesting that the spectacular visibility of girl activists such as Malala Yousafzai contributes to the differentiation between girls who change the world and girls who do not. Bent (2020) writes, 'Girl-activists circulate in public discourse as those who epitomize neoliberal sensibilities of self-reliance and exceptionalism' (p. 47). The corollary of this cultural construction of exceptional girls is the construction of *non*-exceptional girls, the dark underbelly of which is a culture that promotes comparison between those who are doing it right and those who are doing it wrong, those who are doing it well, and those who are doing it better (which is deeply ironic given that, in the interests of protecting their self-esteem, children are routinely told *not* to compare themselves to others!). In their comparisons of the women's actions, participants thus highlighted the prominence of the culturally-instituted practice of comparison.

Undoubtedly, and as McRobbie (2015; 2020), Projansky (2014), Bent (2020) and Harris (2004) have powerfully explicated, the responsibility to be perfect and engage in competition with others, falls disproportionately on the shoulders of girls and women. Yet, their analyses call to mind the omnipresence of comparative practices across children's lives more broadly. In the sphere of education alone, children are interpellated into an education system where comparison is promoted through perpetual, standardised testing. Whether focusing on sporting prowess, academic ability or something else, children are used to comparing individuals and comparing themselves with others. Furthermore, through dominant discourses that differentiate between – and hierarchise – different types of girls, children learn that assigning certain individuals a greater level of value is normative practice. Therefore, Conor's observation that Roddick's environmental activism had an impact on *"certain parts",* but Beling's scientific work had an impact on the "*whole part of the world*" is unsurprising. It is also unsettling. Both women had a monumental effect on how we understand and look after our planet, yet Conor's response is a stark reminder that children are growing up in a context in which pitting women against one another is not only culturally permitted, but culturally normative.

Future Aspirations

I turn next to how this pattern of response – participants' appraisals of the women's being rather than their doing – relates to expressions of their own aspirations and

imagined futures. At times, usually after engagement with one of the biographies, I asked participants how they imagined their future lives. Conversations about their futures was also prompted by one of the peritextual features in *Good Night Stories*. I used the template for readers to write their own story and draw their own portrait at the back of the text as a stimulus for asking participants to imagine their future selves, looking back on their lives. Participants' responses to my inquiry tended to fall into one of three categories. Some said they had no idea what their futures might look like. Others seemed more comfortable talking about how they might be rather than what they might do. However, many of their responses did focus on doing, with participants articulating what jobs they wanted to do in the future. Interestingly, these responses indicated resistance to the type of doing presented in the texts – for the most part, the texts showcase a selection of women who have achieved extraordinary things in a single area of speciality (see Chapter 6). Yet, when discussing their future aspirations, participants often expressed resistance to the idea of doing one thing when they're older.

As aforementioned, some participants expressed uncertainty about their future aspirations. When I asked Mickael what *"kind of achievements or things"* he would write on the 'Write Your Own Story' page, he said, *"Umm, probably worst moments, best moments, and largest achievement and, most memorable achievement"*. Mickael's response is distinctly vague, drawing on general superlatives (*"worst", "best", "largest"*, and *"most memorable")* rather than offering specific details. It is likely the case that Mickael, like other participants, had/has no idea what he might desire for the future. Indeed, in addition to participants stating, *"I have no idea!"* (Harry) or *"I don't know"* (Conor) when asked about their future aspirations, they often drew upon their current interests and experiences, suggesting they found it difficult to imagine life beyond their immediate context. For example, when I asked Harry, *"What would you write in the story? What would the story of your life be?"* he replied:

> *(Looks upwards, as if he's thinking) That (short pause) I liked witches and I didn't care about what other people said because that's actually my story in real life. 'cause they say you can't like pink, you can't like witches but I love pink and witches.*

Imagining how he might reflect on his life in the future, Harry draws upon a current experience that is particularly salient for him. Ultimately, this experience is about being –

being true to oneself in the face of ridicule or adversity. When imagining her future life, Darcy also focussed on being. Following our engagement with the biography of Parks in *Good Night Stories* in a group reading session (this was the second time we had looked at the text together), I drew participants' attention to the quote: ' "I would like to be remembered as a person who wanted to be free… So other people would be also free." – Rosa Parks' (p. 167) and asked them if there was anything they would like to be remembered for. Darcy said she would like to be remembered for *"being kind"*. In the absence of detail on what being kind might look like or entail, Darcy's response is unambiguously being-orientated.

Aside from Conor, who stated he wanted to be remembered for *"bees"* (presumably, researching bees like Beling, whose biography he engaged with the most), participants expressed that their future aspirations were not tied to doing just one thing. In her main interview, Sofia was keen to discuss the biography of Japanese artist, Yayoi Kusama in *Little Leaders* (pp. 52-53). We were reflecting on the final sentence of her biography, which reads, 'Yayoi forged a path where there was none' (p. 52). I asked Sofia if there was anything she would like to do in her life, that nobody else has done. She replied:

> *Well, I guess I would kind of have like a multi job, kind of because, I'm really interested in painting and drawing as you know, but I also kind of like want to invent kind of like my own own way.*

Interestingly, for Sofia, forging her own path means having a *"multi job".* It is unclear whether inventing her *"own own way"* is additional to her artistic aspirations, or part of them. However, it is clear that Sofia wants to have autonomy over her future endeavours, and that these future endeavours are not tied to doing one thing.

Olivia also expressed resistance to the idea of doing one thing in the future. In response to the biography of women's rights activist, Manal al-Sharif in *Good Night Stories* (pp. 106-07), Olivia wrote a play script. When I asked if she enjoyed writing scripts Olivia replied, *"I wanna be an actor when I'm older and a teacher so I kinda think that's a way that I could, kind of just, make my own kinda thing".* Both Sofia and Olivia's responses indicate resistance to the notion of specialising in one area. The fact that they both take personal responsibility for this resistance – Sofia emphasised she will *"invent"* her *"own own way"* and Olivia stated she could make her *"own kinda thing"* – suggests awareness

that their aspirations to do more than one thing defy normative expectations. Their responses indicate that they see no clear framework or direction for achieving their multifarious aspirations and, as a result, need to take matters into their *"own"* hands.

To summarise, when appraising the women in the texts, participants tended to commend the women for their character traits – principally, for being brave and being confident – as opposed to their actions. Analysing these responses within the context of what Bull and Allen (2018) have termed a 'neoliberal turn to character' has highlighted some of the pernicious effects that lopsided or disproportionate focus on character can incite. Such focus not only promotes the romanticisation of certain character traits that are, often, presented as empty signifiers lacking clear direction for action, but they responsibilise individuals.

Finally, considering participants' articulations of their aspirations has enabled exploration of how their interpretations of the women relate to their own imagined futures. It strikes me that there is an intimate connection between participants' being-orientated appraisals of the women; the resistance they expressed to the idea of doing one thing in the future; and, as I go on to discuss, their struggle to relate to the women's actions and achievements. Specifically, my interpretation is that participants' tendency to focus on the women's being in addition to their resistance to aspiring towards a specialised future was partly informed by their struggle to relate to the extraordinariness of their doing. Below, I present my second theme, affirming and challenging inspirational-ness, where I explore the tension between participants' affirmations of the women as inspirational and their simultaneous struggle to relate to their extraordinary doing.

Theme 2: Affirming and Challenging Inspirational-ness

As discussed in Chapter 6, the authors' public intentions for these texts are very clear. All four books include authorial notes, addressing the reader directly. For example, in the introduction to *Little Leaders*, Harrison (2018) writes:

> I hope these biographies inspire you to create, invent, imagine; to try new things; to make mistakes; to ask questions. […] Little Leaders are here to guide you on this journey around the world, through space and time. Let them inspire your future! (Harrison 2018: n.p.).

Throughout, participants repeatedly demonstrated an acute awareness of this authorial intent to inspire action. When asked why they thought the authors had written these texts, participants responded with answers such as, *" 'cause they want to know, what, they want to inspire people, like, children"* (Lucas). Participants also affirmed the texts' inspirational-ness and the women's inspirational qualities. For example, when I asked Harry if he thought the texts were inspiring, he replied, *"Yes!"* with a slight laugh and roll of his eyes, as if to signal that this was patently obvious. He continued, *"They are very inspirational (short pause) 'cause there's lots of stuff that I could do like, they can give you ideas, they can give you ideas of what to do in life or something like that".* Although participants utilised the terms, 'inspire', 'inspiring' and 'inspirational' a lot, it was often unclear what they meant by them. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2023), 'to inspire' means to 'influence, animate, or actuate (a person) with a feeling, idea, impulse'. As will become apparent, some responses were indicative of this definition, though most were fairly enigmatic.

I begin by discussing how participants expressed understandings of the texts' intended purpose, proposing that in response to this understanding they took up their role as 'inspirees'. That is, they consistently demonstrated understanding that they *should* be inspired by the texts and, perhaps resultingly, affirmed their inspirational-ness with an almost-habitual zeal. However, participants' engagement with the texts simultaneously called their inspirational capacity into question. They expressed difficulty relating to the women's extraordinariness, perceiving the women to be extraordinary, but perhaps too extraordinary to be inspired by. Participants' expectations of what nonfiction is or what nonfiction should be also seemed to preclude them from fully embracing the texts' invitations to 'be inspired'. Terming these 'issues of relatability' and 'issues of believability', I conclude by exploring participants' resistance to the texts' inspirational-ness.

Readers as 'Inspirees'

Given that one of my research questions focuses specifically on participants' interpretations of the texts, I was keen to understand how they interpreted the texts' overarching purpose. I asked questions such as, *"why do you think the authors wrote these biographies?"* and *"who do you think the authors want to read them?"* Although

perhaps influenced by my questioning, participants' responses strongly indicate that they perceived the texts to have an 'implied reader' (a hypothetical reader whom the texts are addressed to) (Iser, 1978), who was meant to learn and be inspired. Overwhelmingly, their responses call attention to the texts' intended didacticism and the readers' expected, resultant action.

For example, when I asked Olivia, Orla, Lucas and Mickael in their first reading session why they thought the authors had written these books, Olivia replied, *"ummm (inaudible) thinking. Is it to le- I think it's to let children know that, erm, about women and maybe to (intonation goes up) inspire them"*. Olivia drew a clear link between the texts' intended didacticism (the texts exist to let children know about women) and the readers' expected role as inspirees (*"and maybe to inspire them"*). Specifically, participants interpreted that the texts were written to inspire readers to act, to do something. Usually, that something was of immense magnitude, though rather vague in its abstraction. For example, Conor said that the authors wrote these books *"to make more people know about this story so the-, so they, themselves, can save the planet"*. For Conor, the imperative is clear: know the story, save the planet. Yet, it is unclear what 'saving the planet' (a rather large feat!) actually entails. When I asked Sofia who she thought the authors wanted to read the books, she replied:

> *Umm (short pause) hm I'm not quite sure, but, I think the authors would expect like someone that's interested in like the world and like other people, so they can maybe, like, so they can be, like, (intonation goes up) inspired, and maybe do something similar because, right now the world's kind of like being polluted with plastic, and there aren't like, much people doing good, and, yeah (short pause) but I think (inaudible) they want people like to get (intonation goes up) inspired, so, they would get inspired and maybe do something similar.*

Sofia constructed an expected causal pathway between readers engaging with the texts, being inspired, and taking action. Ruminating that the authors would expect *"someone that's interested in like the world and like other people"* to read the books, her response alludes to the texts' intended didacticism. It suggests that the readers' interests can be satisfied through engaging with the texts to learn something new. Crucially, this learning could inspire productive action; Sofia's repetition of the word 'inspired' signalling her understanding of the implied reader as inspiree. Sofia observes that *"the world's kind of*

like being polluted with plastic", and concludes that the authors *"want people like to get inspired, so, they would get inspired and maybe do something similar".*

Sofia's ruminations are indicative of a wider pattern of response whereby participants interpreted being agentic as central to the inspiree's role. In her discussion of agency in relation to children's literature, Nina Christensen (2021) notes that agency 'derives from the Latin verb agere, "to act," an origin reflected in a contemporary definition: "Ability or capacity to act or exert power" (OED)' (p. 10). However, although participants were aware of the expectation placed upon them to be agentic, their understanding of what this acting might entail was unclear. This is unsurprising given that, as Beauvais (2020) identifies in her analysis of nine picturebook biographies published between 2005 and 2016, the texts 'encourage action; they are socio-politically committed in that they envisage, but never give a clear shape to, the child's future projects informed by the past' (p. 63). While exhortations to act are ubiquitous across the texts used in this study – readers are implored to save the planet (*Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the World*); change the world (*Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*); 'to create, invent, imagine' (*Little Leaders*, n.p.); and to 'live a life full of passion, curiosity and generosity' (*Good Night Stories*, p. xii) – guidance for tangible action is wanting. Interestingly, and as I go on to discuss, Conor said that the presentation of clear guidance for action would make the texts more inspiring.

Not only did participants frame the imagined reader as an inspiree, expected to be agentic following engagement with the texts, but some of their responses implied there may also be expectations for readers to transform themselves. For example, Harry said he thought the texts were aimed at

> *… girls who are like, or boys who are like, people who are a wee bit, not very (intonation goes up) nice maybe. But then they look at these and then they're like, oh well that lady's kind and I wanna be like her. Yeah let's, let's be like her then.*

In stating that the texts are aimed at *"people who are a wee bit, not very nice maybe",* Harry's response endows the texts with power that is expectantly transformative: through looking at the texts and noticing the women's kindness, the *"not very nice"* reader is able/expected to be inspired, resolving to *"be like her".* According to Harry's understanding of authorial purpose, it is not just that readers are expected to learn from

the women, but they are expected to be changed through this learning. In other words, the texts' inspiration should lead to readers' successful imitation.

Although a haze of ambiguity enveloped participants' conceptualisations of what the implied reader was expected to do (they were clear that readers were expected to do something, but that something remained unclear), there was no ambiguity surrounding their conceptualisation of the implied reader as an inspiree. While they saw the implied reader's role as threefold: to learn, to be inspired, and to act, being inspired was deemed particularly important. As the central link, being inspired was understood to be both the necessary result of learning and the empowering springboard for action.

Affirmations of Inspirational-ness

While demonstrating an acute awareness of their role as readers – to be inspired – participants also affirmed the texts' inspirational-ness. Whether responding to open questions such as, *"what did you think of the biography?"* or answering more direct questions such as, *"do you think it is inspirational?"* participants' responses often included the descriptor, 'inspiring' or 'inspirational'. López Estrada (2019) found something similar in her study at Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica, observing that the university students repeatedly referred to the women in *Good Night Stories* as 'inspiring', 'extraordinary' and 'amazing' (p. 232). Although López Estrada notes that the students clearly used the adjectives to express their positive appraisals, it is unclear exactly what the students meant by these terms. At times, it was similarly unclear what participants meant by these descriptors in my study, though some responses indicated that participants saw being inspirational as synonymous with being determined. Other responses suggested that inspirational-ness was linked to superlative performance (being the best at something), while a small number referenced the women's actions as reasoning for their affirmation of inspirational-ness.

Similar to their use of the terms 'brave' and 'confident', participants frequently deployed 'inspirational' and 'inspiring' like buzzwords, struggling to articulate *what* they found inspiring about the texts or *how* they had been inspired. For example, after Darcy stated that the texts had inspired her, I asked how. She looked down, took a short pause and said, *"I don't really know".* Responding to Parks' biography in *Good Night Stories* (pp. 166-67), Harry said it *"was really inspirational that was the most inspirational one in the*

book". Using 'inspirational' as an isolated descriptor, his response offers no indication of its intended meaning. However, his response does suggest that there is a criterion for being inspirational, as he stated that the biography of Parks was *"the most inspirational one"*. Seemingly, some biographies are more inspirational than others, though it is unclear what this evaluation is based on. Just as participants' articulations of the implied reader's expected action were vague and enigmatic, ambiguity also appeared in their affirmations of the texts' inspirational-ness. Although they stated that the texts and the women were inspirational, it was not always clear what 'inspirational' meant to them.

As buzzwords often do, 'inspirational' seemed to operate as a catch-all term, evading specificity. For example, Olivia said that the books *"are inspiring just to be brave and everything"*. Though the allusion to being brave suggests a link between being courageous and being inspirational, the *"and everything"* suggests that being inspiring has omnipotent capacities. In their analysis of self-care apps for women, Orgad and Gill (2022) observe that 'inspiration becomes a kind of "magical thinking" that is "lifted out" of everyday life, offered up as a series of timeless and universal psychological truths' (p. 90). Here, Olivia's *"inspiring"* is reminiscent of this 'magical thinking'; it can do *"everything"*. As a further example, when I asked whether the books had inspired her, Sofia started flicking through *Little Leaders*; *"it was one of them to kind of like save the environment or like the trees",* she said, before stopping at the biography of Wangari Maathai (pp. 62-63). I asked whether this story, in particular, had inspired her. Sofia replied, *"mmm yeah basically all of them did (short pause) especially Rosa Parks"*. In stating that *all* the women had inspired her, Sofia demarcated very wide parameters for inspirational-ness. However, like Harry, she spotlighted Parks as being *"especially"* inspiring, proceeding to explain that Parks *"changed the world a little bit by a little act"*. This notion that little things can change the world in big ways surfaced several times throughout my discussions with participants, particularly in relation to the biographies of Parks and Yousafzai. In fact, it started to feel like a 'buzz phrase' of its own. Although Sofia's response offers some insight into why she found Parks inspiring, the rationale behind this descriptor is arguably as nebulous as the descriptor itself.

This said, some responses did offer further insight into participants' understandings of inspirational-ness. Specifically, some affirmations of the texts' and women's inspirational-ness suggested that participants saw being inspirational as synonymous with being

determined. In response to the biography of art director and production designer, Eiko Ishioka (*Little Leaders*, pp. 60-61), Harry said, *"Well, she was very inspirational, 'cause she never gave up she just kept trying. She never gave up".* Repeating the phrase, *"she never gave up",* Harry was clear that it was Ishioka's perseverance that made her inspiring. Similarly, when explaining why he chose Anne Frank's biography (*Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*) for the reading session, Mickael said that Frank *"is quite an inspirational person. Erm, basically, she is a role model ?for? everybody, who, ermm, wants to do something, but there's a blockage, or something (inaudible) from doing it".* Likening the adversity Frank faced to a *"blockage",* Mickael suggests that it was her determination to overcome this that makes her an inspirational role model.

Some participants referenced the women's superlative statuses as reason for their appraisal of inspirational-ness. In response to the biography of Clinton (*Good Night Stories*, pp. 70-71), Lucas said, *"I think she's really inspiring 'cause she was the first ever president, umm, well, first person nomin-, first woman nominated for a, a major party in the, United States of America for a vote".* Lucas assigned Clinton inspirational status on account of her superlative performance – she was the *first* woman to be nominated as presidential candidate for the democrat party. Explaining why she chose Yousafzai's biography (*Good Night Stories*, pp. 104-05) for the group reading session, Orla explained:

> *(Smiling) I chose it umm, because, umm, I think Malala's really inspiring. She was the youngest one ever to get a Nobel Peace Prize and I really like, um, what she says, (reading from the text) "When the world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful".*

Similarly, Orla calls attention to Yousafzai's superlative performance – she was the *youngest* person to receive a Nobel Peace Prize. Interestingly, although Lucas and Orla's responses offer some insight into their perceptions of what being inspirational looks like, both focus on the outcomes of the women's doing, that is, securing a presidential nomination and winning a highly prestigious award. That participants rarely cited the women's actions as reason for their appraisals of the women's inspirational-ness certainly fits the pattern of response discussed in relation to the first theme. Explaining how participants tended to appraise the women for their being rather than their doing, I likened character traits such as confidence and bravery to low-hanging fruit, easy to grab onto. Here, Clinton and Yousafzai's statuses as the *"first"* and *"youngest"* feel similarly

accessible. Used to express the highest degree of comparison, superlatives suggest 'fact'. As they are measurable (by virtue of the comparative process), they are seemingly indisputable and easily-citable.

On the rare occasions when participants did talk about the women's doing in relation to their 'being inspirational', they spoke about their actions in very broad terms. For example, in response to the biography of Anita Roddick (*Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet*), Orla said, *"I think this i- I think it's really inspiring, and I think it's really great that someone's actually trying to, um, stop environment, stop the envi- um, stop climate change. And stuff li- and global warming"*. Stating that Roddick tried to *"stop climate change […] and global warming"*, Orla clearly referenced Roddick's contribution to environmental activism. However, the details of her contributions remain unspecified, while highly-charged, ubiquitous terms such as 'global warming' and 'climate change' take centre stage.

Given that participants expressed clear awareness of the authors' intent to inspire them, their affirmations of the texts' inspirational-ness could be read as acquiescence to their role as inspirees. Indeed, the patterns of intonation across the examples presented on page 152 are striking. When participants said the words, 'inspire' or 'inspired', their intonation went up. I interpret this rising intonation to have been a quiet appeal for me to assure them that their interpretation of inspirational intent was correct, that they were fulfilling their role as inspirees 'correctly'. Furthermore, with a few exceptions, participants seemed hesitant to repudiate the texts' inspirational-ness. When I asked Conor whether he felt inspired by the texts he responded, *"Ummm (short pause before intonation goes up slightly) yeah, I think"*. Here, Conor's initial *"yeah"* is undermined by his subsequent *"ummm"*, short pause, rising intonation and *"I think",* all of which imply apprehension. All of this has led me to wonder whether participants affirmed the texts' inspirational qualities, at least in part, because they thought they should. After all, and as discussed below, participants' responses also seemed to problematise the texts' inspirational-ness.

Challenging Inspirational-ness

Although participants affirmed the texts and the women's inspirational-ness with an almost-habitual zeal, some of their responses seemed to challenge this appraisal. These challenges manifested themselves in two primary ways. One, in what I perceive to be participants' struggle to relate to the women's extraordinariness; and two, in their questioning of the texts' truth and factual accuracy. Discussing each of these in turn, I tease out this apparent paradox, problematising any notion that participants' ascription of inspirational-ness was straightforward or uncomplicated.

Despite the authors' primary purpose – to inspire readers into action by presenting the achievements of relatable, 'ordinary' women – participants expressed that they perceived these women and their achievements to be extraordinary. Their struggle to relate to the women's extraordinariness was expressed in three ways: through articulating that it would be difficult to be like the women; through implying that extraordinariness is reserved for the realm of adulthood; and through requesting more guidance on what they themselves could do. Even when participants did seem to find points of connection with the women, they still perceived them to be extraordinary, arguably diluting the potential of their relatability.

In their main interviews, I asked each participant whether they thought it would be easy to be like the women presented in the books. Their responses were fairly unanimous. Orla shook her head and affirmatively replied, *"no, I don't think it's easy";* Olivia said, *"probably a bit hard";* and Lucas said it would be very difficult because

> *… you'll have to like, you'll have to (elongates) know what to do when you're older; try not to be like, really, just a normal person if you wanted to be like famous or something. Be like, (intonation goes up) different, out of all the people.*

According to Lucas, to be like one of these women would require you to not be a *"normal person"*, you would have to be *"different"* from everyone else. Drawing a clear distinction between 'normal' people and the women presented in the texts, Lucas' response captures participants' interpretation of the women as exceptional. Perceived to be different from them, they are also, by implication, unrelatable.

Not only did participants perceive the women to be extraordinary, but they understood extraordinariness to be the preserve of adulthood. As Lucas said, to be like these women you would have to know, as a child, what you want to be when you're older. Although participants stated that they found the texts and the women inspiring, they did not seem to envision acting upon this inspiration until they were older, if at all. Below is an excerpt taken from a conversation I had with Sofia, where I asked if she was planning to write her own story and draw her own portrait at the back of *Good Night Stories* (pp. 202-03).

Sofia: *(Smiling) Yeah, well at least when I'm older 'cause, mmm, 'cause nothing really I mean of course thing- exciting happen, things happen in my life, but, like, I'm still not even like, in the middle of my life. I'm only like ten years living.*

Louise: *(Nodding) Sure!*

Sofia: *So yeah.*

Louise: *So you think this would be good to write, when you're older, so you've got more things to say?*

Sofia: *(Nods)*

Louise: *Interesting.*

Sofia: *Also there will actually be an actual purpose to my life, so people could see, and, yeah.*

Sofia's final point – that there *"will actually be an actual purpose"* to her life when she is older – is staggering. Although Sofia acknowledged that exciting things happen in her life, the implication is that she does not deem any of these things important enough or purposeful enough, to write about now. As García González (2020) highlights, in texts like *Good Night Stories*, 'the objective of a life seems to be its orientation towards those achievements worthy of being narrated' (p. 51). That Sofia does not think anything in her life is worthy of narration is demonstrative of participants' struggle to relate to the women's extraordinariness and, crucially, of their deferral of potential extraordinariness until adulthood. It is also noteworthy that Sofia alluded to the importance or value of people seeing her purposeful life (*"so people could see"*). García González (2020) identifies that in *Good Night Stories*

> … the achievements of women are largely associated with notions of acknowledgment: the book's back cover presents the work as a collection of "life adventures" of "extraordinary women" to inspire girls to 'dream big and reach their dreams' (García González 2020: 51).

Sofia and others touched upon this this association between achievement and acknowledgement throughout. They seemed to see extraordinariness as existing hand-in-hand with acknowledgement, recognition and visibility. Again, this is evocative of neoliberal discourses of empowerment, where being *seen* is a legitimising force, where an individual's visibility has become a powerful form of currency (Banet-Weiser 2015b: 58).

