

FAMILY, FRIENDS AND LOVERS

Community, domesticity, intimacy and mediation

In her Reading Aloud Diary, one Mass Observer, F45, records:

Sunday: Mum is reading yesterday's colour supplement from *The Times*. Mum likes to read bits out to other people a lot, and she is very expressive, sometimes to the point of me cringing. I think I cringe because I am her daughter and she is embarrassing me. [...]

When I've done my hair, Mum reads out bits from a beauty feature in the same magazine. She is incredulous because the items are stupidly expensive [...] This then leads the two of us on to what we each consider to be essential beauty items, and it's a darn sight less stuff, and far cheaper. [...]

Dad comes in and Mum reads the article out loud to him – edited highlights only – and he also scoffs [...]

Dad has moved on to something on Facebook, a brochure for the TVs and radios made at the factory where my grandfathers worked. He reads aloud some stuff about the specifications of a record player, but I am too busy reading the paper and don't pay more than a cursory bit of attention [...].

Monday: In the evening my daughter (aged 16) who is out with friends sends me an amusing whatsapp message and I reply. We have a couple of exchanges about what I'm watching on TV at the moment. I read the exchange aloud to my son (aged 14) and he laughs.

This chapter examines reading aloud as a way of being with others, as members of smaller and larger groups or communities, as friends, lovers, partners, spouses and family members. It will look at the ways that we read aloud as part of creating, expressing, sustaining or developing these relationships, exploring oral reading in and as domesticity, intimacy and mediation: between inner and outer worlds, personal and political worlds, familial and global worlds.

In A. S. Byatt's 1978 novel *The Virgin in the Garden*

[...] on the new bedsprings, which twanged, Daniel consummated his marriage. There was a moment during this time, when his face was on hers, cheek on cheek, brown on brow, heavy skull on heavy skull, through soft skin and flesh. He thought: skulls separate people. In this one sense, I could say, they would say, I lose myself in her. But in that bone box, she thinks and thinks, as I think in mine, things the other won't hear, can't hear, though we go on like this for sixty years. What does she think I *am*? He had no idea what she was.

(Byatt, 1978, p. 278–9)

It is hard to read this without reflecting on how our physical bodies both unite and separate us, and the ways that our thinking both is and is not accessible to others. Our 'bone boxes' are built to protect and enclose but also to open up and make sounds that others can hear. Reading aloud, this chapter will argue, is one way that we join ourselves with others, whether taking on particular roles in relation to others (grandmother, Rabbi or partner), becoming 'one with others' as one merged voice or entity (one choir, one family, one congregation), or perhaps both.

Community

This afternoon I attended a session of the university Baking Society, and I found myself reading aloud the recipe and commenting on it to the people around me. In that regard, reading aloud can be seen as a social activity; as a way to stimulate conversation between people who would otherwise be strangers.

(MO M23)

Oral reading can certainly be a way that people join with others socially, whether in the case of the young man above, who feels reading aloud brings a form of closeness or camaraderie to a group of Baking Society members who would otherwise be 'strangers,' or the cases of the many crossword societies, board-game clubs, writing or poetry groups and reading circles where reading aloud provides a way 'in' to more friendly or personal conversation (this is something that happens in many different countries around the world; see discussions in Duncan (2012, pp. 90–92) on Japanese, Canadian and American reading circles, as well as Long (2003) on Texan groups and Nafisi's account of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004)).

We can also see oral reading as part of forms of community or belonging around religion, language, social class and ethnicity. Examples of reading aloud as a way to be together in the context of religion are plentiful, and [Chapter 8](#) provides a more detailed examination of this area. I want to touch on this briefly here too, though, as this is one of the most striking ways that reading aloud is used as a way of joining ourselves with others, whether in person or

remotely. From [Chapter 4](#), we might remember Observer F26, who noted that her participation in a weekly Catholic mass means her ‘voice gets lost in a mass of other people [...] It makes me feel like I belong to something.’ Interviewee MA describes something similar but virtual, as she watches, listens to and joins in with filmed online Baha’i worship from her home in Glasgow: ‘there is energy, and when we [listen and take part] we enjoy to hear other people [...] not only ourselves’ (British Library, C1765/23). Another interviewee, SM, describes her family’s practice of reading aloud, singing and chanting Islamic prayers every week at home and how important this is ‘to connect’ as a family:

we involve them [the children] and encourage them and get them to, to live and experience what we are living and experiencing because I think we, we passed a time when we weren’t doing that, and we found our children were quite disconnected, and we didn’t know how to connect them, so for us this is a really good opportunity to connect spiritually together.

