

BOOK REVIEW

Alice Bell, Sam Browse, Alison Gibbons & David Peplow. *Style and Reader Response: Minds, Media, Methods*. Alice Bell, Sam Browse, Alison Gibbons & David Peplow. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2021. e-Book. ISBN 9789027260376

Reviewed by Chloe Harrison (Aston University)

Style and Reader Response: Minds, Media, Methods expertly showcases the value and versatility of empirical reader response methods in contemporary stylistic research. The studies and methodological applications in this collection trace those inherent dialogic connections that exist between text and reader, and convincingly demonstrate that, regardless of whether the data under focused consideration is the literary text or reader responses, reception-oriented research has much to offer stylistic accounts of reading.

The collection is divided into three distinct, though highly interconnected, sections. The first, 'Minds', explores cognitive stylistic approaches to reader response studies. These chapters draw on cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology to situate reading as an embodied, experiential and 'text-driven' process (see Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999). In the first analytical chapter, Peplow and Whiteley study reading group discourse collected from a *Creative Writing in the Community* project which ran in Sheffield in 2011, and explore reticulations and repetitions within the 'co-reading' participant responses to Simon Armitage's poem 'Upon Opening the Chest Freezer'. The study demonstrates how reading is not only dialogic but it is also 'doubly dialogic', as readers engage collaboratively with co-readers and also with the text or author. This chapter opens up and establishes the conversation about contextual and intersubjective reading which underpins the collection as a whole.

The next two chapters similarly consider spoken reader data and extend applications of the Text World Theory framework (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999). Norledge's chapter examines the discourse of a small-scale reading group of the dystopian text 'Pop Squad'. She argues that mind-modelling a focalising consciousness in reading is "a process [which] can [...] be conceived of as an extended form of world-building" (p.57), with fictional characters simultaneously working as world-building objects of study and also as vehicles for forming and framing text-worlds. In the next chapter, Browse applies a think-aloud protocol to investigate the oppositional responses of Labour party members reacting to a Conservative party piece written by Theresa May. Browse moves beyond the

parameters of the stylistic discipline to identify a gap between Critical Discourse Analysis and critical stylistics on the exploration of responses to political discourse, and argues that supplementing Text World Theory with concepts from Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987, 1991) creates a rounded “cognitive model of critical reception” (p.77). The final chapter in this section by Vaeßen and Strasen sees a movement away from the former text-driven accounts to provide a more theoretically-driven reflection on the role of cultural models and associated schematic knowledge in processes of character conceptualisation, destabilisation and reification.

The second section, ‘Media’, continues to present combined theoretical approaches to the reception of texts which cross genre categories. Gibbons explores a fictional art retrospective, an exhibition which is in fact an “ontological hoax” (p.109), to examine to what extent viewers paid attention to “signposts of fictionality” (p.102) within the exhibition, and how viewers respond to a character when they discover the character is a fictional entity. The methods here are similarly integrative, combining cognitive stylistic concepts with the attention-value model from museum studies. Through a qualitative questionnaire, Gibbons observes how depth of processing impacts on the perceived fictional or referential status of a character and reflects on the significance of fictionality for both readers and researchers. Van der Bom et al.’s next chapter follows with a discussion on reader expectations of a digital fiction text which invites another “disruptive” (p.123) reading experience. The researchers appraise the specific roles and functions of hyperlinks in this piece of hypertext fiction, and consider how these links can clarify or obfuscate narrative cohesion, or create particular subtextual poetic effects. Finally, van Driel’s chapter is a logical continuation of some of the conversations raised by Browse in Chapter 4. Van Driel investigates reader responses to news events and elucidates how Attitudinal Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005) can provide an apparatus through which to examine how readers frame affective and evaluative responses of texts and characters, and importantly how this apparatus can apply to both text and response data.

The third section poses larger questions necessary for reader response ‘Methods’. Stockwell’s chapter neatly bookends the collection by returning to the discussion of solitary reading introduced in earlier chapters, and questions to what extent can any text analysis be disconnected from subjectivity and introspection. By “reclaiming introspection as an empirical method” (p.165), Stockwell argues that it is not just “as an exclusive approach but [...] a key part of a multi-tooled literary linguistic exploration” (p.166). Equally pertinent questions and arguments for reception-oriented research are raised in Thomas’ chapter, which deftly tackles questions of appropriate ethical protocols of online reader response data collection, and how researchers might negotiate their shifting roles and ethical respon-

sibilities in moving from observation to participation. Finally, Escott's chapter fittingly closes with a reflection on the relationship between extra-textual factors and situated, ethnographic observations in text production and reception. All three of these chapters highlight the importance and significance of researcher sensitivity in methodological design.

Kuijpers' postscript concludes the collection with a reflection on the perceived, and yet artificial, dichotomy between quantitative (seemingly more 'objective') and qualitative ('subjective') approaches to reader response research between different schools of thought. The reflection ends with a plea for empirical literary and stylistic researchers to collaborate and cross these obstructive categories, which echoes Whiteley and Canning's (2017) earlier request for "a more holistic, less restrictive approach to reader response research"; one which "encourages future researchers to consider a more cohesive mix of empirical and naturalistic methodology" (p.81). The breadth of approaches outlined in *Style and Reader Response* invite the book to be treated as a practical handbook for the literary linguistic teacher and researcher which underscores and returns to what is at the core of stylistics: an analysis of the language of the text and interpretative significance. While researchers of the 'objective' tradition may note the absence of more extensive quantitative methods in *Style and Reader Response*, the collection celebrates the value of situated and contextualised approaches. It demonstrates that naturalistic methodologies can be empirical, that experimental protocols can be qualitative, and that all such approaches can be systematic and scientific, and rigorous and reliable, in their own right.

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Address for correspondence

Chloe Harrison
School of Social Sciences and Humanities
Aston University
Birmingham B4 7ET
United Kingdom

c.harrison10@aston.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9963-3208>

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