In their critical multicultural analysis of 60 children's nonfiction picturebooks (Orbis Pictus honour and awarded texts from 1990 to 2019), Margaret Vaughn and her colleagues (2022) found that 'agentic acts primarily occurred during adolescence or adulthood', with children 'viewed as passive individuals who are able only to exert their agency as they enter into adulthood' (p. 44). As my study used biographical compendiums of (adult) women, this same accentuation of agentic adults is unsurprisingly identifiable. However, given the texts' clear exhortations for child readers to be inspired and take action now, this over-emphasis on adult agency is rather perplexing. In fact, it arguably risks engendering the opposite effect. Reflecting on Parks' biography in his main interview, Harry remarked:

> *So at least someone um, in, the world has to become someone like Rosa Parks and go down in one of these books one day because, someone needs to change this. And I think I'm too little to go on all those outdoor adventures by myself.*

Aware that racial injustices have persisted since Parks' refusal to give up her seat in 1955, Harry was passionate that someone needs to *"change this"*. As aforementioned, the individualising messages of responsibilisation that these texts espouse are troubling, and they clearly reverberate across participants' responses (note Harry's appeal for one person, for *"someone",* to change things). However, what is significant here is that Harry stated, in no uncertain terms, that this *"someone"* could not be him on account of his age (*"I think I'm too little"*). Do the texts' representations of extraordinariness; specifically, extraordinariness that is unrelatable by virtue of its confinement to the adult sphere, risk deferring action or creating apathy among young readers? Responses such as Harry and Sofia's demonstrate that while participants understood their role as inspirees required

them to take action, they could not envisage emulating the women's extraordinary doings now, in their childhoods.

A similar observation has been noted by Haight and Boryenace (2019) who, keen to redress early learners' misconceptions regarding the leadership potential of women, established a group called Little Leaders in 2018 for girls aged between three and six in Pennsylvania. The group met every other week to read picturebooks celebrating inspirational women, and to deliver projects in their local community by replicating aspects of the women's work. They report that when they first set up the group

> … one of the participants said, "I am only five. I have to go to kindergarten next year, so I don't think that I will be able to fix a lot of problems until after kindergarten." Another child responded, "I'm in kindergarten and we are just learning how to read. We don't learn about fixing problems" (Haight and Boryenace 2019: 10 and 12).

For these children, becoming 'active citizens' in their communities was not something they could envisage doing until after kindergarten. Haight and Boryenace (2019) reflect that 'people rarely ask children within this age range to address community issues, so this conceptualization was quite abstract to them' (p. 12). Certainly, there are many reasons why children might perceive activism as an adult privilege, not least because social structures and institutions are often obstructive to and disparaging of agentic children. Analysing the portrayal of climate activist Greta Thunberg across a range of children's literature, Moriarty (2021) finds that in many texts, Greta and other children are depicted 'as individuals with agency who can create change on a global scale' (p. 197). However, Moriarty also acknowledges the abuse suffered by Thunberg in the press, which has sought to subjugate her and silence her message. This disparagement is not lost on children. In fact, wondering why Thunberg did not appear in any of the texts we engaged with, Lucas told me about the 'How Dare You?' memes that began circulating following Thunberg's speech at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in 2019. The memes he described mock Thunberg for her impassioned criticism of world leaders' inaction on the climate crisis, and the underlying message they emanate is clear: children, know your place.

Finally, some participants challenged the texts' inspirational messaging by highlighting their lack of instruction as a limitation. They expressed a desire for the texts to include

more guidance on what *they* could do, in light of the biographies they had just read. For example, when asked what would make the books more inspiring Conor replied, *"Ummm, maybe show how (intonation goes up) you could do it as well, like maybe like a little tutorial at the end of each book, like how you could change the world".* Responses such as this suggest that some participants did not find the accounts of what the women had done to be particularly imitable; if they did, they would have been unlikely to request further guidance. Conor certainly wanted something else; something tangible, something that he could imagine himself doing. Indeed, the women's achievements are framed in such a way that they are almost too extraordinary to be attainable. After all, the women appear in these books precisely *because* they are extraordinary.

However, Conor went even further, questioning the value of extraordinariness altogether. During our discussion about how easy it would be to be like the women in the texts he said, *"you could just like accidentally find something, that could like umm, change the entire world, like do something like that but, might not be the brightest person in the world".* Intimating that extraordinariness is not a requisite for changing the world – you *"might not be the brightest person"* – Conor challenged the inspirational capacity of the texts' portrayal of extraordinary women. One could read Conor's analysis in light of my suggestion that participants struggled to relate to the women on account of their exceptionality – it is easy to criticise something you cannot relate to – but I think it serves as a powerful reminder that although readers might be aware of their expected role as inspirees, their conception of what counts as inspirational might be very different from what is depicted on the pages. Perhaps it is not only that celebrations of adult extraordinariness risk deferring action or creating apathy among young readers, but that dazzling promotions of extraordinariness need to be re-considered as the 'go-to' paragon for inciting action.

While there is ample data to suggest that, on the whole, participants struggled to connect with or relate to the women and their extraordinary accomplishments, there were moments where Orla and Sofia did articulate points of connection with the women. Sometimes, these points of connection were distinctly 'ordinary'. For example, when discussing the biography of Mary Seacole (*Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*) in Orla's main interview, I remarked that, before reading the text, I had no idea that Seacole was half Scottish and half Jamaican. Orla eagerly replied, *"Yeah. I'm three*

quarters Scottish!" She seemed excited to learn that she and Seacole shared this heritage. Similarly, in response to the biography of Yousafzai, Orla declared, *"I really like her. She-, mostly because I love school".* Again, Orla seemed excited to have found a point of connection. In fact, she stated that it is precisely because of this connection, this shared love of school, that she likes *"really"* likes Yousafzai.

There were moments where Orla seemed to relate to the women on an even deeper level. With reference to the computer scientist, Grace Hopper, who contributed to the creation of the world's first all-electronic digital computer used by astronauts, she said:

> *Umm, so, it's kind of, erm, it it look it really felt um, like, it feels a bit crazy to say I wanted to be a scientist for NASA. Umm, and, it just seemed to relate that she wanted to be, all these crazy things and, join the army and stuff. And I just think it, umm, ties in with, kind of connects to me and m- yeah.*

With ambitions to work for NASA in the future, Orla stated that she felt a connection to Hopper. She said it (by which I presume she meant the biography) *"seemed to relate"* and *"kind of connects"* to her. Yet, the tentativeness and reticence with which Orla spoke was palpable. Her response includes hedges (*"kind of"*) and 'fillers' (*"umm"* and *"erm"*), all of which suggest she wasn't entirely comfortable voicing her sense of connection to Hopper. She even said, *"it feels a bit crazy to say I wanted to be a scientist for NASA".* My interpretation is that Orla felt like she was saying something that she should not, that positioning herself in the same 'league' as one of these extraordinary women was a presumptuous or even hubristic thing to do. The tentativeness I sensed might have also been influenced by the fact that having aspirations to be a scientist is still seen, culturally, as more appropriate or 'natural' for boys than girls (Master and Meltzoff, 2020). Thus, even though Orla's response strongly indicates that she felt connected to Hopper on account of their shared interests and aspirations, the tentativeness of her expression suggests she also perceived Hopper as being distinctly different. Given her assertion that it *"feels a bit crazy"* to say she would like to be like Hopper, I wonder to what extent Orla perceives or experiences Hopper's extraordinariness as an impediment to her relatability.

Sofia also implied that she felt a sense of connection to some of the women in the texts. In particular, to those she perceived as being unique, and who remained steadfast in their opinions and actions regardless of other people's perceptions. For example, of Kusama (*Little Leaders,* pp. 52-53) she said:

Because I mean, it's kind of, like, impressive that just because polka dots can get kind of like, like old, she still thought about them and she liked them because she thought that maybe she, 'cause they kind of expressed her I think, and, I just thought that was really cool about her because she didn't really think (inaudible) other people's thought (inaudible) they're like trendy or not, and, and yeah she basically still did what she loved. And she got recognised for doing something like that. And I thought that was really nice.

As discussed on page 149, Sofia was clear that, like Kusama, she wants to create her own artistic style. She said, "*I also kind of like want to invent kind of like my own own way*". My impression was that Sofia admired Kusama's commitment to pursuing her own preferences, and that this was a quality she would like to emulate. Indeed, when I asked Sofia how easy she thought it would be to be like the women in the books, she replied:

Honestly, if I were like one of these women I would feel like extremely proud because I knew that I made, like I've made a difference in this world. And, I'm like I might be dead but my story still lives around other people inspiring, other people to, like, not be scared to be like unique or different.

Sharing that she would feel *"extremely proud"* to be like one of the women, Sofia attributed clear value to not being *"scared to be like unique or different".* In fact, she stated in no uncertain terms that she would like to inspire others to "*not be scared to be like unique or different".* However, when discussing how she approached Salavarrieta's posture in her drawing of the Colombian spy, Sofia explained that she needed to *"cut off some of the body parts, and you don't want people to think that's weird, so it's kind of tricky"*. Sofia's insistence that *"you don't want people to think that's weird"* stands in stark contrast to her expressed desires for pursuing her own artistic style despite other people's opinions. Arguably, Sofia's responses suggest that she felt inspired by the extraordinariness of Kusama's perseverance, but that she perhaps found this difficult to emulate in her own life. Similar to what I perceived to be Orla's tentative expression of her desire to be a scientist, Sofia's response could also be read as a residual effect of the constraining influences of dominant discourses around what is 'appropriate' for girls and women to aspire to, and the pressures girls and women may feel to 'fall in line'.

There are many ways to be a girl and these forms of girlhood 'depend on not only the material bodies performing girlhood, but also the specific social and historical contexts in which these bodies are located' (Kearney 2009: 19). While there are different ways of being, these are limited and inflected by wider power relations linked to gender, race,

age, class and other axes of identity. Here, Sofia and Orla's responses are indicative of the power that wider socio-cultural discourses have in legitimising ideas about what is appropriate for girls to do and how it is appropriate for girls to be. Although 'girl-power' discourses promote and legitimise the notion that girls can and should seek empowerment, pushing the boundaries of normalised gendered and racial disparities in science-related fields for example, other discourses work to keep girls in their place. Sofia's contention that *"you don't want people to think that's weird"* acts as a reminder that, ultimately, discourses that demand girls be and act in ways that are pleasing and acceptable to others, remain authoritative.

My interpretation of the data reveals a chasm between participants' affirmations of these extraordinary women's inspirational-ness and their ability or desire to fully 'take on' their perceived, expected role as inspirees. I have proposed that this was, in part, to do with issues of relatability. Whether consigning extraordinariness to the adult sphere, requesting further guidance for action or, like Conor, questioning the value of extraordinariness altogether, participants' responses indicated their struggle to relate to the women's achievements. These issues of relatability, in addition to the issues of believability I discuss below, seemed to have implications for participants' perception of the texts' inspirational-ness.

Participants' expectations of what nonfiction is or what nonfiction should be, also precluded them from fully embracing the texts' inspirational messaging. Participants were clear that they expected nonfiction to be realistic, detailed and factually accurate. Such expectations are illustrative of the pervasive influence of discourses that maintain there is one, single, accepted way to see – and present – the ('facts' of the) world. That participants, entirely unprompted, identified moments in the texts where they felt these nonfiction conventions were not fully adhered to, is indicative of the power these discourses hold. For example, in response to Clinton's portrait in *Good Night Stories,* which is comprised solely of shades of blue and white, Olivia remarked, *"I think the illustrator could have used more colours".* She continued, *" 'cause it's all just blue and probably her hair wasn't blue so"*. Further, the extent to which participants' expectations for nonfiction were met seemed to affect their perception of the texts' inspirational-ness. For example, when I asked Orla if there was anything she would do to make the books more inspiring, she replied:

> *I think I would, um, not just look on, like, one website and find tons of information, but look on more websites to back that up and to find more, to make sure it's all true 'cause (starts flicking through one of the books) I think I told you last time, I found out stuff otherwise that, about some of the women that, might have been, umm, untrue, not true.*

Stating that she would make the texts more inspiring by ensuring all the information were true, Orla indicated that an increase in factual accuracy would lead to an increase in inspirational capacity. In response to the illustrations in *Little Leaders,* Mickael drew a clear link between the authorial intent to inspire and the text's (un)realistic depictions:

> *It's almost as if they're trying to make them look like children. […] I think they're trying to convey the point that as a child you can be like these people too but I think they went too far. (Elongates, loudly) Way too far!*

Demonstrating awareness that children are meant to be inspired by the text, Mickael asserted that the unrealistic artistic style, whereby the women *"look like children",* ultimately undermines this intention.

As discussed in Chapter 2, these texts are part of a new wave of children's nonfiction. Contrary to 'when more traditional learning books were the rule', in this new style of nonfiction the factual world 'ceases to be univocal, and becomes at least dialogical' (Grilli 2020: 11). With factual accuracy no longer regarded as the bedrock of children's nonfiction, a range of previously unconventional devises are used to spark children's engagement and invite critical reading (Aronson, 2011; Sanders, 2018; von Merveldt, 2018). Graff and Shimek (2020) discuss how contemporary nonfiction reflects literary 'mashups and remixes', writing that 'creators are remixing the role of the nonfiction reader by directly addressing readers' (p. 226). Beauvais (2020) draws on the work of Barthes to explain how reality effects and the biographeme are frequently employed by writers of biography. Reality effects, she writes, 'sidestep claims to an inherent truth […] giving the reader a believable account of the person's life' (p. 64), while biographemes are small details which decant some of the essence of a past life (p. 68), intensifying certain moments (see Chapter 6). Alluding to these devices in their responses to the texts, participants seemed to perceive them as detrimental to the intended, inspirational messaging. Below, I use participants' responses to the biographies of Parks in *Good Night Stories* and *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* to demonstrate how, in

questioning the texts' truthfulness and factual accuracy, participants challenged the inspirational status they simultaneously ascribed to Parks.

Part of the texts' strategy to inspire readers into action is to present the women's achievements as both extraordinary *and* simple. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through use of biographemes – 'moments where a person's existence appears intensified, compressed into a small space, packed with symbolic meaning and narrative force' (Beauvais 2020: 68). In Parks' biographies, her refusal to give up her seat for a white person is certainly intensified, compressed, and packed with symbolic meaning and narrative force. When retelling Parks' biography, participants often focused on this part, on her famous "no". They positively appraised Parks for saying no, framing her refusal as a very simple and straightforward act. Olivia said, *"she just went on a bus and then she just said no!"*; the adverb, *"just"*, implying a certain effortlessness. Sofia said that Parks did not move because *"she didn't want to"*. The idea that *"she changed the world a little bit by a little act"* (Sofia) was repeatedly raised in conversations and, like many of the women, participants praised Parks for being inspirational. In fact, and as aforementioned, Harry said her biography *"was really inspirational that was the most inspirational ones in the book I thought"*. Participants affirmed Parks' inspirational-ness, echoing the overall narrative framing of the texts – that these women achieved extraordinary things with ease and simplicity.

However, the juxtaposition between 'extraordinary' and 'simply' is demonstrative of an unrealistic idealism – things which are extraordinary are rarely achieved with or through simplicity – and, in fact, this narrative of simplicity was simultaneously problematised by participants. With reference to Parks' "no", Olivia reflected, *"it is actually hard* [to say no] *'cause it is a rule".* Participants also described the extraordinary effect that Parks' "no" had, with Sofia and Olivia both noting that it *"changed the world",* but they also questioned to what extent the world has been changed by Parks' 'simple' actions. Their expectation that these biographies should be both realistic and accurate seemed to prevent them from being persuaded by this simple-yet-extraordinary narrative. In a moment of reflection where he pondered the effects of changing segregation laws, Harry said:

But for some reason, I feel like that wasn't enough, because some people are like, let's twist the law back again. Let's regain the power of having a strange place to live. And it is already strange and that's wonderful, but some strange can be very awful to have. For example, that's a very mean and selfish one for your skin tone and the other skin tones who will be very sad.

Harry questioned the long-term effects that Parks' actions had, clearly stating that the subsequent change of law was not enough. Neither Harry nor the other participants seemed altogether convinced by the simple, straightforward narrative presented via this biographeme. Their responses were rich, multi-faceted and complex, as they questioned how simple it is to do extraordinary things and how extraordinary, extraordinary things are.

Reality effects, which are an 'aesthetic of believability' rather than the portrayal of an 'inherent truth' (Beauvais 2020: 64), are especially prevalent in Parks' biography in *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*. For example, there is an illustration of two women talking on the phone about boycotting the buses. Referring to this illustration, Mickael said, with slight irritation, *"it's not complete fact, that there were two people on a phone, saying, 'I'm boycotting the buses', 'So am I' ".* Like the biographeme described above, the illustration depicts a sense of effortlessness on the part of these women, a simplicity that Mickael did not seem persuaded by. More broadly, Mickael said he preferred the *"more serious"* style in the *Good Night Stories* version and expressed his dislike for the *"comical"* style of Parks' biography in *Fantastically Great Women*:

> *I think it conveys the opposite point of what they're trying to do, because, I think it's trying to make the, uh it makes the in my opinion anyway, it makes the person that's saying, 'ARE YOU GOING TO MOVE?', look smarter and better than Rosa Parks. Because, like I said before, Rosa Parks looks like the kind of lunatic you would find on the side of the road that's been drinking too much beer.*

For Mickael, the deliberate artistic style – described by participants as *"cartoony"* and *"comical"* – undermines *"the point of what they're trying to do"* (inspire readers into action). Instead, he perceived the *"comical"* presentation of Parks to be unrealistic and, presumably, far from inspiring given his interpretation that she looks like a *"lunatic"*.

Certainly, participants expressed preference for Parks' biography in *Good Night Stories*, which has more elements associated with traditional nonfiction books. Darcy said, *"well, I*

definitely like the one in Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls better [...] 'cause it's more detailed and I think it's probably more how she looked". Ultimately, participants' expectations that nonfiction should be detailed, realistic and accurate inhibited them from being fully persuaded by the simple-yet-extraordinary narrative, intended to be inspirational. As Beauvais (2020) writes, contemporary children's biographies can 'undermine their own educational purposes by proposing portraits that are at once too idealistic for role-modelling, and too inaccurate to serve as historical instruction' (p. 63). Not only does my analysis support this claim, but it suggests that it is primarily because readers have expectations that nonfiction *should* be accurate that the texts fail to serve as historical – and in the case of the texts discussed here, inspirational – instruction.

I was recently talking with a child who told me they had been learning about "one of those inspirational women" in school. Their use of the word 'those' struck me. Grammatically, 'those' is a demonstrative, used to point to a noun. Clearly, this child perceived there to be a specific group of inspirational women. Discernible as a 'those', the group is thus recognisable (it can be pointed to) and exclusive (there must be, by implication, a group of not-those). The participants in my study were similarly clear that the texts represented an extraordinary group of women, and that their role as readers was to be inspired by them. Yet, similar to Zarnowski's (1988) study where the participants maintained that the biographies of women could be both inspiring and overwhelming (p. 62), the participants in my study both affirmed the texts' inspirational-ness and called their inspirational capacity into question. Their responses intimated that despite the texts' fervent and extensive marketing of empowerment, more than one possibility is tenable – namely, that the texts do have inspirational capacity and that this inspirational capacity can be challenged.

Conclusion

Discussion of these two themes has demonstrated how, by drawing upon positive, being-orientated descriptors such as 'inspirational, 'brave' and 'confident', participants repeatedly affirmed the texts and the women's inspirational-ness. Sometimes, their utilisation of these terms was accompanied by additional insight into what they meant by them. More often, their bestowal of these words had an almost automatic, habitual quality. Simultaneously, participants problematised and challenged the notion that the

texts and women represented therein were inspirational. At times, they seemed to perceive the women as being too extraordinary to be relatable, and their representation as being too inaccurate to be believable.

This double-edged interpretation is evocative of the tension Keller and Ringrose (2015) articulate in their reporting of how young feminists perceive celebrity feminism. Noting that many highlighted the benefits of having highly visible, feminist identities in popular culture while also calling attention to the limitations of this visibility, Keller and Ringrose (2015) conclude by 'questioning the ability of celebrities to represent the complexities of contemporary feminist issues – including systematic inequalities, racialised sexualisation, and a lack of feminist education' – that were raised by the girls they spoke with (p. 134). Although these double-edged interpretations are different (the scepticism expressed by participants in Keller and Ringrose's study was about celebrity feminists' (in)ability to capture the complexity of feminist issues, while my participants expressed scepticism about the extraordinariness of the women's actions), they are similar in that they both point to the difficulties of capturing nuance when aiming to inspire young people's engagement with feminism and issues around gender justice and equity.

What is clear, is that in neither Keller and Ringrose's (2015) study, nor my study, did the participants imbibe the feminist messaging without pause, reflection or critique. To the contrary, both studies highlight young people's capability to identify and grapple with complexity; something I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 8. Efferent Expectations and Aestheticritical Engagements

Introduction

In the previous chapter I explored how participants responded to and perceived the women in the texts by presenting the themes, appraising women's *being* rather than their *doing*, and affirming and challenging inspirational-ness. This chapter focuses on how participants engaged with the texts, paying particular attention to the nature of their engagements. My discussion is framed around Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading. As I outlined in [Chapter 3](), Rosenblatt proposes that texts can be read efferently and aesthetically. Readers adopt a more efferent stance when they are concerned with the end product of reading, 'concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading' (Rosenblatt 1978: 24), whereas aesthetic reading involves turning inward to connect with one's feelings and experiences in relation to the text. Through exploration of my final three themes, I suggest that although participants tended to approach the texts from an efferent stance, the nature of their engagement was far from straightforwardly efferent.

As discussed in the previous chapter, participants' responses suggest that they viewed the texts as having a three-fold, didactic purpose. Namely, to instil learning, to provide inspiration, and to encourage action. The first theme I discuss, literature for learning, focuses on this first element – to instil learning – and illustrates how participants seemed to perceive the texts as calling for efferent reading. In short, participants' initial engagement with the texts seemed to be largely driven by their reported desire to learn and to acquire knowledge.

However, although participants tended to frame the texts as fact-filled vessels requiring an efferent stance, they did not necessarily engage with them as such. This does not mean they therefore engaged with the texts from an exclusively aesthetic perspective – though, as Cynthia Lewis (2000) points out, Rosenblatt does, at times, set the two stances in opposition to one another, with researchers and educators often appropriating this polarised view (p. 256). Participants' engagements with the biographies were far more complex. Not only did they seem to oscillate between efferent and aesthetic reading, but

when the possibility of critical reading was opened up through my questioning and facilitation, participants started engaging in critical, reflective dialogue on a range of social justice issues, and questioned the texts' authority in a variety of ways.

This will be the focus of my discussion later in the chapter when I present the themes, justice as fairness and permissive questioning. Suggesting that participants' responses cannot always be classified as either efferent or aesthetic, I propose the term 'aestheticritical' as a way of capturing the aesthetic undertones of some of their critical engagements. As I go on to demonstrate, participants' responses were sometimes critical in that they cracked 'open the polished surface of the authority of the texts' to 'ask questions, test information, and become part of the process of intellectual inquiry rather than its passive beneficiary' (Sanders 2018: 11-12). Yet, at times, these critical engagements were simultaneously aesthetic in that they paid attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that the words and their referents seem to evoke within them (Rosenblatt 1978: 25).

A Brief Interlude: Aestheticritical Reading

As I tried to make sense of how participants engaged with the texts, I struggled to find a term that would encapsulate the fusion of aesthetic and critical qualities that seemed to characterise a lot of their engagements. Indeed, scholars have continued to question how, where, or even whether, critical engagement fits within Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (Cai, 2008; Lewis, 2000; Wade et al., 1994). Mingshui Cai (2008) details how some scholars, including Vivian Yenika-Agbaw (1997), and Maureen McLauglin and Glenn DeVoogd (2004), have proposed that a third stance, a critical stance, should be added to Rosenblatt's efferent and aesthetic stances. For example, Yenika-Agbaw (1997) argues there are 'a variety of possible readings that are not easily captured in Rosenblatt's (1978) aesthetic and efferent duality' (p. 446). She suggests, 'Efferent and aesthetic readings must be reinforced with readings that propagate social change—readings that enable readers to ask questions about situations and ideas they encounter within texts' (Yenika-Agbaw 1997: 447), and proposes postcolonial and critical multicultural readings as potential avenues for exploration. Yenika-Agbaw remained committed to this position, oft-referring to the efferent, the aesthetic and the critical as three separate entities. In a chapter Yenika-Agbaw co-authored with Lesley Colabucci, for

example, they note that picture book biographies offer students 'a simultaneously aesthetic and efferent experience' *and* 'afford students opportunities for critical thinking' (2018: section 2, para. 3). Cai's (2008) chief contention is that suggestions to move beyond the efferent-aesthetic continuum to accommodate critical engagement are born out of misunderstandings of Rosenblatt's work, arguing that

> While Rosenblatt emphasizes aesthetic response as the primary step in literary transaction, she never claims that it is the end of literary transaction. Instead, she insists that aesthetic response represents only the first step, "the starting point for criticism" (1985b, p. 103) (Cai 2008: 214).

Cai (2008) goes on to suggest that, according to Rosenblatt's theory, critical engagement 'should be anchored in the reader's aesthetic response' (p. 214), or 'an illumination and extension of the reader's unique, individual, aesthetic response' (p. 216). However, having analysed my data, I am not convinced that critical engagement can only exist beyond the efferent-aesthetic continuum (as posited by those advocating for a third, critical stance), or that it should be conceived of as 'an illumination and extension' of aesthetic reading (Cai 2008: 216). In fact, my interpretation is that the dataset includes numerous instances where participants' criticality had a distinct, aesthetic texture to it, where 'feeling-tones' (Rosenblatt 1978: 11) seemed to suffuse their critical engagement.

The term 'aestheticritical' seeks to illuminate this particular type of response; this fusion of feeling and criticality. Rosenblatt has described the aesthetic stance in many ways. She has explained that in the aesthetic transaction the literary work 'comes into being through the reader's synthesis of the states of mind felt to be relevant to the text' (Rosenblatt 1981: 22). She has noted that it 'designates an attitude of readiness to focus attention on what is being lived through in relation to the text *during* the reading event' (Rosenblatt 1986: 124), and has discussed the presence of 'feeling-tones' in aesthetic reading, where the reader associates the words with certain feelings that are created by past experience (Rosenblatt, 1978). The aesthetic component of aestheticritical thus embraces the presence and expression of *feelings*; feelings being so clearly central to Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance. Hence when I refer to the aesthetic texture, aesthetic undertones or aesthetic qualities of participants' responses, I seek to highlight my perceived presence of, or participants' explicit expression of, feeling(s).

The critical component of aestheticritical takes Sanders' exposition of critical engagement as its defining core. Drawing on key notions from a range of scholars' writings on critical reading (for example, Comber, 2001; Freire, 1970/2017; Leland et al., 2013), Sanders (2018) determines that critical engagement

> …is characterized by a sharing of authority between reader and text, allowing for a form of active dialogue between text and reader rather than the reader's passive receipt of information from the authoritative text […] critical engagement allows for a form of dialogue in which readers can see the process of generating knowledge, vulnerabilities in that knowledge and the people who created it, venues for resisting or redirecting conclusions drawn from that knowledge, and avenues for performing new inquiry (Sanders 2018: 13-14).

Emphasising the interdependent relationship between reader and text, this definition foregrounds what Rosenblatt (1938/1995) describes in her theory of transactional reading, where the reader and the text are caught 'in a to-and-fro spiral' (p. 26). Rather than conceiving of the text as a static object upon which critical readings can be applied, Sanders' definition places dialogue between reader and text at the centre.

Taking an alternative standpoint to those discussed above – the suggestion that an additional, critical stance be added to Rosenblatt's theory, and the contention that criticality is already identifiable in Rosenblatt's theory – Lewis (2000) calls for a re-conceptualisation of aesthetic reading, one that 'invites students to take pleasure in both the personal and the critical' (p. 264). Contributing to a broader conversation regarding how literature is taught in elementary classrooms, Lewis (2000) argues that the utilisation of reader response theory is often misguided in that it focuses on finding pleasure through personal response and identification at the expense of social and political engagement:

> In quick and easy fashion, Rosenblatt's efferent stance becomes associated with the traditional focus on reading comprehension, and her aesthetic stance becomes associated entirely with the personal, often in terms of whether readers can identify with and respond experientially to characters in a literary text (Lewis 2000: 255).

Lewis' (2000) primary argument is that this misinterpretation is limiting: 'Conflating the personal and the aesthetic is problematic, because it strips the aesthetic stance of its interpretive and critical possibilities' (p.255), though she acknowledges that 'it is difficult

to determine where [Rosenblatt] would locate analysis and critique on her efferent/aesthetic continuum' (p. 257). Lewis is clear that aesthetic reading *can* include a critical approach; one that addresses the social and political dimensions of texts. The term 'aestheticritical' thus offers a potential descriptor for the fusion of aesthetic and critical reading that Lewis alludes to.

Although not writing specifically about children's engagement with literature, Candace Kuby (2012) also illuminates how the aesthetic and the critical can be melded, presenting a beautiful explication of how children's critical literacy is intertwined with emotion. Describing how a group of five- and six-year-old children from a relatively affluent southeastern community in the US engaged in learning on social justice issues as part of a summer enrichment programme, Kuby (2012) explains that 'emotional collisions' – 'the moments that the performance of our emotions collides with others in situated contexts' (p. 40) – prompted critical conversations about social injustices. Kuby (2012) reminds us:

> The historical roots of critical literacy are based in the emotional realities of peoples' lives. […] However, it seems that the way critical literacy has been 'curricularized' in some school contexts has shifted the focus from emotional, lived realities to a more analytic perspective of reading the world and the word (Kuby 2012: 32).

Rosenblatt (1978) states that in aesthetic reading, 'the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text' (p. 25). As this 'living through' surely involves the reader experiencing and connecting with their emotion, we might suggest that Kuby's emotional collisions share an affinity with Rosenblatt's aesthetic response. In accord with Lewis (2000), Kuby sees the critical and the emotional (or aesthetic) as intimately intertwined, ultimately calling for teachers 'not to think of aesthetic and rational responses as dichotomous' (Kuby 2012: 40). Rather, critical engagement can be imbued with emotional investment, criticality can have emotional force.

To summarise, setting 'aestheticritical' forth as a term for describing readers' engagement that is characterised by a fusion of criticality and aestheticism does not deny that efferent reading can involve critical interpretation and evaluation, nor that critical engagement can exist within Rosenblatt's conception of aesthetic reading. Rather, I use

'aestheticritical' as a term for highlighting the aesthetic qualities of participants' critical engagements with the biographies.

Theme 3: Literature for Learning

Texts as 'Depositors'

Throughout, participants expressed that they saw nonfiction texts as sites for retrieving information that they could 'carry' with them (Rosenblatt 1978: 24). When, during his initial interview, Mickael said that he enjoyed reading nonfiction, I asked what he liked about it. He took a short pause and said:

> *Eh, the fact that it's factual. Ahh (pause) and in terms of, uhh books nonfiction books ?in? science, the fact that you can* <u>*take*</u> *that, and use it somewhere else. Take that knowledge you've use- you've got from that, and use it, in another subject maybe. Or, even, somewhere else, in, that, science.*

Increasing his volume to place emphasise on the verb, 'to take', Mickael attributed value to nonfiction's capacity for providing helpful knowledge that can be taken and used elsewhere. Mickael stated, in no uncertain terms, that this is what he likes about nonfiction – *"that fact it's factual"* and *"the fact that you can take that,* [knowledge] *and use it somewhere else"*. Mickael was not alone in placing the acquisition of knowledge at the centre of his appraisal of nonfiction. In her initial interview, Sofia said, *"I really like nonfiction books because they normally tell you about facts, and I really like facts because most of them are, are things that people don't really know".* Like Mickael, Sofia expressed that she liked nonfiction texts because they communicate information *to* the reader, they *"tell you about facts"*. From their initial interviews, it was clear that all participants saw nonfiction as synonymous with the acquisition of knowledge. They drew on discourses about objectivity – including the notion that objectivity itself is possible – and how certain forms of knowledge, which are legitimised through objectivity, are perceived to be more valuable or prestigious than others.

Heller (2006) reports a similar finding in her study with girls aged six and seven at a midwestern, American school, where she set up a book club to explore their responses to nonfiction. She notes that all the girls were quite familiar with the term 'nonfiction': ' "Nonfiction is true; it's stuff you learn; it's factual; it's important." ' (p. 361). In their

investigation into girls' experiences of reading science texts in the US, Ford and colleagues (2006) found that the girls' sense of purpose in reading science texts was intricately connected to learning: 'Their understanding of school science may be intertwined so deeply with their understanding of reading science that they may not be able to imagine science reading outside of a school-based purpose of learning' (p. 82).

Although there has been a growing insistence among children's literature scholars that 'children's nonfiction should not just be considered from the point of view of the dissemination of information and knowledge' (Goga et al. 2021: 2-3), nonfiction still seems to be at the mercy of efferent authority. Not only does 'the conventional wisdom that good nonfiction will serve the transmission of facts from adults to children' (Sanders 2018: 34) endure, but the biography genre 'benefits from the support of the educational system. Biographies are often para-educational books, used in class, for which purpose publishers often provide extensive epitextual informative material' (Beauvais 2020: 59). It is thus unsurprising that participants tended to view the biographies as literature for learning, and that they adopted an efferent stance when approaching the texts.

Certainly, the idea that nonfiction serves the acquisition knowledge extended to participants' perceptions of the biographies used in this study. Harry said that *Good Night Stories* was *"made so people could learn all the stories"*. Darcy and Orla, who both had copies of *Good Night Stories* before the project began, expressed that they enjoyed reading it precisely because of what they could learn and the information they could 'carry away' (Rosenblatt 1978: 24). Orla said, *"it just gives me more facts to blurt out at dad!"*. Darcy said, *"I like to see what, um, girls has, have done, like, in the past"*, and continued, *" 'cause I like learning about, umm, I like learning about history, 'cause I really liked learning about the Victorians in school"*. Learning was a central component of participants' understandings of the texts' purpose, to their expectations of the texts, and to the pleasure they reported experiencing when engaging with them.

Participants' articulated understandings of nonfiction were somewhat reminiscent of the 'banking' concept of education that Paulo Freire (1970/2017) describes:

> Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently

receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (Freire 1970/2017: 45).

This idea that education is *for* knowledge acquisition persists as a socially dominant discourse. Although, today, school curricula include focus on self-guided and collaborative inquiry (Department for Education, 2014; Scottish Executive, 2008; Welsh Government, 2020), the idea that children attend school to learn things *from* the teacher and other resources, remains pervasive.

In the context of participants' conceptualisation of nonfiction, texts can be regarded as the depositor – they deposit information for the reader to 'receive, memorize, and repeat' (Freire 1970/2017: 45). However, whereas students are ascribed limited opportunity for action according to the banking model (all they can do is receive, file, and store the deposited information), participants understood their role as inspirees to include a level of activity beyond reading the texts. They understood there to be an expectation that they *do* something with their newly-acquired knowledge (though, as discussed in [Chapter 7](#), they seemed unsure of what this action should entail). Nonetheless, there seemed to be a distinctly efferent or 'banking' orientation to participants' framing of the texts: their attention was 'centred on what should be retained as a residue *after* the actual reading event—the information to be acquired' (Rosenblatt 1981: 21).

Desire for 'Deposits' Driving Engagement

Not only did participants perceive the texts as sites for efferent reading, but they seemed to approach the texts, at least initially, from an efferent stance. That is, when selecting which biographies to engage with, they explained that their decision was often driven by their desire to learn. For example, Olivia recalled that when she first received the texts she started looking for Parks' biography because she *"wanted to learn more about her"*. Given that participants perceived the texts to have a didactic purpose, that their initial engagement seemed predominantly driven by their desire to learn is unsurprising – if you perceive something to have a certain function it usually follows that you approach it with the view to utilising or benefiting from said function.

It seems likely that participants' initial engagement with the texts (their selection of which biographies to engage with) was also driven by their personal interest in learning about something that interested them. This 'something' varied from participant to participant, depending on their individual passions and interests. For example, Mickael said he chose Frank's biography for the group reading session for a number of reasons, the first being that he was *"quite interested in World War Two"*. Other studies exploring children's engagement with nonfiction texts report this same finding. In her study of almost 200 first-grade children's reading preferences in the southwest US, Kathleen Mohr (2006) notes that when asked to explain why they chose the texts they did, most children said they were interested in the topic. Reporting on their work with 46 young people (aged from 8 to 14 years) who participated as judges for the 2011 Royal Society Young People's Book Prize, Joy Alexander and Ruth Jarman (2015) reflect:

> More common were 'flick through' readers who would "dip in, dip out," as one boy described it, or readers who would look at the contents page first and then read "the more interesting parts" or "the ones that appealed to me" (Alexander and Jarman 2015: 130).

Conor's eagerness to engage with Beling's biography on account of his passion for bees is exemplary of how participants' selection of which biographies to engage with was informed by their desire to learn about something that interested them. Not only did Conor choose Beling's biography for the group reading session, but it was the text he wanted to speak about most in his main interview. When we were discussing his drawing of Beling, I asked Conor if he had thought about engaging with any of the other biographies. He replied:

> *Yeah I think I was definitely gonna choose this story because, the other ones were really good, But um, I think this one, (smiling) really just showed that my favourite insect which is the bee I think, well, there are some different other insects that I like, but these guys (inaudible). And that they're just not useless, and stuff. Showing that these guys are really important.*

Conor's response is largely focussed on knowledge acquisition for the purpose of knowledge dissemination. Stating that although the other biographies were *"really good"*, Conor emphasised that this one showed *"that these guys are really important"*. Highlighting the value of acquiring and sharing important information about bees, Conor

was clearly invested in the information he and others could acquire through engagement with the biography.

As a further example, Orla's decision to engage with the biographies of Cleopatra, Nefertiti and Hatshepsut seemed predominantly driven by her desire to learn about Ancient Egypt. Early in the study, I asked Orla what she liked doing in her free time. She replied, *"I quite like finding stuff about Ancient Egypt and baking".* Throughout the study, Orla and I spoke about the biographies of the Egyptian rulers at length. As part of her response to the texts, Orla even recorded herself delivering a monologue as Cleopatra, complete with gold crown, and created a PowerPoint presentation on Nefertiti (Figure 9).

Figure 9 – Orla's PowerPoint presentation on Nefertiti

Explaining why she decided to develop a PowerPoint presentation in response to Nefertiti's biography in *Good Night Stories 2,* Orla said:

> *She's one of my f-, umm, as I've sai- (nods) yeah. As I've said before, sh- I'm <u>obsessed</u> with Ancient Egypt! Um, so I deci- um, so I just and Nefertiti's one of the one of the most mysterious. So I made a PowerPoint about her.*[14]

As with Conor's explanation of why he selected Beling's biography, Orla's response is indicative of the value she accords to the dissemination of knowledge. Stating that she chose to make a PowerPoint about Nefertiti as she is *"one of the most mysterious"*, her creation can be read as an attempt to demystify her, to make visible her existence. Further, it is representative of the drive Orla demonstrated throughout the entire study to learn more about the Egyptian rulers and to share this knowledge with others.

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[14] As Orla already had a copy of this text I invited her to select biographies from *Good Night Stories* and/or *Good Night Stories 2* when engaging with the reader response toolkit.

In fact, Orla's desire to learn from biographies extended beyond the ones used in this study. As part of her response to my question regarding how popular she thought these biographies about women would be in her school, Orla said:

> … 'cause I almost want to, I almost want to read the boys' series. 'cause there's a series on boys, I almost want to read the boys' series 'cause I'm interested in anything in history! Any greats! Breakthroughs in science or art or stuff like that.

For Orla, her desire to learn about *"history"*, *"greats"* and *"breakthroughs in science or art"* is strong enough for her to *"almost want to read the boys' series"*. There is something interesting here about Orla's tentativeness in expressing her desire to read the boys' series. Her use of the adverb, 'almost', suggests an understanding that engagement with the boys' series may be deemed 'inappropriate' on account of her gender. Viewing gender as a discourse, including the very idea that people 'have' genders, illuminates its power in normalising the notion that a person's gender possibly makes one form of reading less appropriate for them. Yet, for the purposes of this discussion, suffice to say that Orla seemed to perceive biographies, whether of men or women, as resources for learning; her responses intimating that her decision to engage with certain biographies (especially those of the Egyptian rulers) was closely connected to her desire to learn more about them.

While I have emphasised participants' efferent stance during the initial stages of engagement (or their reporting on their initial engagement), they also seemed to adopt a more efferent style of engagement when I asked them to compare texts. As some of the women who participants expressed interest in appeared in more than one text (there are biographies of Curie and Parks in *Good Night Stories* and *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World,* for example), I prompted them to compare the different representations. Comparing Curie's two biographies, Harry said, *"It actually gave more detail in this (holds Good Night Stories to the camera) so I prefer this because it gave more detail".* When I asked Olivia which biography of Parks she preferred, she replied:

> The one that uh (Louise holds Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World in front of the camera) no the big one because it kind of told you a little bit more facts, like told you actually, about, for how many days they were boycotting the bus, and for um, and for how long she was like, in jail, for. So that really told me (inaudible) 'cause I thought that she just had a fine and

then the other book just told me that she went, she got arrested so I didn't actually know for how long.

Olivia's response focuses on quantifiable facts. Stating that Parks' biography in *Good Night Stories* "told you a little bit more facts"* – the length of the boycott and the length of time Parks spent in jail – her appraisal places a spotlight on the additional details that *Good Night Stories* offers. Darcy also said she preferred this version: *"Well, I definitely like the one in Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls better. […] 'cause it's more detailed and I think it's probably more how she looked".* As a further example, Lucas said he thought *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* was better than *Good Night Stories* because *"it has more information inside it".* Common across these responses is participants' prioritisation of the amount of information available for readers. They rationalised their judgement based on the amount of knowledge they could gain.

This efferent stance should be considered within the broader context of participants' understandings of the expectations placed upon them as inspirees, their expectations of the genre, and their expectations of my expectations (what they thought I was expecting of them). As aforementioned, participants consistently demonstrated a clear understanding of what nonfiction is generally perceived to be (detailed, realistic and factually accurate) and what nonfiction is intended to do (teach). It seems tenable that participants' reported desire to learn may have been linked to their expectations and understandings of the genre, and their presumptions about my expectations as a researcher, asking them questions about nonfiction. Nonetheless, participants expressed their desire to learn from the texts with eagerness and excitement. Circling back to Conor's explanation for why he chose to focus on Beling's biography, he was smiling as he spoke about the text. His passion for learning about insects was palpable. Similarly, Orla's passion for the Egyptian rulers was striking. She said she was *"obsessed with Ancient Egypt!"* Although there may have been other factors influencing participants' reported desire to learn, I interpreted their expressions as indicative of their genuine eagerness to learn from the texts.

"But then sometimes I would go no that looks boring"

Although participants' initial engagement was, to a large extent, driven by their reported desire to learn, how they perceived the texts visually was also an important factor in their

selection. At times, participants were more attentive to the quality and visual appeal of the illustrations, and less focussed on what they could learn from the informational content. When I asked what their initial thoughts were when they received the texts, or how they decided what biographies to read, their responses sometimes included reference to how the texts looked. For example, explaining how he chose which biographies to engage with, Harry reported with candour:

> *I just opened it and sometimes I would be like, oh that picture looks cool and that n- name looks cool, (higher-pitched, excitedly) okay let's do this! (Starts flicking through Good Night Stories quickly) But then sometimes I would go no that looks boring, let's keep (lyrically) moving on! So I would keep looking at the pictures and going like, (inaudible).*

As with some of the other participants, Harry stated that his decision to engage with certain biographies was influenced by how the text looked. Similarly, Orla recalled, *"when I flicked through I re-, I, umm, I just, first I just chose the illustrations I quite liked",* and Conor said, *"I think I just flicked through and see which one looked interesting".* Referring to his engagement with *Little Leaders* Mickael said, *"I just, flicked through half of the book and I was like, no! Not for me!"* Indeed, participants' initial impressions of how the texts looked seemed to strongly influence whether they would begin reading at all. Again, this finding is in keeping with other studies on children's engagement with nonfiction. For example, while Mohr (2006) found that the majority of students cited their interest in the topic as reason for their selection, some 30 per cent mentioned the illustrations as a reason (p. 97).

However, on some occasions, participants' appraisals of the texts' visual presentation seemed closely connected to their reported desire to acquire knowledge from the texts. For example, discussing her initial response to the front covers of the *Fantastically Great Women* books Sofia said:

> *First I was kind of curious to read them because, umm, like the way they drawed, like they were drawn, it seemed like they were all drawn from the like the same illustrator (short pause) and I really liked the positions that like, the illustrator made them in 'cause it already kind of says a lot from, like what they were actually kind of like, born to do.*

For Sofia, her curiosity to read the texts was inextricably linked to her interest in the illustrations. Sofia said she *"was kind of curious to read them"* because of the way the

illustrations were drawn. Observing that the illustrations *"already kind of says a lot from, like what they were actually kind of like, born to do",* Sofia highlighted how the front covers offer a visual indication of the biographical compendiums' content. On both covers, the title is large and centred, with small, individual illustrations of the women dispersed around the edges. For example, Emmeline Pankhurst is depicted carrying a sign reading, 'VOTES FOR WOMEN' (*Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*) and Eugenie Clarke is illustrated in her diving equipment, surrounded by underwater creatures (*Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet*). Sofia's response implies that not only was she curious to read the texts on account of how the illustrations were crafted, but because they offered some indication of the information within.

By the same token, when participants expressed that they were put off by the texts' visual presentation, their aversion could sometimes be interpreted in connection to their expectations of the texts as sites for knowledge acquisition. For example, some participants expressed that they disliked the *Fantastically Great Women* books' visual presentation. Comparative to *Good Night Stories* and *Little Leaders,* in which the women's biographies are presented as continuous prose, the *Fantastically Great Women books* are more innovative in their formatting. Each biography presents segments of information through use of speech bubbles, and self-contained blocks of text and illustrations (see Chapter 6 for further detail). As a result, readers have greater autonomy to choose what aspects they want to engage with and in what order. However, Lucas, Olivia and Mickael noted that they found this presentation confusing. Below is an excerpt from the transcript of the second reading session I held with Lucas, Olivia and Mickael, where we discussed Frank's biography (*Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*).

Louise:	*I'm interested to know, um, what do you think of how it's presented?*
Lucas:	*(Short pause) Kind of confusing 'cause it's like different. There's like (holds the text in front of the camera and points to different areas on the page) different parts like, all in different places. (Holds the book over his head, like a tent).*
Louise:	*(Nodding) Yeah! What do you think Olivia?*
Olivia:	*(Short pause) Ummm*
Lucas:	*That's with every page.*

Olivia:	*(Elongates) Maybe they could've shown you what part you should read it, 'cause then I got confused when you were reading some little bits.*
Louise:	*Ahh, so yeah. It's quite difficult to know which order to read the- read the parts-*
Olivia:	*Yeah 'cause sometimes you read a part and then but then another part was supposed to go first and now it doesn't make any sense.*

It is worth noting that prior to asking participants what they thought about the presentation, I had read the biography aloud. As the text does not offer clear direction for what order the self-contained blocks of texts 'should' be read, participants had to anticipate where I would 'go' next. Therefore, it could be that Lucas and Olivia's confusion was linked to this specific scenario. However, this was not an isolated critique, as Olivia and Mickael made the same point during the first reading session in response to Roddick's biography. Olivia said, *"It's a nice layout (inaudible) but I think next time they should show, umm, in what or-, order you have to read it in".* Mickael agreed:

> *Well, to be honest, I'm with Olivia. They could have made it clear to figure out ?which? way to read it. However, if you were reading it in blocks, it would be ?quite? easy, because you would just read one block, then go on to the next block, then go on to the next block, then go on to the next block, and so on.*

Olivia, Mickael and Lucas were clear that they would have preferred these texts to be more directive, expressing that they wanted to know what order they 'should' be read. Although the texts' format encourages 'radial reading'– the self-contained 'nuggets' of information inviting 'readers to explore the rhizomatic structure of information across the double-page spread' (Tandoi and Spring 2022: 113) – Olivia, Mickael and Lucas expressed frustration at the lack of clear direction.

Having read a series of compelling commentaries about the opportunities and possibilities that this type of visual presentation can open up for readers, I was surprised by these responses. For example, Alexander and Jarman (2015) note that many of today's science information books for children are organised in double-page spreads, which tends to encourage radial reading. They write that it 'gives greater agency to the reader, who can choose how to negotiate a page' (Alexander and Jarman 2015: 130). Similarly, in *A Literature of Questions: Nonfiction for the Critical Child*, Sanders' (2018) analysis centres on 'where a text makes itself vulnerable to critical engagement—or where it refuses to do

so' (p. 15). Sanders writes that the nonlinear reading that peritexts (aspects of textual apparatus such as sidebars, captions and footnotes) encourage is 'an especially promising venue for self-directed, critical engagement with ideas' (p. 30). Although Frank and Roddick's biographies are not strictly peritextual, the way the texts are presented undoubtedly encourage nonlinear or radial reading. Yet, Olivia, Mickael and Lucas did not seem enthralled by this invitation for radial or nonlinear reading.

My hunch is that participants' resistance to this type of reading was informed by their expectations of the genre being disrupted. Unlike other types of nonfiction books, such as science information books, biography is usually framed in a linear fashion – lives are reported to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is certainly an expectation Zarnowski (1998) observed in her study of readers' engagement with biographies: 'Responses from the children indicated that the children understood that a biography gives facts about the person's life and focuses on an individual's development in roughly chronological order' (p. 62). Writing on the development of informational picturebooks, von Merveldt (2018) states that 'many picturebook biographies appear indistinguishable from fictive stories both in text and image' (p. 241). Indeed, Pankhurst frames her biographies as stories. The blurb of *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* reads, '*Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* tells the awe-inspiring stories of women who spent their lives protecting the Earth and all its living things'. However, Pankhurst does not present information about the women's lives in a straightforward, linear way. As discussed, participants often looked to the texts to acquire information, and the invitation to delve into self-contained segments of information about the women's lives, in any order, may have felt counterintuitive. Expressing frustration, participants seemed to experience the visual presentation as obstructive to their reading and, arguably, to straightforward acquisitions of knowledge.

Exploration of this theme has drawn attention to participants' tendency to perceive of these biographies from an efferent stance, reporting their desire to learn from and to extract information from the texts. In short, and as delineated in the title of the theme, they saw the texts as literature for learning. However, as I go on to demonstrate in discussion of the final two themes, participants deviated from this efferent stance. Particularly in relation to the theme, permissive questioning, I suggest that this may have been influenced, in part, by the nature of my questioning and facilitation.

Theme 4: Justice as Fairness

This theme, justice as fairness, shares its name with the theory of justice outlined by John Rawls. In 1971, the political philosopher published his groundbreaking work, *A Theory of Justice*, in which he presented his challenge to utilitarianism. He refined his theory several times, including in an essay titled, 'Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical' (1985) and in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001). As Rawls' titles suggest, his theory is predicated on the notion that justice in a liberal society is inextricably linked to the idea of fairness. Participants in this study also seemed to conceive of social justice issues as issues of fairness. This is unsurprising given that children's ideas about injustices are often manifested through a discourse of fairness (Kuby, 2012). In responding to the texts, they engaged in critical, reflective dialogue on a range of social justice issues, expressing particular interest in issues pertaining to gender, race, and the environment. This dialogue was inspired by the women they read about, many of whom could be regarded as social justice activists or advocates. Participants also framed the texts' representation of *only* women as a justice issue, with most positing the historic, unjust, under-representation of women as a potential reason for the texts' exclusive focus on women.

Although my naming of this theme was accidental in its allusion to Rawls, the way participants seemed to conceive of fairness was, at times, evocative of Rawls' theory of justice. This theory is constructed upon two principles. In summary, the first principle asserts that all individuals have an equal right to liberty or freedom. The second principle is comprised of two parts – fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle. Fair equality of opportunity prohibits inequalities unless it is reasonable to expect they will be advantageous for all, and the difference principle holds that inequalities are acceptable if they benefit the least advantaged in society. For Rawls, a just society can be realised if both principles are adhered to, though the principles are in lexical order. The first holds priority over the second, and the first part of the second principle (fair equality of opportunity) holds priority over the second part of the second principle (the difference principle).

It is important to note that the theory 'is intended as a political conception of justice [...] worked out for a specific kind of subject, namely, for political social, and economic institutions' (Rawls 1985: 224). Comparatively, participants' discussions of fairness were

not institutionally-focussed. As Urvashi Sahni (2001) notes in her writing on social justice dialogue and action with young children, children 'see themselves as inhabiting peopled worlds, personal and interpersonal worlds, rather than structured worlds' (p. 35). Unsurprisingly, in their discussions of social justice issues, participants tended to draw on their own experiences and interpersonal relationships. Nonetheless, Rawls' theory is a useful touch point for exploration of this theme. It is helpful for teasing out some of the complexities within and across participants' responses, and for elucidating participants' use of particular discourses in relation to ideas of fairness.

My discussion of this theme is comprised of two parts. I begin by discussing how participants responded to and discussed social justice issues – those raised in the biographies themselves, and others that were instigated through engagement with the texts – suggesting that participants tended to perceive the issues through a lens of fairness, and that their conception of fairness was akin to that described by Rawls in his liberty principle. In the second part, I pivot to focus on how participants viewed the exclusion of men from these texts. Complicating the general pattern of response captured within this theme, one participant's response to this exclusion, in particular, brings to light the complexities of Rawls' theory, and incites urgent and difficult questions regarding how value for all individuals can be achieved while simultaneously striving for equity.

Crucially, and as I highlight throughout this chapter, participants' engagements with social justice issues in relation to the texts were poignantly critical. Often used with reference to feelings or emotional experience, the adverb, 'poignantly', captures the emotional charge that permeated participants' critical dialogue on social justice issues. As the examples I discuss in this chapter aim to elucidate, many of the participants' critical responses to justice issues were aestheticritical – they were simultaneously personal and impassioned, questioning and resistive.

Rawls' First Principle: A Point of Convergence

Rawls' first principle, often referred to as the liberty principle or the freedom principle, states, 'Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all'

(Rawls 2001: 42). That is, all individuals have the same right to liberty regardless of age, gender, race, socio-economic status, and any other factor. The way participants seemed to conceive of fairness was evocative of this principle. Regardless of whether a social justice issue raised in the text or a social justice issue being discussed in an interview or reading session was in relation to recognition, treatment, permissibility, access, or representation, participants tended to make sense of the issue through a lens of fairness.

Participants repeatedly expressed that diversity among people was something to be respected and valued, making it clear that 'difference' or belonging to a 'different' group should never be reason for unfair treatment. For example, when Orla and I were discussing Frank's biography (*Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*), Orla looked visibly shocked to learn that the Franks were in hiding to avoid persecution on account of their religious beliefs. Orla said, *"Umm, I also- (intonation goes up) Jewish? (short pause. Her eyes narrow, a sense of confusion in her facial expression and tone of voice. She begins speaking, slowly and thoughtfully) Being Jewish, means hiding out? Weird".* Increasing her intonation as she clarified, *"Jewish?",* and narrowing her eyes to scan the text; as if to check she had not misunderstood, Orla vocally and physically expressed disbelief that this actually happened. Slowing the speed at which she was talking, I sensed that Orla was beginning to comprehend the extent of the cruelty and indignity Jewish people experienced on account of their religion during the Second World War. As Orla had, until this point, consistently expressed her opinions and perspectives with a fervent loquaciousness, I read her monosyllabic conclusion – *"Weird"* – as indicative of her struggle to make sense of this atrocity. My interpretation was that she could not muster any other words to articulate her indignation. I broke the silence by explaining that the Nazi party sent Jewish people to prison camps, where many of them died. Orla's eyes widened, *"Wow. (Short pause). Wow".* Though Orla did not verbally articulate in explicit terms that all individuals should have the right to liberty, her visibly visceral response was strongly indicative of this principle.

The notion that all people have the right to be respected and valued was particularly prominent during discussions of Parks' biography (*Good Night Stories*, pp. 166-67). For example, Conor said, *"Wai- just because like, I don't know, um, your um, gender or, skin tone or something like that, umm you have to follow a certain set of <u>rules</u>. No one deserves that".* Also reflecting on Parks' biography, Olivia said, *"it is a bit unfair if*

someone gets treated unfairly because of the colour of their skin". In one of the reading sessions, I asked participants what they would tell their friends or family about the biography of Parks. Harry said he would tell them, *"if a <u>white</u> person, starts bullying a <u>Black</u> person, the white person has to go to jail for thirteen days!"* I asked him whether this was because he thought bullying was bad and bullies should be held accountable. He responded assertively, *"No! It's just because Black people (short pause) have the right, to (short pause) do whatever they want!"* Contrary to my assumption that Harry was simply advocating for retributive justice, the basis for his suggestion was clearly steeped in Rawls' first principle – that all people have the right to freedom, *"the right to do whatever they want"*.

While these examples provide insight into how participants responded to social justice issues within the biographies, the biographies also functioned as catalysts for discussions of social justice issues more broadly. For example, Sofia chose the biography of Chilean writer, Isabel Allende (*Good Night Stories*, pp. 76-77) to discuss in one of the reading sessions. I asked participants what they thought about the line, 'Isabel protested every time she was treated differently for being a girl. Whenever someone told her she could not do something because she was a girl, her heart ignited with indignation' (p. 76). Met with a long period of silence, I asked participants whether they had ever been told they could not do something on account of their gender, height, eye colour, or any other characteristic. Harry's hand shot into the air.

> *(Passionately and affirmatively) So. I like <u>pink</u>, but boys and girls say, (in a high-pitched, mocking voice, using his hand to imitate the opening and closing of a mouth) oh no pink's for girls only, blah blah blah. (Returns to normal voice) Even though that is <u>not</u> true, it's for <u>everyone</u>.*

Harry's response had strong aesthetic undertones. Impersonating those who criticise his fondness for the colour pink, he evoked – performed, even – 'ideas, feelings, images, situations' that he felt were relevant to the text (Rosenblatt 1981: 22) and wider discussion. Returning to his normal voice when delivering his final sentence – *"Even though that is <u>not</u> true, it's for <u>everyone</u>"* – his words had a distinctive weight to them. By placing vocal emphasis on the phrase 'not true' and the word 'everyone' Harry stressed the importance of ensuring all individuals have the right to like whatever colours they so wish. Harry also discussed his love of pink in his main interview, declaring, *"I think anyone*

can like what they want". The allocation of 'appropriate' likes and dislikes according to one's gender seemed totally non-sensical to Harry. He said, *"I like them. So obviously, someone has to like them who's not allowed to (demonstrates scare quotes with both hands) apparently! It's not like it's against the law!"* Harry's use of the word 'apparently' signals his understanding that the idea that pink and witches are 'for girls' is an arbitrary construction, not an authoritative truth. It is illustrative of how dominant discourses around gender can be refuted, resisted, and reimagined, demonstrating that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault 1976/1998: 95).

Later in the reading session, I shared my own experience of being told that LEGO is a boys' toy. Harry looked exasperated. He placed his head in his hand before straightening his back to assert, *"Toys are for kids, or adults, or old people. Not for boys, not for girls! Not for women, not for men! Just all of them!"* Harry's impassioned pronouncement procured support from Conor in the form of a quiet yet incisive, *"Yeah!"* and the others smiled in, what I perceived to be, avid agreement. Indeed, participants' engagement in discussions on social justice issues, especially gender, seemed most animated when they could find a point of connection with their own lives and lived experiences. From a pedagogic perspective, this is an important point, for it suggests that rather than being distractions, discussions centring children's lived experiences are indispensable to critical engagement with texts.

The Exclusion of Men and Rawls' Second Principle

My third research question asks how participants' engagement with the texts impacted or informed how they made sense of gender and gendered subjectivities. I was therefore interested in understanding how they perceived the texts' presentation of women's biographies, exclusively. I asked all participants why they thought the authors had chosen to write these biographies solely about women. As I discuss below, their responses were numerous. They included suggestions such as: the authors preferred writing about women, the authors could not find any information about men, and the authors wanted to redress the historic under-representation of women. When I proceeded to ask what they thought about the authors' decision to focus on women exclusively, their responses were less varied and almost unanimously apathetic. However, there was one exception. Mickael found the exclusion of white men from Harrison's series of biographies to be

deeply unjust. He spoke passionately, emotion suffusing his critique of this exclusion. Using Rawls' theory of justice as a frame of reference to analyse Mickael's response, I later conclude my discussion of this theme by reflecting on the necessity of facilitating boys' engagement with feminism in productive and inclusive ways.

Responses to my question regarding why the authors chose to focus exclusively on women garnered an assortment of hypotheses. Harry offered three potential reasons:

> *Well (short pause) I think it's actually my reason because, they just want to make other books maybe about boys, or they just prefer making girls or, they cannot find anything about boys. That's what I think about these stories.*

In other words, the authors created these books about women for reasons of convenience or personal preference. In a similar vein, in her first interview Orla responded, *"I just think no one's got it got round to do it"*. However, when I posed this same question to Orla in her main interview, she alluded to the unjust erasure of women from history stating, *"no books were published about women <u>then</u> because, they weren't allowed to do stuff to it if they did break rules, it wouldn't something to be published about but something to <u>punish</u>, sometimes!"* Orla shrewdly noted that what contemporaries might view as women's courageous action, would have likely been perceived as grounds for punishment rather than publication in times past, hence the need to publish books about women today.

When I asked Mickael and Olivia about the authors' exclusively-female focus, they also alluded to the under-representation and unfair treatment of women throughout history:

> *I think it might be because um, they felt like the majority of stories were about either, men and women, or solely men, so they felt like they wanted a little bit of change and so, wrote books about women, as well as the fact that they probably felt that women, uh, weren't being treated as well as men, in some, (inaudible).* (Mickael)

> *I don't know exactly think it might be because, in the olden days, girl- uh girls were treated (intonation goes up) unfairly maybe. (Quietly and high-pitched) Something to do with that? But, I have no idea (short pause). Uh yeah, I just have like no idea.* (Olivia)

Mickael suggested these books were published because *"they wanted a little bit of a change",* before going on to conject that it was perhaps because women *"weren't being*

treated as well as men". I sensed something akin to detachment or tentativeness in his utterance, as his voice trailed off towards the end of this sentence. Olivia's response was also quite tentative, her rising intonation indicating that she was not fully confident in her assertion that, historically, women had been treated unfairly. In fact, Olivia concluded by saying, and repeating, that she had no idea why the authors chose to write biographies about women. Just as participants' affirmations of the texts' inspirational-ness could be interpreted as acquiescence to their role as inspirees, participants' explanations that the authors had political motivations could be read in a similar vein. That is, perhaps they cited women's under-representation and their unfair treatment as a motivating factor because they thought they should.

Participants were aware of similar biographies about men, such as *Stories for Boys Who Dare to Be Different: True Tales of Amazing Boys Who Changed the World without Killing Dragons* (Brooks and Winter, 2018). Published shortly after *Good Night Stories*, this book and numerous others, have a strong resemblance to the texts used in this study. Indeed, entirely unprompted, half the participants mentioned 'boys' versions' of the texts at some point. When I proceeded to ask participants what they thought about women's and men's biographies being separated, some focussed on the practical benefits of combining them. Olivia said that amalgamating men and women's biographies would be preferable because it would make economic sense (if separated, *"they'd have to spend like £40 buying like two books!"*), while others said it would make research easier (again, highlighting their perception of these texts as tools for learning). Darcy and Orla said they liked men and women's biographies being in different books, but did not explain why: *"Well, I like that, um, it's only girls and that I like to see what, um, girls has, have done, like, in the past"* (Darcy); *"Umm, I, I quite like the idea of having them all in one but I think it would be (short pause) I think I prefe- I prefer it apart"* (Orla). Lucas said it was fine for them to be separate because *"you could just buy the other version. (Short pause) Which is actually good".* Generally, participants did not express a strong preference either way.

When I asked Harry whether he thought it would be better if the books included biographies of men too, he said he thought it was *"quite good for just all women because then y-, they can make more other books with lots of other boys maybe".* He continued, *"and that would be real nice 'cause they'd, come in packs".* He pointed to the back cover of *Little Leaders*, where Harrison's other books, *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black*

History (2017) and *Little Leaders: Exceptional Men in Black History* (2019) are advertised. For Harry, it seemed okay that these books only include biographies of women, as men are represented somewhere else. Our conversation continued, and I told Harry that, in an interview, Pankhurst said she wrote the *Fantastically Great Women* series because when she was a child there were few books containing strong, female characters. She thought it was important to create books celebrating women's stories and histories. He responded, *"Oh that makes sense 'cause she wanted men <u>and</u> women to take over the world, so I think that's very good too, half men half women in the world; that would be nice, to have"*. Harry's characterisation of men and women 'taking over the world' is certainly intriguing, but his conclusion that *"half men half women in the world; that would be nice to have"*, is particularly pertinent to this discussion, exemplifying an equality-based approach to justice.

An equality-based approach to justice understands fairness as equal distribution – individuals having the same access to opportunities and resources. This understanding is often contrasted with the concept of equity, which recognises that individuals are likely to have different needs as a consequence of historic, deep-rooted disadvantage. Harry's response signals the power of early childhood discourses that frame fairness as equal distribution. Consider that, in the cultural context of the UK for example, children are routinely encouraged to share resources equally and to ensure everyone has the same chance of winning a game (Lee et al., 2022). These discourses function to promote the normalisation of equal distribution as a 'social good' (Gee, 2011a; 2011b), as something society deems valuable to cultivate and preserve. Mickael also noticed the advertisement for Harrison's other books on the back of *Little Leaders*. His response to this observation might also be read as evocative of equality-based fairness. The following excerpt is worth quoting at length for not only does it raise valuable questions regarding what fairness means, but it incites urgent questions regarding boys' engagement with feminism during a time of increasing feminist consciousness where young girls are often pitted as its champions.

> **Mickael:** *Oh! And I've only noticed now, but, the, back of the, Visionary, Little Leaders: Visionary Women Around the World, it's got, um, the thing that I find a little (short pause) probably a little racist,*

Louise: *Hm.*

Mickael: *Would be that, they've got, the book that's called Visionary Women Around the World, ?so? that's Black and white, and then they've got, Little Leaders: Bold Women in <u>Black</u> History, so Black women solely, and then the other one is, Exceptional <u>Men</u> in Black History, but they don't have except- ex- exceptional men, from around the world or something.*

Louise: *Right, yeah, I see what you mean.*

Mickael: *So I think that's a little, racist.*

Louise: *Mmm. Why do you think that they haven't made a book about umm, yeah, exceptional men around the world, for example?*

Mickael: *Because, I think, they're trying to be, <u>not</u> racist and <u>not</u> like; like some schools. They try to be <u>not</u> sexist by being sexist in the other direction.*

Louise: *Ahh how how do you mean? That's really interesting, how do you mean?*

Mickael: *Like, for example, some schools you have, tons and tons of activities for girls, and o- two, like (becomes increasingly high-pitched) a hundred, ten, (inaudible) 20 activities for girls, (lowers pitch) to <u>two</u>, for, boys.*

Louise: *Mmm, I see. (Short pause) So, you me-, so like in, they're sort of trying to give girls more opportunity, but by doing that, then it's um, lessening the opportunity for boys?*

Mickael: Yes.

Louise: *Mmm, I see. (Short pause) I wonder whether, because umm (short pause) I don't know; I'm wondering what the author (intonation goes up) would say, so who wrote this book, Vashti Harrison, whether, if we could call her up right now and we said to her, look, why haven't you published a book about exceptional men, in history? I'm just wondering what she would say to that. (Short pause) I wonder if she would say that-*

Mickael: *Well, I don't know why but I feel like she's a Black female. Notice how I said "she".*

[A few seconds later in the conversation]

Louise: *… Umm, I wonder whether she would say something like, y'know, for lots of history I- there are so so so many books about men, in history. And there are not t- there are hardly any about Black men or Black women. Um, so I'm just trying to fill that gap, I wonder if she'd say something like that.*

Mickael: *But then she should, but then, she should also write a book about men, because then that would be sort of (short pause) even. So she's being racist or sexist, to try and stop other people from being racist or sexist. It doesn't make much sense does it?*

In the above exchange, Mickael asserts that Harrison's decision not to write a book about exceptional men is *"probably a little racist"* arguing that *"she should also write a book about men, because then that would be sort of (short pause) even".* Placing vocal emphasis on the word 'even', Mickael seemed at pains to explain that if Harrison wrote a book about men (white men, presumably, as Harrison has published a book about Black men) this would be fair – everyone would have the same representation. He likened this to when schools decide to offer more activities for girls than for boys: *"They try to be not sexist by being sexist in the other direction".* That is, schools attempt to ameliorate sexism by ensuring girls have ample opportunities, but this is injurious to boys, ultimately causing sexism *"in the other direction".* According to this logic, then, Harrison's attempts to redress racism by not representing white men in equal measure to Black women and Black men, is a *"racist"* act.

A Rawlsian perspective would repudiate this type of understanding for its failure to take into account women's disadvantage.[15] Indeed, Rawls' second principle argues that social and economic inequalities can be acceptable if two conditions are met. Firstly, that there is fair equality of opportunity. This requires 'not merely that public offices and social positions be open in the formal sense, but that all should have a fair chance to attain them' (Rawls 2001: 43). Secondly, inequalities may exist only if they are to 'the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle)' (Rawls 2001: 43). Thus, we might say that a Rawlsian conception of fairness is committed to

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[15] It is important to note, however, that Rawls has been criticised for not paying adequate attention to women. For example, Susan Moller Okin (2005) writes, 'In *A Theory of Justice*, I argued, Rawls not only almost completely ignores gender, he almost completely ignores women' (p. 237).

equity as opposed to equality, as he argues that the specific circumstances and contexts of particular groups and individuals must be considered. Rawls (2001) asserts that 'certain requirements must be imposed on the basic structure beyond those of the system of natural liberty' (p. 44). To put it another way, Rawls recognises that individuals start from different positions, and so, for basic liberties to be realised, opportunities must be open and fairly attainable for all.

Mickael's analysis does not take into account all existing biographies of white men, which irrefutably outnumber those of white women, Black women and Black men. Yet, from looking at the book covers in the *Little Leaders* series, Mickael perceives there to be unequal representation – Black people and women are represented, but white men are not – and he sees this inequality as problematic. According to Rawls' difference principle, this inequality would be deemed tolerable as it benefits the least-advantaged members of society. Women, Black women and Black men are severely under-represented in children's biographies and historical literature more broadly, and so their representation in this series is entirely justifiable; necessary, even. However, Mickael cannot see himself represented and seems to perceive this as grossly unfair and disorientating; perhaps because it is likely that his general experience is that he *does* tend to see himself represented. His response prompts important reflection on how we engage boys with feminism so that they see themselves as productive participants as opposed to outsiders, while also providing important insights into how gender and racial inequities of the past shape societies today.

Mickael's response is evocative of discourses that could be associated with popular misogyny or the development of popular misogyny as theorised by Banet-Weiser and Kate Miltner. Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) suggest popular misogyny is a phenomenon that 'responds in part to the unprecedented frequency of expressions of popular feminism articulated on multiple media channels and in a variety of contexts' (p. 172). Popular misogyny perceives patriarchy as being 'threatened in specific ways by feminism', and while some forms of popular misogyny are heinously violent and brutal, others are less visible and more insidious (Banet-Weiser 2018a: 32). Mickael's response, which includes a reclamation of terms that have their roots in feminist and anti-racist movements ('sexism' and 'racism'), could be interpreted as a proclamation of

victimisation. In this response, the position of white men and boys is positioned as one of precarity, one that is under threat.

I believe that educators have an ethical responsibility to reckon with discomfort, and to ensure students have access to information that will enable them to acquire historic and holistic understandings of social justice issues. This includes helping students develop awareness of the history of marginalised communities and oppressed groups, and of understanding the importance of foregrounding voices that have been endemically silenced. However, during this exchange with Mickael, I inhabited numerous positions simultaneously (researcher, educator, feminist, adult, woman). I felt unnerved and uncomfortable as I struggled to negotiate these various positions. Mickael's response was emotionally-charged. He spoke loudly and was vehement in his emphasis of certain words as he reflected critically on the exclusion of white men. I felt compelled to encourage Mickael to engage from a different perspective (note that my responses included me 'wondering' about Harrison's perspective), but I found his responses challenging to hear. I wanted to scream, "BUT ALL OF THE OTHER BOOKS IN THE LIBRARY ARE ABOUT WHITE MEN!" It was only after months of reflection on my own positionality in relation to this particular piece of data that I came to realise Mickael's response could be read as an expression of him potentially feeling like an outsider to the texts.

Men are rarely mentioned in these biographies about women. After all, the purpose of biography is to provide an account of an individual's life, and these texts specifically aim to celebrate the lives of women. As I discuss in my presentation of the final theme, permissive questioning, Conor pointed out that when men do appear in the texts they are cast as villains. Reporting on her experiences of teaching about race and racism with first graders, and their responses to *Let the Children March* (a picturebook depicting children marching for racial justice in the Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963), Oona Fontanella-Nothom (2021) explains how white students 'were able to see themselves in the text, not as outsiders but alongside the action, working for social change' (p. 285). The students' capacity for thinking about racism was thus expanded and a space opened up for student-led possibilities for teaching and learning about racism and anti-Blackness (Fontanella-Nothom 2021: 285). Comparatively, these biographies about women offer little opportunity for boy readers to see themselves as productive actors in the fight for gender justice, and Mickael's response serves as a poignant reminder that educators must

facilitate boys' engagement with such material in a way that promotes inclusion and avoids alienation.

The need to engage boys and men in gender justice work is clearly established (Flood, 2019; Keddie, 2021; 2022; Keddie and Bartel, 2020; Keddie et al., 2023; O'Rourke and Haslop, 2022), with Catherine Driscoll and colleagues (2022) recently calling for an affirmative feminist approach to studying boys:

> This approach does not mean finding only or more positive things to say about boys, but it does involve imagining boys in more complex ways, with careful attention to their lived contexts and diversity. It involves resisting the urge to reduce boys to sites for the reproduction of, or intervention in, patriarchal power, in favour of seeking opportunities for productive feminist engagement with boys and for boys (Driscoll et al. 2022: 2-3).

With this in mind, Mickael's response warrants consideration within the wider context of his positionality as a young boy in a climate of heightened feminist consciousness. Expressions of popular feminism are everywhere. Role models for girls are everywhere. Girl empowerment narratives are everywhere. Mickael's own articulation of his lived experience is that the same conditions designed to empower girls – such as the deliverance of additional activities at school and the publication of biographies that do not include white men – are disempowering for boys, disempowering for him. Again, while Rawls' difference principle would hold these to be justifiable inequalities, Mickael does not perceive them as such. In fact, he seems to perceive Harrison's exclusion of white men as a straightforwardly and lamentably unfair reversal of power dynamics: "*So she's being racist or sexist, to try and stop other people from being racist or sexist. It doesn't make much sense does it?*" Although I do not agree that Harrison's exclusion of white men is racist or sexist, the broader point Mickael raises calls attention to an important question; a question that exists at the heart of Rawls' theory of justice. When striving for equity, how can fairness for all be achieved?

Reading Mickael's response as an expression of exclusion does not deny the fact that boys, by virtue of being boys, are beneficiaries of what Raewyn Connell (1995) has termed, the 'patriarchal dividend' (the advantages men gain from an unequal gender order). Nor does it deny that anti-feminist movements are on the rise, and that 'virulent forms of reactionary politics that cast men and boys as the real victims of the current

focus on gender justice have surfaced' (Keddie 2022: 401). Rather, it highlights the potential challenges of facilitating boys' engagement with biographies about women, and casts light on the larger, tremendously complex task of engaging boys with feminism in a way that is productive and inclusive.

Discussion of the theme, justice as fairness, has highlighted how participants' engagement with the texts went far beyond an efferent style of reading. Enthusiastically engaging in discussion on a range of social justice issues, which they generally perceived through a lens of fairness, participants demonstrated an ability to engage critically. Often, their critical engagement was suffused with feeling; as evidenced by the sometimes-thorny, complex and difficult conversations that ensued. In the next section I highlight how my questioning and facilitation may have instigated and, in some instances, sustained participants' aestheticritical engagements.

Theme 5: Permissive Questioning

The final theme, permissive questioning, encapsulates the idea that participants seemed more inclined to question the texts' authority when they perceived that I had granted them permission to do so. It is important to note that this 'granting of permission' was neither a persistent nor conscious act during data gathering. At times, I did yearn for a more critical type of engagement, and was more intentional in my approach on these occasions. For example, when I asked participants if they thought all the information in the books was true and the response was a resounding, affirmative, 'yes!' I persisted with the follow-up question, *"so you guys believe what the books are saying?"* I wanted participants to spend more time reflecting on *how* and with what purpose the texts had been created. However, for the most part, the notion of critical engagement was far from my conscious thoughts. It is only through analysing the data that I have been able to understand the extent to which my role in mediating participants' engagements with the texts affected their responses.

Participants challenged the texts' authority in three primary ways. Firstly, they resisted and redirected conclusions as they questioned the texts' factual accuracy. At times, they adopted an aestheticritical stance, by which I mean their questioning seemed to emanate from a visceral, feeling place. On other occasions, their questioning seemed more

disconnected – they adopted an efferent stance, eager to set forth what they perceived to be the objective truth. Secondly, they identified and interrogated 'vulnerabilities' (Sanders 2018: 13) in the texts. Demonstrating awareness of the texts' partialness, they alluded to and questioned missing information, sometimes relating their own lived experiences to their critical reading. Finally, participants expressed pleasure – often interpreted as synonymous with aesthetic reading – in generating their own knowledge by undertaking further research to find the information they perceived to be missing from the biographies. I discuss each of these in turn, paying attention to how my own participation – specifically, to what I think participants perceived as my granting permission – may have encouraged them to challenge and query the texts' authority.

Interrogating Truths

In discussing the theme, literature for learning, I explained how participants generally saw the texts as resources for learning, impervious to questioning and critique. However, just as Griffin (2010) found that scaffolding students' conversations and providing instructions on the process of collaborative discourse seemed to encourage readers to examine the texts' factual accuracy, there seemed to be certain conditions that stimulated a more critical style of engagement in my study, where participants appeared more confident to query and interrogate the 'facts' presented on the pages. In their second reading sessions, I asked participants whether they thought all the information in the texts was true. Below is an excerpt taken from the first group's response.

Louise:	*…And, do you guys think that all of the information in all of these books is true?*
Harry:	*(Tilting his head to the side, responds in a high-pitched voice) Yes!*
Conor:	*Yeah it's a book! Most (inaudible) are true!*
Sofia:	*Like, I think, yeah.*
Louise:	*You think yes Sofia?*
Sofia:	*Well at least 99 per cent of it. At least.*
Louise:	*At least 99 per cent, OK, so you guys believe what (holds Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet in front of the camera) the books are saying?*

> **Conor:** *Well um, yeah, probably 99 per cent 'cause, like maybe if you use, maybe a book, might, it might have been outdated.*
>
> **Sofia:** *Oh yeah.*
>
> **Conor** *And Google, well Google might not always know the answer.*

Harry, Conor and Sofia were quick to respond with an affirmative 'yes' in answer to my question regarding the texts' truth. Gently intimating that veritable truth is not necessarily a foregone conclusion, I asked a second time. Conor then stated that, in fact, some reference books used to create the biographical texts may have been outdated. He also remarked that *"Google might not always know the answer",* and Sofia's *"Oh yeah"* suggests she had not considered this limitation before Conor pointed it out. This exchange is exemplary of a pattern that emerged repeatedly throughout data gathering – I would ask a question, participants would respond in a way that affirmed the texts' authority and objectivity, I would re-phrase the question or another participant would respond to the contrary, and a more critical type of engagement would ensue.

When I asked participants in the second group the same question, Lucas said, *"I think they mostly are 'cause they wouldn't be, um, […] I think it's, if it wasn't like, if we weren't using it for like, this session thing, we wouldn't, it wouldn't be a good story"*. In other words, we would not have been using the texts unless they were reliable sources of truth. Lucas' response is indicative of the power certain individuals are perceived to hold in the production, protection and dissemination of certain truths. Foucault (1972/1980) asserts:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault: 1972/1980: 131).

In this instance, Lucas' intimation that I would not have chosen texts unless they were mostly true suggests he perceived me to have the requisite status to be an arbiter of truth. Or, to use Foucault's (1972/1980) words, to be 'charged with saying what counts as true' (p. 131). Hence not only does Lucas' response provide a further example of how participants viewed the texts as literature for learning, but it is evocative of the extent to

which truth was perceived to be an integral component of nonfiction by most participants and of how I was perceived to be, at least by Lucas, an appropriate gatekeeper.

In addition to gently intimating that the texts could be questioned, offering participants hypothetical authority over the texts' development and improvement seemed to incite more critical engagement. For example, when I asked Orla what she would do to make the texts more inspiring, she replied:

> *I think I would, um, not just look on, like, one website and find tons of information, but look on more websites to back that up and to find more, to make sure it's all true 'cause I think I told you last time, I found out stuff otherwise that, about some of the women that, might have been, umm, untrue, (intonation goes up) not true.*

Orla's rising intonation before she uttered the words, *"not true",* suggests she may have felt a degree of hesitancy in questioning the texts' authority. Yet, she continued:

> *Umm, because in Cleopatra, I I think I might have told you in Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls, it, at the start, it says, a king-, a kingdom was left t- um, once um, once upon a time, a kingdom of, a father left a his kingdom, to his 12-year-old s- um, to his, um, 12-year-old son and, um, sixteen year-old daughter, but actually, Cleopatra had <u>two</u> brothers and <u>two</u> sisters.*

Placing vocal emphasis on the 'correct' number of children Cleopatra had – *"Cleopatra had <u>two</u> brothers and <u>two</u> sisters"* – Orla's challenge appeared to emanate from an efferent stance. She seemed to view the texts as, primarily, sources of information, and was keen to rectify what she perceived to be erroneous reporting.

On other occasions, participants' interrogation of the 'truths' presented in the texts seemed to have more aesthetic undertones. When reading from an aesthetic stance, the reader

> … is attending *both* to what the verbal signs designate *and* to the qualitative overtones of the ideas, feelings, images, situations, characters that he is evoking under guidance of the text. The literary work of art comes into being through the reader's synthesis of the states of mind felt to be relevant to the text (Rosenblatt 1981: 22).

Mickael's answer to my question, *"what do you think about the truth in these stories?"* deviated from the general pattern of response presented above. Instead, his response seemed to evoke 'qualitative overtones' (Rosenblatt 1981: 22). He said:

> *I disagree with, erm, him. I think, most of it is true, But part of it is the author's opinion, and the people who the author got the information from's opinion. 'cause some of them are secretly biased. For example, Hillary Clinton, it says there was a time when <u>only</u> boys could do whatever they wanted (short pause) not, sometimes, maybe boys d-, maybe boys their talking about <u>didn't</u> want to be (inaudible) they're allowed to be, 'cause they wanted to be something else, and they weren't allowed. So it's not completely true.*

Zarnowski (2019) notes that students often 'see biography as a single story, free of personal interest and perspective' (p. 145), but contends that this understanding can be recast if readers are encouraged and supported to recognise biographers' unique perspectives. Perhaps encouraged by my open question, Mickael seemed confident to express that he disagreed with Lucas (who said he thought the texts were mostly true), passionately affirming that the author was *"secretly biased".* He claims that the opening statement of Clinton's biography – 'There was a time when only boys could be whatever they wanted' (*Good Night Stories*, p. 70) – is an over-generalisation, stating that there may have been *some* boys who were not allowed to do what they wanted. Rosenblatt (1978) states that, in aesthetic reading, 'concentration on the words of the text is perhaps even more keen than in efferent reading' (p. 29). Mickael's response certainly places semantics at the centre – seemingly affronted by the authors' generalisation of boys' experience, it is the text's specific wording that shapes his response.

Reflecting on 20 years of research focusing on child readers' responses to texts, Sipe (1999) reports, 'Readers may neutrally *accept* a text, actively *embrace* it, or vehemently *resist* it for one reason or another' (p. 123). Placing vocal emphasis on certain words and drawing evidence from the text to verify his declarative statements, Mickael's response can be interpreted as 'vehemently' resistant. Indeed, it is charged with the type of 'feeling-tones' Rosenblatt (1978) describes in her theory of aesthetic reading. Drawing on the work of Edward Sapir (1921), she explains that words have associated 'feeling-tones', which are created by past experiences:

> The reader's attention to the text activates certain elements in his past experience—external reference, internal response—that have become linked

with the verbal symbols. Meaning will emerge from a network of relationships among the things symbolized *as he senses them* (Rosenblatt 1978: 11).

We can only speculate as to the past experiences that may have informed Mickael's response, though other data items provide some context. There were numerous moments throughout the study in which Mickael expressed dissatisfaction or frustration with what he perceived to be the mistreatment or misrepresentation of boys and men. You might recall from the previous section that when discussing Harrison's decision not to write a book about exceptional men Mickael said, *"some schools you have, tons and tons of activities for girls, and o- two, like (becomes increasingly high-pitched) a hundred, ten, (inaudible) 20 activities for girls, (lowers pitch) to two, for, boys"*. Changing his pitch to highlight the difference in opportunities afforded to girls and boys, Mickael's response was imbued with feeling. He seemed outraged at what he perceived to be the unfair treatment of boys. While it is not my intention to construct a simple cause-and-effect interpretation of Mickael's resistance to Lucas' endorsement of the text's truth, Sipe (1999) does encourage us to consider the potential ideological, social, and personal grounds of readers' resistance (p. 123). Though the particular grounds of Mickael's resistance are unknown, it seems clear that his critical engagement was coloured by some past experience(s). Suffused with feeling-tones, his critical engagement went beyond exercising an 'objective' or detached adjudication of the text's accuracy. Rather, my interpretation is that his critique was driven by his desire for fairness.

Another example of this type of aestheticritical reading can be found in Conor's main interview when we were discussing the biography of the Chipko Movement and the deforestation protests in *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet*. Conor said that it was, in fact, a man (Chandi Prasad Bhatt) who *"told the people to, y'know, hug the trees"*. Conor explained, *"he technically actually started the movement. So he, technically, well this story should technically not be here but um, the it was female villagers that actually saved the trees so that's why I think it's why it's here"*. Conor's repetition of the word 'technically' suggests a strong investment in factual accuracy, and he seemed troubled by what he perceived to be the author's mis-representation of Bhatt's 'true' contribution. Flicking through the book, he proceeded to count how many men were represented across the biographies. He concluded, *"I think there are only five"*. When I asked Conor what role he thought the men were generally taking in the books he responded, *"Umm like the villains' side, I would say"*. Thus, not only did Conor imply that

Bhatt's contribution had been inadequately represented in the Chipko Movement's biography, but he interpreted that the men were generally depicted as evil in the texts.

As aforementioned, these texts are objects of popular feminism. They exist as part of a broader campaign that seeks to empower women and girls by making visible the achievements of other women and girls. As Banet-Weiser (2018a) writes, we are witnessing 'a dramatic increase in the visible expression and acceptance of feminism' (p. 5), and, with that, we might say that female empowerment is increasingly operating as a 'truth'. As Foucault (1972/1980) notes, truth 'is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption' (p. 131). Calls for and celebrations of female empowerment are undoubtedly undergoing 'immense diffusion and consumption' in this current moment, and Mickael and Conor's responses might be read as resistances to this 'truth'. Specifically, they might be read as part of a broader discourse that proffers female empowerment as unjustly injurious to maleness.

Conjectures aside, what is clear is that Mickael and Conor's responses were coloured by aestheticriticality. Imbued with feeling-tones, they undoubtedly had an aesthetic texture to them. While it is unclear what 'the words and their referents [seemed] to evoke within them' (Rosenblatt 1978: 25), the feeling-tones were palpable. Something shifted. Both Mickael and Conor's responses felt deeply personal. Identifying what they perceived to be 'vulnerabilities' (Sanders 2018: 13) in the knowledge presented, and questioning the texts' factual accuracy, their responses were also critically resistant. Not only do the exchanges discussed here exemplify the extent to which participants' engagement went far beyond an efferent style, but they incite important questions regarding children's engagement with social justice issues around racism and gender inequities.

Identifying and Interrogating Vulnerabilities

In addition to interrogating the texts' 'truth', participants also demonstrated awareness of the texts' partialness. Again, my interpretation is that once they felt they had been granted permission to do so, they seemed to conceive of the texts as curated objects as opposed to absolute, fully-comprehensive, accounts of women's lives. Furthermore, and as with their interrogations of the texts' factual accuracy, when discussing the texts' partialness some of their responses seemed to emanate from a more efferent stance, whereas others may be more suitably described as critical or aestheticritical. I begin by

offering some examples of the former, where it is clear that participants viewed the missing information as impeding readers' capacity to learn. I then discuss how, in identifying and critiquing the texts' partialness, participants not only demonstrated awareness of censorship in children's literature, but some reflected on the consequences of censoring certain topics, such as death. I identify an aesthetic texture to some of these critical engagements, again highlighting a synergy between the aesthetic and the critical.

Drawing attention to the 'Further Reading' (pp. 82-83) and 'Sources' (p. 84) pages at the back of *Little Leaders*, I asked participants what they thought of these peritextual features. Conor said, *"Ummm, I would say that's pretty good because, maybe other people can like check that place out and like check out the <u>full</u> story. That's not like, cut out"*. Explaining that readers could *"check that place out"* to obtain *"the <u>full</u> story"*, Conor drew attention to the text's incompleteness. Orla's response to the same question similarly highlights the text's limitations:

> *Um, I think that'd be really useful if I was kind of doing a, erm, if I was, umm, trying to, umm, research, about them. I wouldn't just know what's limited on the page, but more (short pause) much more.*

Conor and Orla did not simply affirm the text's partialness; they used their vocal expression to emphasise the extent of this partialness. Increasing his volume when stating that readers could look elsewhere to obtain the *"<u>full</u>"* story, Conor insinuated that the existing text is, by implication, not full. Repeating the word, *"more"*, and taking a short pause before uttering her final words, *"much more"*, Orla also highlighted that additional information could be found beyond the texts. It is also noteworthy that, for Orla, the value of the peritextual features is linked to learning – she said that the list of sources would be useful if she were undertaking research on the women. Framing the text as literature for learning, Orla's response thus emanates from a distinctly efferent stance.

On some occasions, when I asked why they thought the author had decided to omit certain details, participants surmised that the author's limited knowledge precluded them from providing the information. As with Orla's response above, these answers had an efferent quality to them. Imagining the production process in purely objective terms, participants focused on the logistics of authors having access to information. Below is an

example from Lucas' main interview, in which I encouraged him to reflect on why Pankhurst might have omitted reference to Curie's radiation poisoning.

> **Louise:** *… I was wondering if there were any other stories in any of the other books that stood out to you?*
>
> **Lucas:** *Marie Curie.*
>
> **Louise:** *(Nodding) Hmm, yeah.*
>
> **Luacs:** *Now I know she died of radiation that's a risky, thing to (inaudible) something like that,*
>
> **Louise:** *For sure, yeah.*
>
> **Lucas:** *I don't think they realised she died of radiation; the people who wrote it.*
>
> **Louise:** *Yeah I'm wondering why they didn't include that in the book.*
>
> **Lucas:** *Or was it like too harmful? (In a louder voice) But now; you could learn from that though; don't put radiation beside your bed, or head!*

Initially, Lucas speculated that the author of *Fantastically Great Women* did not realise Curie had died from radiation exposure – *"I don't think they realised she died of radiation"* – hence its omission from the text. It is then unclear whether his rhetorical question, *"was it like too harmful?"* refers to the radiation poisoning itself or to readers receiving this information. In other words, would it have been *"too harmful"* for young readers to have access to this detail? He responded to his own rhetorical question with the retort, *"you could learn from that though; don't put radiation beside your bed, or head!"*

This small excerpt provides a clear example of how the 'reader's stance toward the text—what he focuses his attention on, what his "mental set" shuts out or permits to enter into the center of awareness—may vary in a multiplicity of ways between the [efferent and aesthetic] poles' (Rosenblatt 1978: 35). If Lucas was indeed referring to the *effects* on readers receiving this information, we might suggest that his orientation was becoming increasingly aesthetic – he diverted his attention away from the information itself (Curie died from radiation poisoning) to the effects of receiving said information. I am not suggesting that Lucas responded from an aesthetic stance, but I am suggesting that in alluding to the harm readers might experience through reading this information, he was starting to consider the aesthetic response of the hypothetical reader. However, in highlighting what could be gained through writing about her death – *"you could learn*

from that though" – Lucas arguably moved back towards the efferent pole on the continuum. Thus, while Lucas seemed to oscillate between an efferent and aesthetic orientation, he ultimately came full-circle in his critical participation, focusing on what readers could have 'carried away' from the text had the cause of Curie's death been made explicit.

When I asked Olivia the same question in her main interview – whether there were any biographies that stood out to her – she also referred to one of the women's deaths: *"I found this one (holds the biography of Earhart in front of the camera) sad because she did a fly and then she something went wrong. And then I think she died".* As the aesthetic stance 'explores the feelings that are evoked as a reader undergoes a reading experience' (Yenika-Agbaw 1997: 447), Olivia's response clearly falls towards the aesthetic pole on the efferent-aesthetic continuum – she explicitly states that she found Earhart's biography sad. I proceeded to ask Olivia whether, given this unfortunate ending, she thought the author should have included Earhart's biography in the book. Our conversation proceeded as follows.

> **Olivia:** *Well I think they should have still, because she did break a world record.*
>
> **Louise:** *(Nods) Yeah! Impressive lady.*
>
> **Olivia:** *It's just they kinda I think sometimes, maybe for children's books they shouldn't do so much about dying and stuff.*
>
> **Louise:** *What do you think?*
>
> **Olivia:** *Yeah. Well, a lot of people freak me out ?with? a lot of people have (smiling) Fortnite and stuff and say that you can kill people (intonation goes up) in it. It was like a (intonation goes up) 12 plus.*
>
> **Louise:** *Oo gosh.*
>
> **Olivia:** *And like, half of my class has it.*

Similar to Lucas' response, (where he highlighted the harm that might ensue from presenting readers with details of Curie's death), Olivia's response demonstrates awareness of the conventions surrounding children's literature content. She stated, *"maybe for children's books they shouldn't do so much about dying and stuff"*. When I prompted Olivia to critically reflect on the inclusion of death in children's literature (*"What do you think?"*) her response had aesthetic undertones. Rooted in her own lived

experiences and realities, she related the issue to her peers' engagement with the online video game, Fortnite. Given its suitability rating of 12 plus, she seemed uncomfortable that half of her peers play it *("a lot of people freak me out")*; her rising intonation signalling an almost-disbelief or disapproval. We might interpret Olivia's response as an endorsement of omitting death from children's literature. Implying that death is not an appropriate topic for children to read about, she drew on what she perceived to be her peers' inappropriate engagement with Fortnite to further substantiate her point. However, just as Lucas concluded that, ultimately, it would be valuable for readers to have access to information regarding Curie's death, Olivia implied that Earhart's record-breaking achievements make her story an acceptable exception to the no *"dying and stuff"* 'rule' in children's literature. In other words, Olivia recognised the overriding value (or perceived value) of presenting this knowledge to readers.

Critically attentive to the texts as social and political constructs, Lucas and Olivia's responses centre upon issues of censorship. In the context of children's literature, the earliest use of the word 'censorship' was 'developed in tandem with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 18th-century concept of "the natural child" as innocent and in need of protection' (Booth 2021: para. 3). Before the advent of 'new realism' in the 1960s, 'the general consensus about children's literature was that difficult topics such as death, racial conflict, or sexual permissiveness were taboo and therefore simply did not appear' (Booth 2021: para. 6). 'Depressive endings […] tended to be shunned, on the assumption that the young need to feel confident about the future and their ability to overcome obstacles (Reynolds 2011: 27). While there now exists a growing corpus of children's literature that unapologetically addresses the subject of death (see Book Trust's (2023) booklist on grief and loss, for example), cultural and ideological norms preserving the notion that death is something children require protection from continue to linger. Through his writings, Foucault shows how 'the establishment of knowledge is *institutional*, and how that institutional knowledge becomes institutional power' (Bowman 2015: 4). Here, we might view children's publishing as the institution, accompanied and fortified by other associated institutions such as schools. However, as Lucas' and Olivia's responses indicate, established knowledges can be challenged. Not only did Lucas and Olivia demonstrate awareness of the notion that children should be protected from representations of death, but they critically considered how and why this censorship might persist. Lucas went even further, challenging this narrative by contending that

including details on the cause of Curie's death would be an important improvement – in fact, it would be highly beneficial for readers, perhaps (and ironically) protecting them from harm.

Considering how knowledge is produced and reflecting on the implications of presenting and omitting certain details relating to the women's lives, Lucas and Olivia's responses are irrefutably critical. They could 'see the process of generating knowledge, vulnerabilities in that knowledge and the people who created it' (Sanders 2018: 13). Although focusing on a different aspect of the texts' partialness, Orla similarly called attention to the subjective nature of the authors' knowledge generation. When we were contemplating how the authors selected what information to include and what information to omit, Orla said, *"I think she might have included, umm, umm, there might have been a few, um, hiccups in their life. Or something like that. She might not have wanted to include that"*. When I asked Orla why the author might not have wanted to include any 'hiccups' she replied:

> *If you showed a few, less amazing things they might think (short pause) yeah. Sometimes some bad things can make them seem, extra interesting. For Cleopatra that's one of the th- reasons I, I'm into her. Umm, but for others it can seem, yeah. It can, it might seem, like they're not as amazing, as, you thought they might be.*

Emphasising the importance of cultivating young readers' critical engagement with nonfiction, Yenika-Agbaw (2018) asks, 'How do we engage students in critical conversations around such "truths," especially those that are paraded in nonfiction literature for children and adolescents?' (section 1, para. 2). In the context of these biographical compendiums, I find Yenika-Agbaw's use of the word 'paraded' remarkably apt. In what feels like an almost-processional format, with every turn of the page readers are presented with another celebration of another woman's extraordinary achievements. In the above response, Orla calls attention to the authors' purposefully-curated parade of *"amazing"* women. She implies that including anything *"bad"* could be undermining, but asserts that including *"some bad things"* can make the women *"seem extra interesting"*. In other words, for Orla, the presentation of more realistic, three-dimensional depictions of the women would improve the texts, though she appears impressively cognizant that that this would be antithetical to the author's intended messaging.

Common across all these responses is an awareness that the 'sole recognition of an audience of children triggers a particular ethical and political relation to the work of art' (Beauvais 2015: 182). Orla's response indicates a firm understanding of how censorship can be used to serve an author's intended messaging, while Lucas and Olivia's responses are evocative of wider discourses that justify censorship or sensitivity in children's literature in the name of protecting children from harm (Reynolds 2011: 126). Not only do these responses reveal an awareness of the ethical and political dimensions of texts and their production, but they demonstrate some participants' adeptness at critically engaging with these aspects.

Generating New Knowledge

In Interrogating Truths, I focused on the presence of feeling-tones in participants' aestheticritical engagements. Paying particular attention to Conor and Mickael's resistance to certain texts, I argued that the remnants of past experience could be felt during such engagements, even though they might not be fully discernible. In Identifying and Interrogating Vulnerabilities, I continued this focus by providing further examples of how participants related their lived experiences to their critical engagements with the texts (for example, when Olivia made a connection between her peers playing Fortnite and the subject of censorship in children's literature). In this final section I take a slightly different direction, focussing on the role of pleasure in aestheticritical engagements.

Although there is a tendency to dilute Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance to simply mean, reading for pleasure (Lewis 2000: 255), and while this interpretation is woefully insufficient, it is fair to surmise that pleasure could be considered part of Rosenblatt's theory of aesthetic transaction. Rosenblatt (2005) writes that the aesthetic reader 'pays attention to—*savors* [emphasis added]—the qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth' (p. 11). However, Lewis (2000) calls for 'a broader view of what pleasurable aesthetic reading can mean, one that addresses the social and political dimensions of texts and invites students to take pleasure in both the personal and the critical' (p. 264). Time and time again, participants in my study expressed pleasure in debating, revising, and prising open the biographical texts to question their authority. This finding is somewhat at odds with a conclusion Alexander and Jarman (2018) arrive at following their analysis of data gathered in a

school-based reading challenge: 'The efferent stance yields the chief pleasure of non-fiction – gaining new knowledge, learning a fascinating fact, picking up a factoid to recount to a friend' (p. 84). While the participants in my study did seem to derive pleasure from reading efferently, the data also suggests they found pleasure in questioning and challenging the new knowledge they had acquired. Below, I draw on two main examples to illustrate that participants did indeed 'take pleasure' in the critical (Lewis 2000: 264), specifically, in undertaking their own research to generate further knowledge.

Sometimes seeking information on content that they perceived to be missing from the texts, participants did not seem to regard the biographies as foregone conclusions, as complete accounts of the women's lives. For example, in response to the biography of Manal al-Sharif (*Good Night Stories,* pp. 106-07), Olivia asked, *"Wait, do you know why girls were not allowed to drive? […] It doesn't say umm, just says that religions forbidden women from driving. So it doesn't say anything why".* For Olivia, the explanation offered – that religious rules forbid women from driving in Saudi Arabia – was not satisfying, and she later ruminated, *"Well she could just not be in that religion!"* Arguably, the text assumes knowledge and understanding on the part of the reader that adhering to religious rules is not straightforwardly negotiable in Saudi Arabia. However, this does not make sense to Olivia. As Sipe (1999) explains, readers' responses are profoundly influenced by the various sociocultural contexts that surround them (p. 125). The below excerpt suggests that Olivia's response was, indeed, determined by her immediate frames of reference.

Louise: *I wonder if the rules got changed.*

Olivia: *I think they got (intonation goes up) changed. Because now girls can (intonation goes up) drive, so they probably did get changed.*

Louise: *(Nods) Mmmm.*

Olivia: *Well they probably had to because, now girls can actually drive.*

Louise: *(Quietly) Yeah. (Normal volume) I'm wondering because, this happened in, Saudi Arabia. So a different part of the world so, I know girls can drive here in the United Kingdom, but I wonder whether they can, drive in Saudi Arabia now (looking down at the text).*

> **Olivia:** I- I- I'm gonna search *(begins typing on the keyboard) that, on the internet.*

[After Olivia has finished searching online]

> **Olivia:** *(Reading from the screen) No, they only gave, uh, one year ago they let*
>
> **Louise:** *(Leaning forward towards the screen) Really?*
>
> **Olivia:** *(Smiling, her eyes wide) Yes!*

Presumably, Olivia's observation that *"girls can actually drive"* is based on her experience of seeing women driving in contexts outside of Saudi Arabia. I used 'speculative ponderings' (Evans 2009: 183) (*"I wonder if the rules got changed"*) in an attempt to further our conversation about the different statuses of women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia and the UK. My ponderings seemed to prompt Olivia to undertake her own research, which she appeared very excited about. Stammering to explain what she was about to do – *"I- I- I'm gonna search […] that, on the internet"* – Olivia seemed to take pleasure in extending the knowledge she had already acquired, learning that women in Saudi Arabia recently secured the right to drive.

One of Heller's (2006) observations of the girls' engagement in her nonfiction book club was that 'Tone of voice, body language, laughter, facial expressions, and dramatic gestures were evidence of aesthetic and efferent responses interacting synergistically as the children expressed awe and wonder about new and interesting information' (p. 366). Comparatively, the above exchange with Olivia is not an example of aesthetic and efferent responses 'interacting synergistically', but of aesthetic and *critical* responses 'interacting synergistically'. Olivia engaged critically (undertaking her own research to generate further knowledge) and her facial expressions and tone of voice strongly suggest she felt pleasure in doing so. Smiling as she relayed her newly-acquired knowledge, Olivia appeared to experience pleasure in undertaking her own research in relation to the text.

Although participants mainly undertook their own research when they perceived there to be information missing from the texts, there was one occasion whereby participants sought information to understand why Pankhurst had made certain artistic decisions. Specifically, in a group reading session, Lucas and Mickael worked together and consulted sources online to make sense of why Pankhurst had chosen to use the colour red for the illustrations in Frank's biography in *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*:

Louise:	I wonder why they've gone for red.
Lucas:	*(Excitedly, loud inhale of breath) I think I know! 'cause I've been looking up at stuff, I think that was the colour of her diary or something.*
Louise:	*Oh, okay!*
Lucas:	*I'm gonna see, I'm gonna see what, I'm gonna search up what- (begins typing on the keyboard)*
Mickael:	*Yeah because on both pictures the diary, it has cover as <u>red</u>. Both the one next to Anne Frank, and the one next to Anne's diary. <u>And</u>, I think the full page is designed to look like her diary because the border, chequered red. (Inaudible) in the image with Anne, and her sister (inaudible)*
Louise:	*Well noticed-*
Mickael:	*But then-*
Lucas:	*(Smiling) It was red! It said red!*
Louise:	*(Smiling and nodding) Okay, so the diary was red Lucas?*
Lucas:	*Yes.*

As with the pleasure Olivia seemed to derive from our joint investment in understanding the current status of women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia, Lucas and Mickael appeared to enjoy collaborating to make sense of Pankhurst's artistic choices. Lucas responded to my 'wondering' about the red illustrations by sharing that he thought Frank's diary was red – *"I think that was the colour of her diary or something",* and Mickael built on Lucas' analysis by suggesting that the chequered border around the page was also *"designed to look like her diary".* Having consulted some online sources to verify their hypothesis, Lucas then announced with excitement, *"It was red! It said red!".*

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks (1994) writes, 'As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence [...] Excitement is generated through collective effort' (p. 8). Lucas and Mickael appeared to find pleasure in their joint, critical engagement, and hooks' reference to the generation of excitement feels particularly pertinent. I recall feeling a buzz of excitement

in the moment, subsequently making reference to the salience of this exchange in my field work diary when I watched the Zoom recording for the first time:

> Speculative pondering: "I wonder why they've gone for red" … Great response! Sense of discovery from Lucas: "I think that was the colour of her diary". Mickael extends this – in the illustrations, the diary is red and the pages are designed to look like her diary. Also, the border is checkered red. This is a really lovely moment of co-discovery and collaborative meaning-making among participants! (Excerpt from field work diary, 30-11-2020).

My short, sharp sentences encapsulate the excitement I sensed between the participants, and the excitement I felt as an engaged and interested facilitator. Being open to the wide range of possibilities for readers' engagement with nonfiction – possibilities that go far beyond the parameters of assuming either an efferent *or* an aesthetic stance – can also be pleasurable for educators, practitioners and interested adults too.

As aforementioned, participants mainly undertook their own research when they perceived the texts to be missing information. The second example I am going to discuss centres Lucas' engagement with Curie's biography (*Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World*). As I noted earlier, when we were discussing the biography of Curie, Lucas identified that the text did not explicitly state how she died:

> *… she could have died because she had that radica- radi- thing beside her when she went to sleep. Says (starts reading from the text) Risky Radiation, Marie liked to sleep beside a gently glowing jar of radium but didn't realise this was dangerous! Marie felt i- ill a lot of the time. We know she was suffering from radiation poisoning (stops reading from the text and looks up). How did she die though? I'm not sure.*

He cited the moment in the text that alludes to her death – *"We know she was suffering from radiation poisoning"* – but seemed unsatisfied by the inexplicitness. He asked, *"How did she die though?"* and answers, *"I'm not sure".* Audibly dialoguing with himself, Lucas attempted to 'fill in' what he perceived to be gaps in the textual information. He resolved to undertake further research on the internet and soon discovered that Curie died from leukaemia. In an online source, he also read, *"In 1995 Marie Curie's a- ashes were enshrined in the Pantheon in Paris. She was the first woman to receive this honour for her own achievement".* He took a short pause. *"Hm. Never knew that".* As with Olivia's discovery about women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia, Lucas seemed to delight in the new knowledge he had generated.

However, Lucas remained unsatisfied by the text's lack of information on how knowledge about the cause of Curie's death came to fruition. He asked, *"How did they figure out how she died though? That's my question. How did, how did they figure out what she died to?"* Repeating the word 'how' three times, Lucas seemed eager to learn how this information had been produced. I answered Lucas' question by explaining that, when people die, autopsies are carried out to ascertain the cause of death. Seemingly satisfied with this response, he noticed the illustration of the chemical symbol, Po, and proceeded to ask what it meant. I hazarded an incorrect guess at potassium (Po is the symbol for polonium). Again, Lucas embarked on his own quest for further knowledge, turning to the internet to find the answer: *"I'm trying to find it. 'Po', 'Po', 'Po', 'Po' (short pause) 'Po', 'Po' where's 'Po'? (Laughing) I can't find it! (Continues laughing)".* Again, the delight Lucas experienced during this engagement was palpable, providing yet another example of the potential presence of pleasure in aestheticritical engagements.

As the title of this theme indicates, my perception is that participants challenged the texts' authority when they felt safe to do so, that is, when they perceived that I had granted them permission. Focusing on particular instances in which participants did embrace more of a critical – or, rather, an aestheticritical – style of engagement, has also highlighted how my own facilitation may have been influential. In addition to asking open questions and using speculative ponderings (Evans 2009: 183), I gently intimated that the texts were not necessarily, straightforwardly 'true', and was careful not to appraise their responses as being either right or wrong (though, at times, I think my eagerness to be encouraging may have been received as me affirming the correctness of their perspectives). I also offered participants hypothetical authority over the texts' development and improvement by asking what alterations they would make, and tried to encourage participants to find points of connection between the texts and their own lives. Although I did not design this study with the intention of initiating and facilitating discussion in this way, my analysis of the data suggests that these actions and approaches did encourage, or have some effect, on participants' engagements with the texts beyond a purely efferent stance.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to demonstrate how, although participants expressed that they perceived the texts as resources for acquiring information, their engagement went far beyond simply extracting knowledge. Instead, their engagement often involved 'an opening of the shutter, so to speak, to admit a broader field of awareness' (Rosenblatt 1981: 23). They engaged critically, and this criticality was often coloured by emotionality. This finding fortifies studies cited in [Chapter 4](#) (Alexander and Jarman, 2015, 2018; Armstrong, 2005; Graff and Shimek, 2020; Griffin, 2010; Heller, 2006; Khieu, 2014; Maynes, 2018; Shimek, 2021; Tower, 2002) that demonstrate how documenting children's multifarious responses to nonfiction can help broaden perceptions of the genre's possibilities and children's experiences with it. In terms of readers' engagement with the new nonfiction, the findings from this study suggest readers can be both resistant and receptive. At times, expectations of the genre seemed to preclude some participants from embracing the less traditional styles while, on other occasions, they seemed to embrace the texts' more innovative and creative approaches.

This chapter has also provided an account of the participants' capacity and propensity for critical engagement. This is hugely important, especially given that the modern world increasingly requires individuals to have the skills to evaluate and problematise sources of information, particularly those online' (Lazim 2020: 34). Recognising children can and do engage critically with information is the first step in ensuring opportunities are created for nurturing their critical capacities.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

Introduction

In this final chapter I summarise the study's findings in relation to the research questions. I outline what I perceive to be the study's main contributions and limitations, develop insights for using the texts in pedagogic contexts, and propose recommendations for further research and research practice. I conclude with some reflections on what I have personally learnt through undertaking this study.

Summary of Findings

This study was guided by one main research question:

> How do eight children, aged 7 to 10, respond to and engage with four biographical compendiums about women published between 2016 and 2020?

I attended to this research question by exploring four supporting research questions. Together, they offer insight into the children's responses and engagement. Below, I summarise my findings for each of these supporting questions.

What are the children's interpretations of the texts?

The children's interpretations of the texts were rich, varied, and multifaceted. Undertaking reflexive thematic analysis enabled me to distil their responses into patterns of shared meaning (themes) organised around central concepts (following Braun and Clarke, 2021: 77). One of the themes I developed encapsulates the idea that participants interpreted the texts as literature for learning. As discussed in the previous chapter, [Efferent Expectations and Aestheticritical Engagements](), their interpretation of the texts as literature for learning appeared to evolve over time. Initially, participants seemed to see the texts as resources from which they could extract knowledge. This resonates with other studies exploring children's engagement with biographies (Armstrong, 2005; Griffin, 2010; Zarnowski, 1988). Participants' reported desire for knowledge was a key driver in their engagement with the texts and they often chose to engage with biographies that focussed on topics that interested them.

In my discussion of the theme, permissive questioning, I explained how participants started questioning the texts' authority when they perceived I had granted them permission to do so. They still interpreted the texts as literature for learning, but their conception of what this learning might entail seemed to broaden. Their interpretation shifted from perceiving the texts as omniscient, unquestionable narratives to sites where 'active dialogue' (Sanders 2018: 13) could occur, where they could question the texts' factual accuracy, identify vulnerabilities in the texts, and generate further knowledge of the women by undertaking their own research. This has pedagogic implications, which I discuss below when summarising my findings for the fourth supporting research question.

Participants also interpreted the biographical compendiums as texts intended to inspire, consistently demonstrating awareness of the authors' public intent to inspire readers into action. Taking up their expected role as inspirees, participants expressed understanding that they *should* be inspired by the texts and appraised the women for their inspirational qualities. However, as discussed through my elucidation of the theme, affirming and challenging inspirational-ness, the meaning participants attached to the concept of inspirational-ness, was ambiguous. The terms 'inspirational' and 'inspiring' were frequently deployed as catch-all descriptors, evading clear meaning and lacking specificity. Participants' responses indicated that they interpreted the women as inspirational, but what they meant by inspirational was unclear.

This interpretation was further obfuscated in that participants also challenged the women's inspirational-ness. These challenges manifested in two primary ways: through responses that suggested participants struggled to relate to the women's extraordinariness, and through questioning the texts' factual accuracy. For example, some participants suggested that it would be difficult to be like the women. Some expressed the idea that being extraordinary falls squarely within the remit of adulthood, and some challenged the believability of some aspects of the biographies, all of which arguably precluded them from fully embracing the texts' inspirational messaging. These challenges further problematise any notion that participants interpreted the texts as straightforwardly inspirational. Their varied and somewhat contradictory interpretations of the texts' inspirational-ness is indicative that children do not necessarily consume 'inspirational' feminist messaging with detached passivity or acceptance. The responses of children in my study, at least, are suggestive of children's readiness and capacity for

reflecting on and critiquing narratives intended to inspire. This finding is reminiscent of Zarnowski's (1988) observation that, in her study, the biographies' inspirational capacity was not a foregone conclusion for participants. By implication, and as adults, we might reflect on how we are inviting children and young people to engage with feminism and, specifically, feminist role models. My perspective is that by facilitating, or at least inviting, children to grapple with the varying dimensions and complexities of women's lives, we are not only honouring children's capacities for critical engagement, but advancing more holistic and nuanced understandings.

Another prominent feature of the children's interpretations centred on their perceptions of the women as essential, stable selves, characterised by their mastery of certain character traits. As illuminated in the theme, appraising women's *being* rather than their *doing,* the children frequently appraised the women for aspects of their being, most notably, their confidence and bravery. López Estrada (2019) noted a similar pattern of response from students in her advanced English class at the Instituto Technológico de Costa Rica, with students constantly referring to the women in *Good Night Stories* 'as inspiring, amazing, extraordinary, warriors, athletes, independent, strong, bold, and emancipated' (p. 232). I have built on this work by presenting in-depth analysis of how my participants' use of neoliberal discourses that valorise particular character traits is indicative of the power which self-responsibilising narratives hold in this current context; specifically, how character traits such as bravery and confidence are repeatedly instituted as requirements for achieving self-empowerment. I have also suggested that participants' being-orientated interpretations of the women might be indicative of their struggle to relate to the extraordinariness of their doing. As this latter point is connected to the second supporting research question, which focuses on participants' sense of identification or exclusion with the issues, I continue this discussion below.

What are the implications of engaging with the texts in relation to the children's aspirations and sense of identification/exclusion with the issues?

This question is comprised of two parts. The first part relates to how participants spoke about their future aspirations in relation to the texts, while the second part is concerned with how participants identified with, or felt excluded from, issues foregrounded in the texts. I have intimated that although participants repeatedly appraised women for

being brave, confident and inspirational, these responses do not translate to a straightforward identification with the women and their extraordinariness. In fact, my interpretation is that participants struggled to relate to the women's extraordinariness, perhaps perceiving the women as extraordinary yet unrelatable, and their achievements as impressive yet currently unattainable. This is an important and potentially a rather provocative finding for it implies that the strategy employed by these texts – to inspire children into action by presenting them with 'ordinary' women whom they can relate to – is not as effective as perhaps hoped or presumed. This is because, ultimately, although many of the biographies emphasise the ordinariness of the women, the women appear in the books precisely because they have done something deemed extraordinary! And, crucially, it is this extraordinariness that is spotlighted and celebrated in the texts.

Participants seemed more inclined to identify with issues raised in the biographies, such as environmental issues and gender stereotyping, rather than with the women themselves. Through my questioning, they were able to draw parallels between their own lives and experiences, and the lives and experiences of the women. Yet, again, this did not seem to translate to them identifying with the women themselves. Although participants did find points of connection and identification with some of the women, these connections seemed to be tempered by their struggle to relate to the more extraordinary aspects of the women's lives. It thus follows that the celebration and promotion of extraordinariness, even (or especially) when under the guise of ordinariness, requires re-consideration. That readers cannot easily identify with the individuals set forth as role models on account of their extraordinariness, which they tended to perceive as unattainable, should prompt reflection on whether dazzling promotions of extraordinariness should be heralded as one of the prevailing approaches for inspiring action.

As outlined in my discussion of the theme, justice as fairness, one participant's response to the *Little Leaders* series suggests that he might have felt excluded by the texts' celebration of women's and Black men's extraordinariness. Mickael observed that Harrison's biographical series did not include a compendium about white men, and he perceived this to be deeply unfair. This, coupled with Conor's assertion that when, on the rare occasions men do appear in the biographies about women they are cast as villains, incites urgent questions regarding how boys perceive their involvement, position and

responsibility in relation to feminism. The notion that boys might feel excluded by (representations of) feminism and expressions of feminist ideas is uncomfortable and complex, but I suggest that it requires urgent and thoughtful attention as noted by Sophie King-Hill and David Russell (2023):

> Quite rightly there has been a focus upon young women and girls of late and how they negotiate the evolving nature of femininity and womanhood. Yet, there has been little focus upon boys and how masculinity fits – or should evolve – in conjunction with this (King-Hill and Russell 2023: para. 4).

Writing on the toxic influence of Andrew Tate, a notorious social media personality who has attracted a significant following among young boys through touting extreme misogyny, King-Hill and Russell (2023) assert that, even though we might not like what they tell us about how they are feeling, 'we need to start listening to boys and not shut them out of the conversations on gender and equality' (para. 11). King-Hill and Russell advocate for greater access to resources that include a focus on boys and their perspectives. My data further substantiates the claim that boys need to be included in feminist advocacy and activism, while being supported to recognise and question their relative positions of power and privilege; relative because boys' gender identity, of course, intersects with other axes of identity including sexual orientation, race and class.

This is an important finding, especially given that no other studies attending to children's engagement with biographies about women pay specific attention to boys' responses. A recent literature review undertaken as part of the Global Boyhood Initiative finds that forms of 'masculinity politics' which have been emerging since the 1980s 'portray men and boys (specifically, white, heterosexual ones) as in crisis, victimised by feminism and social justice movements and now suffering 'reverse discrimination' compared to women and racial and sexual minorities' (Equimundo 2022: 12). In these discourses of male victimisation, boys and men are, necessarily, cast as 'other', as outsiders to feminist initiatives and agendas. Banet-Weiser's work on 'popular misogyny' (Banet-Weiser, 2018a; Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016) underscores the dangers attached to this discursive framing. 'Popular misogyny is, at its core, a basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms' (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016: 172). I am not suggesting that the boys' responses in my study come anywhere close to constituting popular misogyny, but they do offer some insight into the types of discourses that might signal boys' exclusion or perceived exclusion from feminism.

With regard to the first part of this research question, participants' articulations of their future aspirations contrasted starkly with the representation of women in the texts, in which their extraordinary achievements in a single area of speciality are foregrounded. When I asked participants how they imagined their future lives, they either said they did not know, they focussed on how they wanted to be (Darcy said she wanted to be kind, for example), or they expressed a desire to do a range of things (recall that Sofia said she wanted to have a 'multi-job'). There thus seemed to be a chasm between the nature of the participants' aspirations and the nature of the aspirational narratives set forth in the biographies. I have interpreted these responses as participants resisting the notion of specialising in one area, and suggested that their lack of identification with the women's extraordinariness may have informed this resistance.

How does the children's engagement with the texts impact or inform how they make sense of gender/gendered subjectivities?

Prior to data gathering, I had assumed that my conversations with participants would be, predominantly, about gender. Having spent a number of years ruminating over these texts as objects of popular feminism, the topic of gender loomed large in my mind. However, it quickly became apparent that issues pertaining to gender were not central to participants' responses and engagement. For example, when I asked what they thought about the texts containing biographies about women only, they responded with almost unanimous apathy. The fact that the biographies were about women seemed of little interest to them. They expressed far greater interest in the topics associated with the biographies. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, Conor was enthralled by the biography of the ethologist, Ingeborg Beling, in *Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet* because he had an interest in bees. Nonetheless, participants' responses to and engagement with the texts do provide some insights into how the texts may have impacted or informed how they made/make sense of gender/gendered subjectivities. Specifically, their engagement seemed to extend their understandings of gender as something that is affective, something that has ramifications for what individuals can do, be, express, and desire.

Firstly, it is important to note that participants' responses imply that they understood gender as a binary, though it is unclear to what extent this was impacted by their

engagement with the texts. Their responses may have been informed by my questioning which, at times, instituted this binary. For example, I asked participants what they thought about men and women's biographies being presented in different books. Of course, the fact that most children's biographical compendiums are gendered perpetuates gender binarism as legitimate knowledge – the categorisation of men and women is upheld as the normal or naturalised way to categorise and make sense of people in the world. García-González (2020) suggests that, instead of 'focusing on instilling gender perspectives by presenting models of remarkable lives', gender should be thought of 'as a problem to be addressed in all narratives and epistemological productions' (p. 59). García-González implies that the production of gendered, biographical compendiums affects readers' understandings of gender, precluding any problematisation of the binary and promoting gendered sensibilities. She notes, for example, that compendiums about men (for boys) promote valuing difference, while compendiums about women (for girls) promote self-empowerment (García-González, 2020). It is difficult to say to what extent participants' engagement with the texts affected their understanding of gender as a binary, but my analysis of the data offers no indication that their engagement facilitated or incited any challenge to this understanding.

Participants' responses intimate that they perceived gender as something that can cause, or can be the cause of, unwanted or injurious effects. They viewed gender as obstructive to women receiving fair treatment. For example, participants expressed an understanding that women had been under-represented in literature and that the women presented in the texts had experienced unfair treatment on account of their gender. Throughout, their responses indicated that much of the information they were engaging with in the biographies was new to them, and that while they may have already had some understanding of women's under-representation and unfair treatment, their engagement with the texts helped further this understanding.

Some of their responses to my inquiry as to whether they themselves had experienced differential treatment on account of their gender suggest they also recognised – and experienced this – as a contemporary issue. They perceived gender as something that should be irrelevant. As with their perspectives on race, they often suggested that individuals should not be prohibited from doing certain things on account of their gender, yet they discussed how gender negatively impacts their own lives and experiences.

This was not specific to the girls who participated. Harry, Mickael and Conor alluded to how gender norms, expectations and stereotypes affect them. Recall, for example, Harry's passionate address about why he should not be berated for liking the colour pink, just because he is a boy (Chapter 8). It was clear that, for participants, being a boy meant something different from being a girl. This understanding was informed by their engagement with the texts insofar as the texts acted as springboards for these types of discussions.

How might the children's engagement with the texts inform their use in pedagogic contexts?

Although a small-scale study, participants' engagements with the biographical compendiums have raised three potential insights for their use in pedagogic contexts. Here, the phrase 'pedagogic contexts' is inclusive of environments and opportunities outside of traditional school settings, such as in the home and other community spaces, where possibilities for learning exist or can be cultivated. Firstly, the participants' engagements demonstrate that the texts can be used as springboards for discussion on a range of social justice issues. Secondly, they bring to the fore the need for adults to reckon with the emotional intensities and discomforts that can arise during conversations about social justice issues. Thirdly, and of course, relatedly, they provide empirical evidence to bolster claims that nonfiction texts can be powerful resources for fostering young readers' critical engagement (Goga et al., 2021; Graff and Shimek, 2020; Grilli, 2021; Sanders, 2018; Zarnowski, 2019).

As delineated across the themes, particularly justice as fairness and permissive questioning, participants demonstrated both the desire and capability to engage in critical, reflective dialogue on a range of social justice issues. Predominantly, they expressed interest in issues pertaining to gender, race, and the environment. Dialogue on these issues was inspired by the women they read about, many of whom can be regarded as social justice activists or advocates. Throughout my analytic discussion I have used the term 'aestheticritical' to capture the emotional dimensions of participants' critical engagement, especially when conversing about social justice issues. Calling attention to the emotionality of readers' responses problematises assumptions regarding nonfiction being for 'efferent' reading only, thus broadening the possibilities for children's

engagement with a genre of texts that has, traditionally, been regarded as serving exclusively informational purposes. This finding resonates with observations reported in Alexander and Jarman (2015; 2018), Graff and Shimek (2020), Heller (2006), Khieu (2014), Maynes (2018), Shimek (2021) and Tower (2002), further underscoring the value of nonfiction as a resource for inspiring dialogue on important issues. Furthermore, through the concept of aestheticriticality I build on these works by providing additional language for exploring and making sense of the emotional dimensions of readers' critical engagements.

There were some occasions when participants' aestheticritical engagements were particularly difficult to navigate. As discussed in the previous chapter, I found Mickael's assertion that Harrison's decision not to write a book about white men was *"probably a little racist"*, hard to hear. I felt deeply uncomfortable and frustrated, and reflected on this exchange in my field work diary:

> I think my discomfort at this point was also to do with my not knowing how to handle inhabiting numerous positions at once – researcher, adult, woman, teacher, human… I felt unsure of how to best articulate an appropriate response. I remember asking him questions in response – my way of encouraging him to think differently? Should I have done this? […] Was he agitated and/or defensive? Was he reflecting and thinking? Was he calm and nonchalant? (Excerpt from field work diary, 19-12-2020).

My litany of questions is indicative of the uncertainty I felt during and after this exchange. I was unsure how to react and respond in the moment, and my uncertainty persisted long after data gathering had ended. Amanda Keddie (Keddie, 2021; 2022; Keddie and Bartel, 2020; Keddie et al., 2023) has written extensively on the need for educators to reflect on how they navigate the emotional intensities of what she terms, 'gender transformative pedagogy', which involves opening up conversations about gender justice with boys and men. Focusing on the significance of pedagogic discomfort, mutual vulnerability, and strategic empathy and ethical self-reflection (Keddie, 2022), Keddie's work provides a helpful starting point for educators and other interested adults. I have expertise in gender theory and feminist scholarship, and have been an educator for over ten years. The sheer panic, discomfort and uncertainty I experienced during this interaction has alerted me to the need for greater awareness of the emotional intensities inherent in conversations

about gender justice to which Keddie and others (Kuby, 2012; Lewis, 2020; Xu, 2021) have called attention to.

Finally, analysis of participants' engagement with the biographical compendiums has yielded pedagogic insights centring on fostering children's critical engagement. However, I suggest that encouraging and supporting children's critical engagement with different types of texts is vital, especially given increasing levels of misinformation and uncertainties about what sources can be trusted when presenting historical events, social analysis, biographical information, or visual documentation (Goga et al. 2021: 2). Alarmingly, while

> … critical literacy is often taught in schools in relation to news, social media and textbooks, little educational and academic attention has been paid to other text sources, such, as children's and YA nonfiction books and nonfiction picturebooks, which may be studied in school, but are most often read freely at home by curious young readers (Goga et al. 2021: 2).

This is lamentable given that, as various scholars have pointed out in recent years, and as noted above, nonfiction affords many opportunities for critical engagement (Graff and Shimek, 2020; Grilli, 2021; Sanders, 2018; Zarnowski, 2019). For example, Sanders (2018) presents a framework for evaluating a nonfiction text's capacity to invite or rebuff critical engagement, discussing three hallmarks at length: the voice of a book (the use of hedges and a dramatisation of debate between sources, for example), emphasis on characters' flaws and mistakes, and the use of peritexts (sidebars, notes for teachers, lists of sources, etc.). Graff and Shimek (2020) discuss how contemporary nonfiction is 'remixing the role of the nonfiction reader by directly addressing readers, revising notions of novice and expert' (p. 226) and inviting readers to critically participate with authors. With a particular focus on biography, Zarnowski (2019) offers three types of 'clues' that can help readers identify an author's unique standpoint: repetition of the author's perspective throughout the biography, the difference in representation across different biographies of the same person, and hints in the author's note – 'it is here that authors often share their personal interests in the subjects and describe how these interests grew and developed over time' (p. 149). Clearly, and as supported in this study, children's nonfiction is a treasure trove of opportunity for fostering critical engagement.

In the works cited above, the scholars are interested, primarily, in the nonfiction text. Hence they only touch briefly on the influence of adult involvement in facilitating critical engagement, if at all. For example, in his concluding chapter, Sanders (2018) states that while children can and do engage critically without adult intervention, adults can help (p. 228). Furthermore, Sanders (2018) argues that adults should actively invite children to critically engage: it is good for children and adults alike, 'because doing so is democratic, respectful and humanizing' (p. 230), but his focus is not on what form such adult intervention might take. Similarly, in their observations of young readers' engagement with nonfiction texts in two schools in the southeastern US, Graff and Shimek (2020) note that students' responses reminded them 'of the possibilities when students are allowed to move beyond expected, assessment-driven responses to nonfiction' (p. 231). Although we are told that the students' responses were self-initiated, Graff and Shimek's use of the word 'allowed' suggests there was at least a granting of permission from the teachers; an intentional opening of space that facilitated responses beyond the boundaries of traditional expectations. However, it is unclear what this opening of space looked like in practical terms.

This said, there is a growing interest in exploring how adults can help facilitate children's critical engagement with nonfiction, including how to support them in challenging understandings of the genre's unwavering fidelity to 'truth' (Yenika-Agbaw, Hudock and McKoy Lowery, 2018; Yenika-Agbaw, McKoy Lowery, Hudock and Ricks; 2018; Yenika-Agbaw, McKoy Lowery and Ricks, 2018; Zarnowski and Turkel, 2012).[16] As Zarnowski and Turkel (2012) argue, how students think about knowledge (their 'personal epistemology') matters to educators: 'Do they see knowledge as certain and unchanging? Simply a matter of personal opinion? Open to discussion, debate, and change? These ideas about knowledge affect students' learning and their expectations about what people do in order to learn' (p. 30). In a series of three books published in 2018, Yenika-Agbaw and colleagues provide a compilation of educational guidance and resources to support educators in cultivating children's critical engagement with nonfiction. In *Does Nonfiction Equate Truth?* (2018), Yenika-Agbaw asks:

> How do we support [young readers] to cultivate critical mind-sets that may
> help to maximize the use of their creative imagination to afford them more

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[16] 'Yenika-Agbaw et al.' has not been used for the 2018 citations as each of the three texts is edited by a slightly different team.

opportunities to participate in truth seeking and truth making, as informed readers who engage in dialogue with texts, authors who create texts, and researchers who are committed to inquiry? How do we foster a culture and/or attitude of scepticism that may enable them to refrain from the culture of consumerism, which often predisposes us—learners—to accepting nonfiction contents as truth? (Yenika-Agbaw 2018: 7-8).

The emphasis Yenika-Agbaw places on truth making, inquiry, and fostering scepticism exemplifies this burgeoning commitment to cultivating young readers' critical engagement with nonfiction.

While I was interested in the pedagogic implications arising from my study (as per this supporting research question, how might the children's engagement with the texts inform their use in pedagogic contexts?), I was not aiming to explore the effects of a particular intervention devised to facilitate critical engagement. It is only in hindsight that I have most fully recognised the impact and effects of my participation though, again, this is not to say that adult intervention is requisite for children's critical engagement (Sanders 2018: 228). In their exposition of critical multicultural analysis in children's literature, Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman (2009) write that 'children become more and more adroit at critically engaging with texts and images' when they are supported by teachers and other adults, older siblings and peers (p. 11). Not only was this my perception during data gathering, but the formal analysis I undertook and development of the theme, permissive questioning, in particular, strongly affirms this point.

This theme encapsulates a repeated occurrence within the dataset – that, with reassurance that it is 'okay' to do so, participants questioned the factual accuracy of the texts. While participants did, at times, question the texts' authority without much facilitation or prompting on my part, there was a notable increase in this type of critical engagement when I asked open-ended questions to seek their perspectives (for example, when I asked what approach they would take if they were the author); when I gently intimated that the information in the texts was not necessarily true, and when I used 'speculative ponderings' (Evans 2009: 183) to create space for rumination and debate. Rather than being passive recipients of information, participants called the texts' authority into question. At times, this led to participants initiating self-guided research on topics that interested them. The pedagogic implications of this finding are exciting, for it

suggests that when readers' expectations of nonfiction are turned on their head, self-directed, critical engagement can flourish.

Main Contributions

Overall, this study makes four main contributions. The first is methodological. Inadvertently, through the physical distancing measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the study has provided insight into some of the challenges and opportunities of conducting reader response studies at a physical distance. Prior to the pandemic, almost all reader response studies had taken place in person, usually in classrooms or other educational settings. This study demonstrates that there are other possibilities. The synchronous, online interviews and reading sessions proved to be an effective tool in facilitating insight into participants' responses to and engagement with the texts. Of course, I am not able to assess whether or not an in-person study would have generated different or better data and, as discussed in Chapter 5, Methodology, there were challenges associated with this online mode. Facilitating group discussion was difficult; technological issues sometimes interrupted the flow of conversation; participants who were unfamiliar with Zoom needed help navigating its in-built features, such as the annotation tool; and the restricted field of vision precluded me from having constant awareness of which text participants were engaging with. This said, the participants seemed comfortable and at ease, and we discussed multifarious biographies in sufficient detail to explore my research questions. Furthermore, being able to record and re-watch the interviews and reading sessions enabled me to constantly review and improve my own practice as an interviewer and facilitator (Couceiro, 2021a). As innovative technologies continue to afford new and exciting opportunities for qualitative research, I join scholars such as Hannah Deakin and Kelly Wakefield (2014), Brandy Jenner and Kit Myers (2019), and Amanda Ptolomey and Elizabeth Nelson (2022) in advocating that, for certain projects, drawing on digital tools should be seen as equally valuable if not preferable to the 'gold standard' of in-person interactions.

Ptolomey and Nelson (2022), reimagining moments from their own creative visual research with children from before the COVID-19 pandemic, 'put forward the concept of "methodological alchemy" to describe an orientation towards methods as constantly in processes of becoming, being and unfolding' (p. 687). They advocate for the ongoing

'pursuit of methods which are inclusive, desirable, fantastical, playful, future-oriented, live and in the moment, that engage senses and tactility, and create spaces for the unexpected' (Ptolomey and Nelson 2022: 687). The reader response toolkit meets many of these criteria. Comprised of participants' suggestions and introduced with assurances that they could engage with whichever and as many/few activities as they liked, the method was inclusive and desirable. It prompted participants' development of a variety of 'fantastical', 'playful' and 'unexpected' artefacts (see Appendix 5), which they were excited to tell me about in their interviews. These conversations provided valuable insights into why they had chosen to engage with certain biographies and how they were responding to them.

This said, the freedoms afforded by the toolkit are both permissive and restrictive. As participants are invited to choose their own method(s), it widens the possibilities for how they might respond to texts. However, if participants' engagement with the toolkit is not observed by the researcher, as was the case in my study, potentially meaningful data will go undocumented. This may or may not be significant depending on the study's objectives and the researcher's purpose for using the method. As I developed the toolkit with the view to using participants' artefacts as stimuli for discussion in their interviews, this was not problematic. The toolkit served its purpose and, based on the informal feedback I received from participants, they appreciated having autonomy to choose from a range of methods. Hence I suggest that the toolkit offers a valuable, additional method for scholars to consider when designing and developing reader response studies.

The study's second contribution is theoretical. Building on Rosenblatt's efferent-aesthetic continuum and engaging with scholarship that grapples with how critical responses might fit within or outside of this continuum, I have proposed the term 'aesthetricritical' as a way of capturing the fusion of aesthetic and critical qualities in readers' responses to texts. Many of the studies reviewed in Chapter 4 suggest readers respond to nonfiction texts aesthetically as well as efferently (Alexander and Jarman, 2015; 2018; Armstrong, 2005; Graff and Shimek, 2020; Griffin, 2010; Heller, 2006; Khieu, 2014; Maynes, 2018; Shimek, 2021; Tower, 2002). However, I contend that inadequate attention is given to the critical dimensions of readers' aesthetic engagement, and vice versa. Importantly, aestheticritical does not render calls for a third, critical stance unnecessary (McLauglin and DeVoogd, 2004; Yenika-Agbaw, 1997), or deny the possibility that criticality is

possible within Rosenblatt's continuum (Cai 2008). Rather, it provides language for capturing and spotlighting the fusion of feeling and criticality identifiable in readers' responses to texts. This is important as the 'historic roots of critical literacy are based in the emotional realities of peoples' lives' (Kuby 2012: 32). If these are dismissed or become indiscernible, the power of critical engagement risks curtailment.

Thirdly, the study's findings have provided a foundation for proposing some pedagogic possibilities for the utilisation of these texts. Crucially, these possibilities are firmly rooted in the children's responses to and engagements with the texts. Rather than perceiving the texts as exclusively for knowledge extraction, I have suggested the texts be used as springboards for discussions and knowledge development on social justice issues. Reflection on my own experiences, during and beyond data gathering, has also alerted me to the importance of paying attention to, and preparing for, the emotional intensities and discomforts that can arise during social justice dialogue. In turn, this reflection contributes to efforts focusing on increasing awareness of the emotional complexities inherent in this type of engagement (Keddie, 2021; 2022; Keddie and Bartel, 2020; Keddie et al., 2023; Kuby, 2012; Lewis, 2020; Xu, 2021). Hence I urge educators, youth workers, parents and guardians, and other interested adults, to seriously engage with this aspect of social justice dialogue. Finally, and as discussed in my summary of findings above, the implications of this study provide further fortification for scholarship seeking to highlight the potential of children's nonfiction for fostering readers' critical engagement (Goga et al., 2021; Graff and Shimek, 2020; Grilli, 2021; Sanders, 2018; Zarnowski, 2019).

The study's fourth and final contribution relates to its significance for two neglected areas of research: children's nonfiction and children as consumers of feminist media. In both areas, children's perspectives and contributions are lacking. The findings of this study enrich the growing corpuses of scholarship in both areas, providing important insights into children's engagement. While these findings are clearly not, and are not intended to be, generalisable to all children, they are indicative of what is possible. They provide a window into how some children are responding to and engaging with these texts, which is valuable in and of itself. They have also formed the basis for developing some pedagogic possibilities and raised important questions that warrant further inquiry. It is not simply that because children and young people are capable of expressing their perspectives and engaging with research that we should find ways to facilitate this. I now argue that doing

so is absolutely necessary. If we conceive of the phenomenon under investigation as a gemstone, casting and refracting light in a variety of different ways is essential for gaining a holistic understanding (Mason 2011: 77). Without casting light on children's perspectives and engagement with media produced for them, there are parts of the gemstone that will remain dull and obtuse.

Limitations

Throughout this thesis I have sought to demonstrate the trustworthiness, or credibility (Morrow, 2005), of this research study. I have provided a comprehensive account of my methodological approach, analysed participants' constructions of meaning through paying careful and thoughtful attention to the culture and context within which these constructions occurred (Morrow 2005: 253), and have reported on this analysis with transparency and reflexivity. Of course, this study, nonetheless, has its limitations. A limitation can be defined as 'a point or respect in which a thing, especially a person's ability is limited; a shortcoming or weakness in capability or capacity; a defect or failing' (OED, 2023). The limitations I outline here have been identified in relation to the study's aims and within the boundaries of how Morrow (2005) defines credible, or trustworthy, research.

In my reporting of this study, I have repeatedly emphasised the importance of facilitating and increasing the visibility of children and young people's perspectives. However, as Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2019) argues, 'the decentring of children's literature studies as an adult-centric field preoccupied with representation' can only be achieved through undertaking projects in which children are active contributors to all aspects of the research process (pp. 186-87). Seeking, sharing and spotlighting the myriad of ways children and young people respond to and engage with phenomena is a crucial starting point for decentring adult-centric fields of study. However, this should not be the end goal. While my study is underpinned by many of the core principles of participatory research (see Chapter 5), it has been guided, predominantly, by a top-down approach. Participants contributed ideas for the reader response toolkit and selected which biographies to engage with, but the study and its objectives were of my design. Therefore, although my study achieves its aim in terms of making some children's perspectives more visible, taking a broader outlook that considers the goal of decentring

adult-centric fields exposes how this contribution is limited by its top-down approach which, arguably, was influenced by the study meeting PhD requirements.

The study is also limited by its lack of diversity among participants. This is not because it aims to draw conclusions or generalisations about how children from a range of different racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds respond to and engage with the texts. Underpinned by reader response theory, this study affirms and celebrates the uniqueness and un-generalisability of individuals' responses to texts. However, the lack of diversity among participants restricts the parameters of possible perspectives and responses. Similarly, that my observations of participants' engagement with the texts were temporally and spatially limited (I could not observe their engagement with the texts outside of the interviews and group reading sessions), meant I was only gaining snapshots of their experiences. These snapshots occurred at specific moments in time in specific contexts. As Morrow (2005) points out, for this exact reason, a single data source always has its limitations (p. 255). While this does not render the data invalid or lacking in utility, it does impose parameters around what can be explored. In the same way, the lack of diversity among participants has limited the possible knowledges that could have been constructed and explored.

Finally, although there were advantages to conducting this research from a physical distance – not being 'in the room where it happens' (Ptolomey and Nelson 2022: 686) – this also gave rise to certain limitations. As I noted in my methodology (see Chapter 5), and as I discuss below in Personal Reflections, the restricted field of vision imposed by Zoom was particularly challenging. It was not always clear which text participants were engaging with and when I sought clarification this interrupted the flow of conversation. Furthermore, the difficulties of facilitating group discussions on Zoom with participants who did not know one another had implications for the type of data that could be gathered and analysed. My review of relevant reader response studies (see Chapter 4) revealed that meaning-making is impacted by readers' engagement with other readers (Alexander and Jarman, 2015; Maynes, 2018; Shimek 2021). Hence my study is limited in that the data I gathered was insufficient to fully engage with this aspect of readers' experiences. Had we been in the room together, both of these challenges would have likely been minimised if not entirely eliminated.

Recommendations for Further Research

I stand by the contribution this study makes to enriching understandings of how children respond to and engage with contemporary biographical compendiums about women. At the same time, this thesis has narrow parameters. It outlines my interpretation of how eight children engaged with four books, at a specific moment in time, in a very specific context. The 'story' I have told (Braun and Clarke, 2021) is a valuable one, but there are innumerable other stories that need to be developed and documented. The more insights we gain into how children from different backgrounds, and children with different experiences, engage with biographical texts about women, the deeper and more multifaceted our understandings of children's engagement with these types of texts will be.

With this in mind, my first recommendation for further research is to continue exploring how children are responding to this new wave of biographies. It has been six years since the publication of *Good Night Stories* – the book that, arguably, resurrected children's biography from the ashes – and there are no signs of subsidence in the genre's popularity. As discussed in [Chapter 2](#), children's biographies seem to have found a foothold in school libraries, classrooms and family homes. More studies are needed to understand how children are engaging with these texts so that more pedagogic possibilities can be developed. It would be particularly interesting to explore adolescents' responses to these texts given that, in the UK at least, expectations are placed on young people at around age 14 to make decisions about their future lives and employment aspirations (through having to select subjects to study at GCSE level, for example). I wonder how being closer to adulthood might impact readers' perceptions around the women as viable role models and the texts' capacity for inspiring action. I have suggested that the value of these texts lies in their capacity to incite aesthetic, critical and aestheticritical engagements, and to spark conversations on important social justice issues, but more studies are needed to challenge, extend, and/or support these suggestions.

Further studies focusing on these and other popular feminist media texts produced for children would also engender greater understandings of how young people are engaging with (expressions of) feminism and feminist ideas. Studies might include children's engagement with television programmes, films or other types of literature. Children,

especially girls, are increasingly inundated with calls to be feminists, from books that encourage young readers to follow in the footsteps of inspirational feminists, to t-shirts with 'tiny feminist' emblazoned on the front. As I highlighted in my analysis of contemporary biographies about women (Chapter 6), these calls tend to dovetail with an assurance that good feminist children will lead to a more gender equitable future, that self-empowerment can lead to world-changing action(s). It is startling, however, that so little is known about how children are engaging with these calls, calls that place the future of gender equity firmly on their shoulders. The findings of this study suggest children do not respond with straightforward acquiescence, though the responses of eight children tell us little about whether this does or does not apply more widely. Further research is needed.

García-González (2020) offers some analysis of *Stories for Boys Who Dare to be Different* (Brooks and Winter, 2018), a biographical compendium about men that came to market shortly after Favilli and Cavallo's (2016) *Good Night Stories*. Comparing the two texts, García-González (2020) draws out some interesting differences between the biographies, noting that the women's life stories 'produce models in which girls, in order to accomplish their dreams, must ignore traditional advice and overcome social limitations. Individual rebelliousness is presented as the model to follow in all but a few occasions' (p. 52). Comparatively, 'the book for boys seems to insinuate alternative repertoires: it is not about "big dreams" anymore but about daring to be different' (García-González 2020: 52). Exploring how children might be engaging with and responding to contemporary biographies about men would enable deeper exploration of the third supporting research question regarding how children's engagement with the texts impacts or informs how they make sense of gender/gendered subjectivities.

Finally, from a pedagogic perspective, the next logical step would be to explore some of the possibilities I set forth in my answer to the supporting research question, how might the children's engagement with the texts inform their use in pedagogic contexts? Specifically, I have stated that engagement with these texts is not limited to the extraction of information. Rather, they can be used as springboards for discussions and knowledge development on a range of social justice issues. Future studies might seek to further explore this potential, paying particular attention to readers' responses beyond

the efferent pole of the efferent-aesthetic continuum, and perhaps even beyond that continuum itself.

I have also advocated for the texts as valuable resources for fostering children's critical engagement, especially if readers are granted permission to question their authority. As discussed in [Chapter 1](), the new nonfiction affords many opportunities for this, yet very little is known about how young readers are actually responding to the texts' invitations for critical engagement. Research exploring whether and how children are querying the authority of contemporary nonfiction texts could offer an essential contribution to the growing body of scholarship that analyses contemporary nonfiction's capacity for critical engagement (Goga et al., 2021; Graff and Shimek, 2020; Grilli, 2021; Sanders, 2018; Zarnowski, 2019).

Personal Reflections

I have learnt a lot through designing and undertaking this study. In hindsight, there are some things I would have done differently during data gathering, including setting clearer expectations with parents and guardians regarding their role. Although I created a bespoke information sheet for parents and guardians (see [Appendix 3]()), emphasising what I anticipated their role to include, I could have followed up on these points in our initial conversations. For example, in the excerpt below (Figure 10), the point on the far-right reads, 'If your child doesn't have an email address it would be helpful to have yours'. In reality, parents and guardians were required to correspond with me quite a lot. They needed to reply to emails regarding the logistics of the interviews and group reading sessions, and they sent me photographs and videos of the artefacts their children had created through engagement with the reader response toolkit.

Figure 10 – Excerpt from information sheet for parents/guardians

Throughout, I was conscious that parents and guardians might feel overburdened by this mediator role, noting in my field work diary: 'I am anxious about requesting too much time of participants and their parents/guardians […] I do not want to overburden parents/guardians in their mediator role' (excerpt from field work diary, 16-09-2020). No one gave any indication that they did feel overly burdened, but when undertaking research with children in the future I will err on the side of caution, over-estimate the extent of adult involvement, and set realistic expectations.

Certainly, the stresses, uncertainties and pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic heightened my awareness that participating in the study could feel burdensome for participants and their parents or guardians. As discussed in Chapter 5, I was mindful of this and repeatedly checked the children's willingness to participate. However, it was primarily for this reason – not wanting to overburden families – that I decided to facilitate just two reading sessions with each group. One of the consequences of this decision was that participants did not have ample time to build relationships with one another. Ad-hoc conversations could not occur 'on the side' as they might do in face-to-face, group settings, precluding participants from getting to know one another well. As a result, conversations tended to follow a question-answer format led by me, rather than being a free-flowing dialogue among participants. Furthermore, as it is impossible to hear more than one person talking at once on Zoom, turn-taking is a requirement. 'Although it would not have been desirable for participants to be constantly talking over one another, this type of turn-taking did incite what felt like a more contrived and mechanical structure of conversation' (Couceiro 2021a: para. 3).

Aware that engaging in dialogue with others is an important part of readers' meaning-making (Arizpe, Noble and Styles, 2023; Braid and Finch, 2015; Chambers, 1993; Maine, 2015), I implemented a number of strategies to try to instigate more group discussions in the reading sessions. These included inviting participants to ask one another questions, and using some of the in-built features on Zoom, such as the interactive whiteboard, to encourage collaboration. These strategies were somewhat successful and dialogue between participants did increase slightly. However, I think this dialogue could have occurred more serendipitously had participants had more time to become familiar and build relationships and with one another. Although I have been unable to consider communal meaning-making to the extent that I had wanted, on balance, undertaking two reading sessions per group felt appropriate. In future, I will anticipate the difficulties of facilitating group discussions over videoconferencing and adjust my plans and expectations accordingly.

In hindsight, I would have also been more proactive in addressing the restricted field of vision imposed through the videoconferencing platform. As discussed above, one of the study's limitations is that I did not always have clear visibility of what text(s) participants were engaging with. Although this was rectifiable through asking participants to hold the book up or to relay what page number they were on, as noted above, this interrupted the flow of conversation. At the start of every interview and reading session I should have asked participants to position their cameras so that I had a better vantage point from which to view their engagement. This would have also made identifying nonverbal cues slightly easier. I was vigilant in constantly observing for signs of discomfort, but the restricted field of vison imposed by the camera meant I could not know whether a participant was tapping their foot or shaking their leg, for example. Depending on the type of technological device participants had access to, creating a totally unrestricted field of vision might not have been possible. However, I could, at the very least, have asked participants to move backwards so that the field of vision was slightly wider.

Following data gathering, I spent four months transcribing. For the most part, this was time well spent as I became intimately familiar with the participants' words. However, I could have used my time more efficiently had I determined, earlier on, the type of details I required in the transcripts. My codebook of transcription conventions (see Appendix 7)

is indicative of the detail I documented (for example, [Looks ↑] and [Looks ↓] to signal when participants looked towards the camera and when they looked down towards the text). It transpired that I did not need this level of detail for my analysis, as I always re-watched the relevant part of the recording when tending to a particular data item. As William Gibson and Adam Brown (2009) note, the 'transcription acts as a kind of shorthand version of the data that is more practical to work with than the data itself' (p. 3). This is exactly how I used the transcripts – as shorthand versions, or, as I often visualised, as a set of maps that orientated me towards certain parts of the recorded data. To maximise time and efficiency, in future research projects I will experiment with transcribing a small portion of the data and undertaking some pilot analysis to work out how much detail is required before transcribing the entire dataset.

Aside from ruminating over what I could or should have done differently, I have also reflected on what I have learnt through designing and undertaking this study. Principally, I have learnt the value of crossing disciplinary lines when seeking to expand knowledges and generate new perspectives. As discussed in [Chapter 5](), the COVID-19 pandemic prompted me to find alternative methods for exploring participants' responses to and engagement with the biographical compendiums. It was through traversing different disciplinary fields that I stumbled across the cultural probe method in the field of human-computer interaction design, which I re-purposed to create the reader response toolkit. Prior to this, I had never considered engaging with this field. In fact, I had never heard of it. This experience taught me that if we frequent unfamiliar spaces and peer 'outside the parameters of expected and ingrained ways of "doing", unexpected questions and valuable new directions will undoubtedly and necessarily emerge' (Couceiro 2020: 43).

For me, this lesson was further reified through integrating different bodies of scholarship from varying disciplines to make sense of my data. Specifically, I found that bringing theories and ideas from the field of feminist media and cultural studies to the discipline of children's literature enabled me to generate new, novel perspectives. Seeing the biographical compendiums as objects of popular feminism, for example, created space for understanding how responsibilising, neoliberal discourses in the texts were being drawn upon by participants to appraise the women. Similarly, bringing reader response theory to feminist media and cultural studies provided a helpful lens through which to view responses to literary objects of popular feminism. Attending a feminist media conference

where I was the only children's literature scholar illuminated the need for, and value of, this kind of cross-disciplinary work.

During my PhD programme I was fortunate enough to undertake an internship at the UK Government's Department for Education. I reflected on this experience in a blog post titled 'My Policy Internship: A Lesson in Range' (Couceiro, 2021b). The main thread running through this reflection piece relates to this idea of crossing disciplinary lines and engaging with a range of approaches and perspectives. During the internship I spent three months working in the Strategy Unit, which was comprised of individuals from a variety of disciplines including technology, education, economics, sociology and behavioural science. I experienced, first-hand, the value of embracing range: a range of knowledge, a range of skill and a range of perspectives. This experience reminded me of my PhD study, in which I was trying to incorporate range through engaging with different disciplines and various bodies of scholarship. I came to realise that being an expert in numerous of disciplines is not necessary, but considering problems from a range of perspectives could be helpful for determining what my specialist knowledge offers and where it might need reframing or further reinforcement (Couceiro 2021b: para. 6).

I recognise that embracing a totally unbound, pliable and multi-disciplinary approach to research is not always appropriate. Somewhere, a line needs to be drawn if research studies are not to lack clear focus and become unwieldly. Knowing where this line should or could be drawn is not straightforward, and learning how to set effective parameters when researching different phenomena is something I will remain attuned to as I progress through my career.

Final Thoughts

As I described in [Chapter 1](), one of my initial motivations for designing this study was to satisfy my own curiosities about how children were responding to the recent proliferation of biographies about women. I was also strongly motivated by a desire to increase the visibility of children's perspectives on literature produced for them. Although this study has focused on a very small segment of children's publishing and the experiences of only eight children have been considered, this thesis goes some way to achieving this aim. I have relished opportunities to tell friends and family, audience members at academic

conferences, and university students in lecture halls about the surprising and unexpected ways the children responded to these texts. My accounts have often been met with reactions akin to, "really? I wasn't expecting that!", adding further credence to the claim that continuing attention needs to be given to making children's experiences with literature, especially nonfiction, more visible. While this study is humble in its size and scope, it nonetheless offers a valuable contribution to the evolving corpus of scholarship that places children's responses at the centre.

Deliverance of this study has also resulted in a number of other contributions I had not anticipated. It has demonstrated that reader response studies can be undertaken at a physical distance. It has added to existing scholarly debate around where and how criticality fits within or beyond Rosenblatt's efferent-aesthetic continuum, proposing aestheticriticality as a potential descriptor for illuminating the fusion between readers' emotional and critical engagements. It has provided findings that enrich areas of scholarship in which children's perspectives are sorely lacking. I have been honest about the study's limitations, noting where further consideration and reflection is needed, and suggesting several promising avenues for further exploration.

Has my curiosity about children's responses to contemporary biographies about women been satisfied? As interesting, insightful and instructive as Harry, Conor, Sofia, Darcy, Mickael, Lucas, Orla and Olivia's responses were, I believe this study has, *excitingly*, only scratched the surface. My curiosity remains.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Sheet for Lower Reading Level

Participant Information Sheet

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

Exploring Children's Responses to and Engagement with Feminist Biographical Illustrated Books

My name is Louise and I am a PhD student at the University of Glasgow. I would like to invite you to take part in a research project.

I am interested in learning about how children read books about women, like this one!

What will happen if you take part?

ONLINE INTERVIEW
We'll talk about how you find reading

→

POST
4 books will arrive!

→

ONLINE GROUP READING SESSIONS
We'll look at the books and talk about what you think

↓

ACTIVITIES based on the books! In your own time you can draw, build, write, make things...

←

SEND ME PHOTOS of what you've done

←

ONLINE INTERVIEW
You can tell me about your creations

What happens after the project?

I will look at the my notes, the interview recordings, reading session recordings and the photographs you sent me!

This is called **RESEARCH DATA**

I will write about what I learnt. In the future, I might write books and articles, and give presentations.

What else do you need to know?

You can change your mind at any time!

If you have any ideas for the activities or interview questions I would love to hear them!

I would like to **video record** the interviews & reading sessions so that I can remember what we talked about

If I hear or see anything that makes me worried about your **safety** I will need to talk to somebody

At the end of my PhD I will delete the **research data** that has clues about who you are. You can decide what happens to the data that uses your made-up name

I will keep your **contact information** safe and delete it at the end of the project

When writing about the project I will choose a **made-up name** for you and check that you're happy with it. I will do my best to keep your identity a secret, but this might not be possible

Please **contact me** if you have any questions!

Researcher	Louise Couceiro
Primary Supervisor	Barbara Read

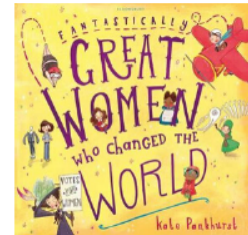# Appendix 2: Information Sheet for Higher Reading Level

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Exploring Children's Responses to and Engagement with Feminist Biographical Illustrated Books

Who am I and why am I doing this project?

My name is Louise and I am a PhD student at the University of Glasgow. I am researching how children respond to nonfiction books about women. The results could be helpful for people, like teachers, who want to use these books in their classrooms. I would love to invite you to take part!

What will be involved for you?

On 'Zoom' we will have an **interview** to talk about your reading habits and experiences

→ **4 books will come in the post!**

→ We will have 2 **group reading sessions** on 'Zoom' to look at the books and talk about what you think

↓

I will email you some ideas for **activities** you can do in response to the books, e.g. drawing, building, writing, photography. You can choose to do as many as you like or think of your own!

← Please **send me photographs** of your creations!

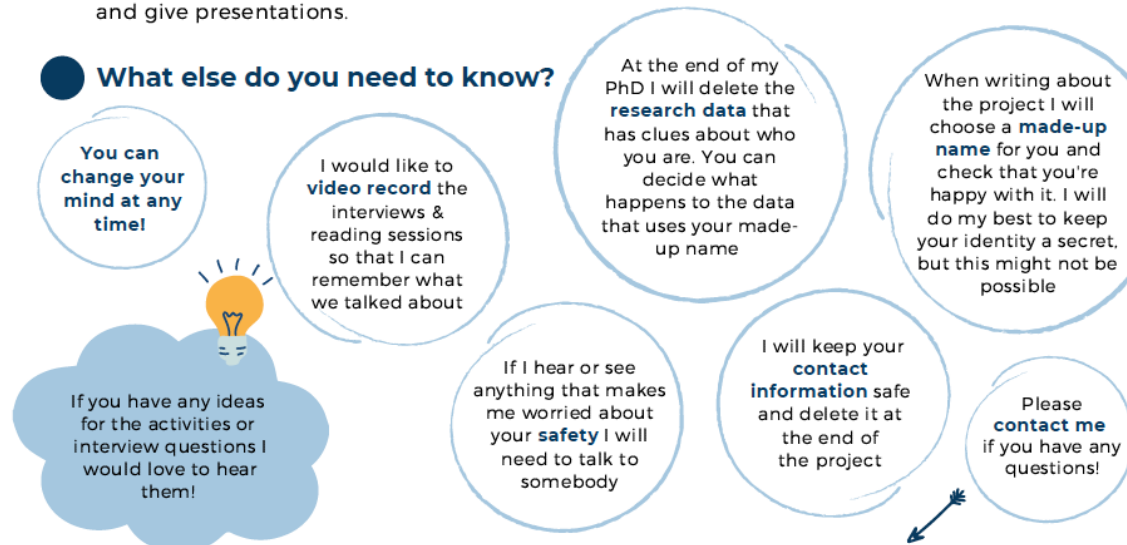← We will have another **interview** to talk about your creations and how you found the project

What happens after the project?

I will analyse my notes, the interview recordings, reading session recordings and the photographs you sent me. I will write my thesis (a long document for my PhD degree). I also hope to share what I've learnt at conferences and in books/articles.

This is called **RESEARCH DATA**

What else do you need to know?

I would like to **video record** the interviews & reading sessions so that I can remember what we talked about

If you have any ideas for activities or interview questions I would love to hear them!

I will keep your **personal data** (like your contact information) safe and delete it at the end of the project

At the end of my PhD I will delete the **research data** that has clues about who you are. You can decide what happens to the data that includes your made-up name

If I hear or see anything that makes me worried about your **safety** I will need to talk to somebody

You can change your mind at any time!

When writing about the project I will choose a **made-up name** for you and check that you're happy with it. I will do my best to keep your identity a secret but this might not always be possible

Please **contact me** if you have any questions!

Researcher	Louise Couceiro
Primary Supervisor	Barbara Read

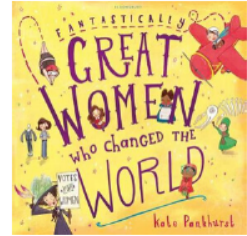# Appendix 3: Information Sheet for Parents/Guardians

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

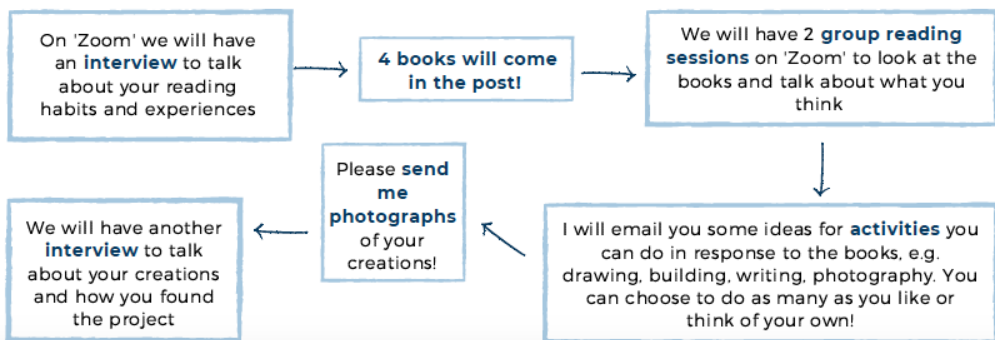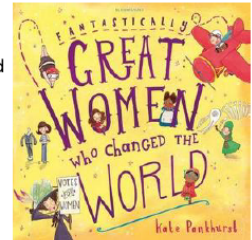## Participant Information Sheet

Exploring Children's Responses to and Engagement with Feminist Biographical Illustrated Books

Parents & Guardians

Who am I and why am I doing this project?

My name is Louise and I am a PhD student at the University of Glasgow. I am researching how children respond to nonfiction books about women and would like to invite your child(ren) to take part in the project. The findings could be helpful for people, like teachers, who want to use these books in their classrooms.

What will be involved for you & your child(ren)?

On 'Zoom' we will have an **interview** to talk about your reading habits and experiences

Please look at the books yourself to check you're happy with the content

4 books will come in the post!

We will have 2 **group reading sessions** on 'Zoom' to look at the books and talk about what you think

You may need to help your child(ren) with using 'Zoom' & emailing me the photos

Please **send me photographs** of your creations!

If your child doesn't have an email address it would be helpful to use yours

We will have another **interview** to talk about your creations and how you found the project

The activities shouldn't require any assistance from you! It's up to you if your child(ren) want you to get involved

I will email you some ideas for **activities** you can do in response to the books, e.g. drawing, building, writing, photography. You can choose to do as many as you like or think of your own!
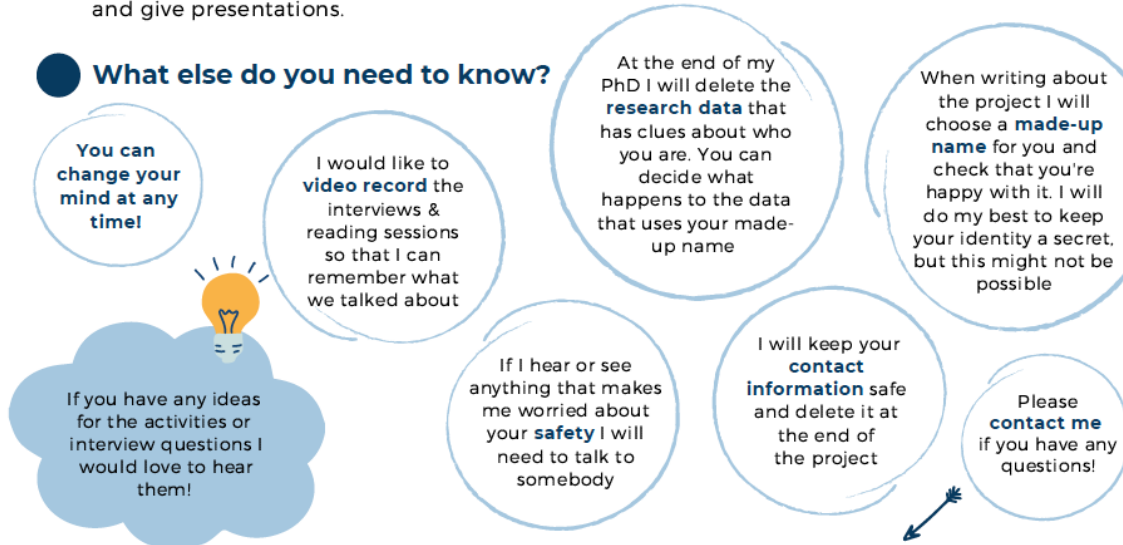
What happens after the project?

I will look at the my notes, the interview recordings, reading session recordings and the photographs you sent me!

I will write about what I learnt. In the future, I might write books and articles, and give presentations.

*This is called **RESEARCH DATA***

What else do you need to know?

You can change your mind at any time!

I would like to **video record** the interviews & reading sessions so that I can remember what we talked about

At the end of my PhD I will delete the **research data** that has clues about who you are. You can decide what happens to the data that uses your made-up name

When writing about the project I will choose a **made-up name** for you and check that you're happy with it. I will do my best to keep your identity a secret, but this might not be possible

If you have any ideas for the activities or interview questions I would love to hear them!

If I hear or see anything that makes me worried about your **safety** I will need to talk to somebody

I will keep your **contact information** safe and delete it at the end of the project

Please **contact me** if you have any questions!

| Researcher | Louise Couceiro |
| Primary Supervisor | Barbara Read |

246

Appendix 4: Sample Consent Form

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Please tick as appropriate

• I have read and understood the information sheet. I have had time to talk to my parents/guardians about it and to ask Louise questions.	Yes ☐	No ☐

I understand that taking part in this project will involve me:

• Taking part in some activities in response to the books I receive in the post	Yes ☐	No ☐
• Emailing photographs of what I have created as part of the activities to Louise	Yes ☐	No ☐
• Taking part in an initial 1:1 interview (around 15 minutes) and another 1:1 interview after the reading sessions (around 45 minutes – 1 hour)	Yes ☐	No ☐
• Taking part in two group reading sessions (around 1 hour each)	Yes ☐	No ☐

I also understand that:

• Taking part in this project is my choice. I can change my mind at any time and I don't have to give a reason	Yes ☐	No ☐
• Louise will collect the interview and reading session video recordings (if consent is given), photographs of things I have created and any notes she has written. This is called 'research data' and Louise will use it to write about the project	Yes ☐	No ☐
• Louise will write about the project for her PhD. She might also share information from the project at conferences and in books/articles	Yes ☐	No ☐
• My name will not be used when Louise writes about the project.	Yes ☐	No ☐

Any information that might allow someone to guess who I am will be changed

- Louise will collect personal data: my (or my parent/guardian's) email address and home address, the interview and reading session video recordings (if consent is given) and the consent form. Louise will also create a list that matches participants' names with with their made-up names, and storing this safely and securely — Yes ☐ No ☐

- Louise will store the research data and personal data safely and securely. Only she and her supervisors will be able to see it. Louise will destroy the personal data and any research data where participants are identifiable as soon as she has finished her PhD — Yes ☐ No ☐

- If Louise is worried about my safety or wellbeing she will talk to somebody about this — Yes ☐ No ☐

I agree to:

- The reading sessions and interviews being video recorded — Yes ☐ No ☐

- The de-identified research data being kept in an online archive (called UKDA) for other people to look at:
  - Interview & reading session transcripts — Yes ☐ No ☐
  - Photographs of artefacts — Yes ☐ No ☐

- Louise keeping a copy of the de-identified research data on a secure memory card for future projects — Yes ☐ No ☐

For parent/guardian:

- I agree to contact Louise within 7 days of the books arriving if I am unhappy with any of the content and would like to request an alternative/alternatives — Yes ☐ No ☐

....
Participant name   Signature   Date

....
Parent/guardian name   Signature   Date

....
Researcher name   Signature   Date

Appendix 5: List of Artefacts Created by Participants

Harry	Collection of photographs of Harry baking and poetry he had written (inspired by Cora Coralina)
Conor	Drawing of Ingeborg Beling
Darcy	Letter to Ashley Fiolek
	Drawing of Anne Frank
	Drawing of Eugenie Clark
Sofia	Drawing of Policarpa Salavarrieta
	A hand puppet of Policarpa Salavarrieta delivering a monologue
Orla	Baked gingerbread shaped in the image of Frida Kahlo's face
	Dance routine based on the biography of Boudicca
	Comic strip based on the biography of Malala Yousafzai
	Performed monologue in the role of Cleopatra
	PowerPoint presentation on Nefertiti
Lucas	LEGO model of Hillary Clinton
	Redesigned front cover of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (made of paper triangles)
	Written review of the books
Mickael	Comic strip based on the biography of Rosa Parks
	Silent LEGO movie based on the biography of Rosa Parks
	Redesigned front cover of *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World* (drawing)
Olivia	Play script based on the biography of Manal al-Sharif*

*Olivia did not send a copy of this to me, but we discussed it in her main interview.

Appendix 6: List of Guiding Questions for Interviews

<u>Initial interviews</u>

- Before we talk about reading, what kind of things do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

- How do you find reading?

- On a scale of 1-10, how much do you enjoy reading?

- How about in the past? Have you always enjoyed/not enjoyed reading?

- Do you like reading by yourself? Who do you like reading with?

- Usually, where do you do most of your reading (home/school)?

- What kind of things do you read the most?

- Are there any books in particular that you really enjoy? What is it about _____ that you like?

- What about nonfiction? History?

- What about books about women?

- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experiences of reading?

<u>Main interviews</u>

The Reader Response Toolkit

- Tell me how you got on with the activities.

- How did you choose which ones to do?

- Tell me about _____.

- Are there any activities you did not do but would have liked to? What would your [creation] have been like?

The Books

- Tell me about when the books first arrived. What did you think?

- Did any of the books stand out?

- What did you think of the covers? Did they make you want to read them? Why/why not?

- Before you opened the books, what did you think they were going to be about?

- Tell me what happened when you opened the books and the process of choosing which stories to read – flicked through, used the contents pages?

- Have you read them by yourself or with other people?

- Have these books changed your opinion on nonfiction books?

Inspirations and Aspirations

- Why do you think the authors wrote these books? What do you think about that? Was that a good idea? Does it work?

- Who do you think the authors want to read these books? Why?

- What do you think about the title, *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*? Do you think this might put some people off?

- If these books were in your library or classroom at school, how popular do you think they would be? Who would read them? Who would not read them?

- Have you heard of the word 'inspirational'? (Something that moves you to do something. For example, if I see someone running a marathon in a really fast time, that might inspire me to try to run a marathon in a really fast time as well). Do you think these books are inspirational?

- Have these books inspired you? How?

- Is there anything that would make them more inspiring?

- Has reading these books made you think about anything differently?

- Do you think the books give any good ideas for how people should act?

- How easy do you think it is to be like the women in these books?

Peritextual Features

- Have you read the authors' notes in the books? What do you think about those?

- Have you noticed anything at the back of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*? What do you think about this activity (pp. 202-03)? Would you like to do it? Why do you think this is included? What would you write? How would you draw yourself?

- Have you noticed anything at the back of *Little Leaders*? How do you think the author chose which women to include and which ones to put in the back?

- *Little Leaders* – pages on further reading and sources. What do you think about this? Do any of the other books tell you where they got their information? Is this a good idea?

Specific Stories

- I know you were interested in _____ are there any other stories that stood out to you?

- What did you think about when you were reading them?

- Do you find the words or pictures more interesting? Would the words be good without the pictures? Would the pictures be good without the words?

- What do you think _____ is thinking about in the picture?

- What else do you notice about this story?

The Project

- How did you find the project?

- What was your favourite part?

- Do you have any ideas for how the project could be improved?

Wrap-up

- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about how you have found reading these books?

- When I write about this project I am not going to use your real name. How do you feel about me using the name _____? Is there another name you would like me to use?

Appendix 7: Codebook of Transcription Conventions

Verbal

Short pause	(…)
Emphasis	<u>Emphasis</u>
Laughing and laughing quietly	((L)) ((L-quietly))
Long pause	(pause)
Inaudible	(inaudible)
Noise	( )
Comment on voice – my interpretation, e.g., 'assertively' or to describe tone, speed, volume, etc.	{ } – generally, at the moment the change in voice occurs. {Elongates} refers to the word directly following, unless stated otherwise
Non-standard utterances, e.g., 'umm'	the number of letters reflects the length of the utterance, e.g., 'um' signals a shorter utterance than 'ummmm'
Starts reading from the text	^St^
Stops reading from the text	^Stp^
Not certain of the verbal utterance	? ?

Nonverbal

Nonverbal information	[ ] – generally, at the moment the gesture/action begins
Looks down – at the text in front of them, though this is often out of camera view	[Looks ↓]
Looks up – towards the screen, from having been looking at the text in front of them	[Looks ↑]
Puts a thumb up	[Thumb ↑]
Puts a thumb down	[Thumb ↓]
Puts both thumbs up	[B_thumbs ↑]
Puts both thumbs down	[B_thumbs ↓]
Puts hand up	[Hand ↑]
Puts hand down	[Hand ↓]
Picks up book*	[GNS ↑]
Puts book* down	[GNS ↓]
Holds book* up with the front page facing the camera	[GNS ↑c]
Holds book* up with inside page(s) facing the camera	[GNS_MarieCurie ↑c]

Other

Comment box	Text taken from field work diary or relevant participant knowledge
Context/my interpretation	<context/my interpretation>

Texts

Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women	GNS
Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2	GNS2
Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World	FGW-Yellow
Fantastically Great Women Who Saved the Planet	FGW-Green
Little Leaders: Visionary Women Around the World	LL

Appendix 8: Nine-Step Process for Transcription

1. Copy and paste the automated Zoom transcript into a new word document.

2. Delete the line numbers and times (1 / 00:00:02.129 --> 00:00:03.720).

3. Tidy up the verbal communication so that the transcript is verbally accurate. Include non-standard utterances, such as 'umm' and 'ahh', and any pauses (short pause – (…) long pause – *(pause)*).

4. Re-play the recording to ensure you are happy with the transcript at this stage. Ensure you have underlined words that are <u>emphasised</u> by the speaker and have included relevant notes on {voice}.

5. Open a new document and insert a table with three columns (for interviews; six columns for reading sessions) and 250 rows. You can add more if necessary. Label the rows with your name and the name(s) of the participant(s), ensuring the participant(s) are always on the left side. The final column will be used to note timings from the recording.

6. Pin the columnar transcript to the right side of your screen and the vertical transcript to the left. Drag the data from left to right, into the relevant cells.

7. Re-play the recording and insert nonverbal behaviours. For the reading sessions this will mean watching the recording numerous times – each time, watching the nonverbal behaviour of one individual. I have noted nonverbal behaviours that I interpret to be significant, for example, participants may have glanced up in between looking down at the text [Looks ↓] and looking up [Looks ↑] from the text, but these glances are not noted unless deemed relevant and/or meaningful. Also, ensure overlapping speech is presented correctly (in cells opposite one another).

8. Add any relevant notes from your field work diary/knowledge of participants.

9. Write the timing on the recording in the final column at any key moments/natural breaks in the transcript.

Lucas	Orla	Olivia	Mickael	Louise	hh:mm:ss
				Yeah, thank you for sharing that, Mickael.	
	Wow! <Silent; on mute>			Wow. Umm, so, are there any parts of this story that stand out to anybody,	
	[Opens her mouth] <As if she is about to say something>			In particular?	
Umm	[Smiling]	[Hand ↑]			
		[Hand ↓]		Okay, Lucas were you gonna say something?	00:27:27
She can go f- uhh she can go [Holds GNS above his head] <like a tent>		[Looks ↓]			
First (inaudible)				Okay, Olivia go for it!	
	[Playing with a piece of ribbon; running it through her fingers] <Likely the in-built bookmark in GNS: 100 Immigrant Women>	I'm thinking, well it's kind of when she was rushed to hospital.			00:27:34
[Lowers GNS and holds it open in front of himself, out of	It was kind of a bit, sad. Obviously, that				

Appendix 10: Guiding Questions for Discourse Analysis

Adapted from Gee (2011a; 2011b)

When thinking about use of language, consider the following:

Words and Phrases	Grammatical Structures	Cohesive Devices	Intonation Contours
- What specific meanings do listeners have to attribute to these words/phrases given the context and how the context is construed?	- Sentence structure (clauses, subjects, etc.) - Use of direct or indirect quotation	- Pronouns - Determiners and Quantifiers ('the', 'most') - Substitution (words that stand in for those in the previous sentence, to avoid repetition) - Ellipses (when information is left out because it is totally predictable based on what has come before) - Lexical cohesion (use of words that are related to one another, e.g., 'Seminoles', 'Indians') - Conjunctions	- How do speakers' intonation contours contribute to the meaning of an utterance? - What words are emphasised/made salient?

For all questions below, consider:

- How else could this have been said? What does the choice to say it in this way communicate/imply?

Assumed Knowledge

- What is not being said overtly, but is still assumed to be known or inferable?

- How are deictics (pointing words, e.g., 'she', 'this') being used to make assumptions about what is already known?

- What would someone who does not share the knowledge and assumptions find strange?

Identities

- How does the speaker's language treat other people's identities? How does the speaker position others? What identities is the speaker 'inviting' them to take up?

- What socially recognisable identity is the speaker trying to enact/get others to recognise? How is the social language used to achieve this?

Social Goods

- How is language being used to build (construct, assume) what counts as social goods (anything a society takes as a good worth having) and how they are/should be distributed in society?

Intertextuality

- How is language used to quote, refer to, or allude to other texts?

Context

- What is relevant about the context within which the data occurred?
- What circumstances make a certain discourse possible? What circumstances limit the discourse?

Significance

- How is language used to build up or lessen significance for certain things and not others?

Connections and Disconnections

- How is language used to connect/disconnect things? How is it used to make things relevant/irrelevant to other things?

Adapted from Willig's (2013) Approach to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

- What discursive object are you interested in? What are the different ways in which it is constructed in the text?
- What wider discourses are referred to within these constructions? What is their relationship to one another?
- What is gained from constructing the discursive object in this particular way and at this particular time?
- What subject positions do the various constructions of the discursive object offer?

- What are the ways in which discursive constructions and the subject positions contained within them open up or close down opportunities for action? That is, what can be said and done from within these subject positions?
- What can be felt, thought and experienced from within various subject positions?

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