(C1765/49)

In 2019, in Addis Ababa, I observed adults and children taking part in an Ethiopian Orthodox ‘Reading School’ (see Kalewold, 1970; Woldeyes, 2017 for discussions of this tradition) in the greenery outside a church, reading Psalms and Gospel passages in small groups. Some groups were reading out loud in unison and others reading the same text but starting from different places and reading aloud at different paces. Standing among them, I heard about twenty different voices reading a dozen different texts and in both Amharic and Ge’ez (the language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church). The year before, in Skye, I observed a Church of Scotland service in Gaelic where a Psalm presenter sang a line (from a written text) in a particular rhythm and the congregation sang a response, in that same rhythm and in one voice. In each of these cases, I observed something incredibly beautiful and sacred, something that happened regularly, and something involving people using their voices and bodies (sitting, standing and moving between the two) to do and be something together.

Overlapping at times with religious practice, the languages we read aloud in (and listen to others reading in) also bind us to others, into bigger and smaller groups and identities, and bind us to the languages themselves no less. Interviewee VC expresses the ‘emotional life’ of her family’s multilingualism:

I grew up in Trinidad, which is an island just north of the equator, close to Venezuela, and I remember hearing about reading aloud as important. My mother went to the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny Convent School – nuns required a student to read aloud in French every lunchtime to them, and this is how she first acquired a good knowledge and accent in French, and she used to read aloud to me from French children’s books and that again was a very, very strong memory

because I think multilingualism is something which is much, much more widespread than people realise and part of the emotional life, even if it is a question of dialect or a question of hearing nursery rhymes or prayers. The things that children have read aloud to them, they are something that form part of how you feel about the world, so I remember about learning about colour names and flowers from this beautiful French children's book. Then the other thing is my father used to read aloud, but his grandfather was Hindu Pundit and so trained in Sanskrit, and my father used to sit in the rocking chair and read aloud from a memorised text in his head, so that was an oral tradition – he'd be doing Sanskrit or medieval Hindi chanting, which I didn't understand perfectly, but it made me then be willing to experience reading aloud in terms of rhythm. [...] Reading aloud for me is also a place where people of different traditions and accents can make a unified whole, the idea of reading aloud as a shared thing, not just something you do alone, is very important in my life.

(C1765/33)

There is a lot here to unpack – a feeling connected with the sounds of French, Sanskrit and (medieval) Hindi as family activity and identity, but also the idea of the 'shared thing' of oral reading (and reciting from memory, which we will return to in [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#)) across, as well as within, cultural traditions. I am reminded also of interviewee GK and her reading aloud of Welsh poetry to be close to both her mother and her native language (see [Chapter 5](#), pp. 75–76).

Class may be a particularly British concern, but many contexts will share a sense of being joined with, and excluded from, others through a mixture of socio-economic, regional, cultural, religious and/or ethnic factors. Interviewee RH remembers working within a community whose voices had been ignored through a process of class-based political oppression. He describes how they found a way to 'write-back' and regain, through reading aloud and listening, their voices and their stories:

people are finding the urge to really tell their story, and I think round here it started in the miners' strike, for instance, when people used to put the news on, put the BBC on, and see a report from their community which was completely counter to what had actually happened [...] so people could see [...] lies being told about them and they need to tell their story.

(C1765/13)

This telling, he goes on to explain, happens through the writing and (oral) communal sharing of texts, their own texts. Another interviewee, PN, speaks about class and exclusion, noting that she rarely feels connected with the voices on audiobooks:

I can't listen to many talking books because if I don't relate to the voice instantly, I can't listen – I can't bare it. And there's not a great diversity of voices and accents in the books that are read aloud [...] it's usually middle-class Southern accents. [...] for me, it's a real big issue of class, it's just the lack of diversity.

(C1765/63)

Conversely, two members of a London Caribbean elder's group and reading circle (interviewees RC and PW) explained to me the closeness they feel reading aloud and talking together from a position of shared cultural heritage.

Family

Instances of reading aloud within families feature heavily within each data collection strand of the RABiT project, just as they dominate cultural discourses of reading aloud in many countries (see, for example, Gurdon, 2019; Lynx Qualey, 2018). There is no denying the huge number of mentions of adults reading to children and the emphasis on reading aloud as part of taking on the role of parent or grandparent. When asked what she reads aloud, a questionnaire participant writes simply 'children's books – *I am granny*' (my italics). Interviewee DL expands:

When I visit my grandchildren in the north, one of their favourite things is to bounce into my room about seven o'clock in the morning, each clutching about three or four books that they expect me to read from cover to cover [...] It's just part of the tradition. If Grandma's in town, we have to be in her bed. I mean four of us in the bed is quite a squash but with the books as well, but that is, it's our, it's our tradition now, I can't go there without that happening.

(C1765/28)

Here, reading aloud is core to being 'Grandma' and part of their shared grandmother-grandchildren 'tradition.'

The picture of reading aloud with children presented by the RABiT data is overall one associated with forms of tradition or security. One questionnaire participant explains '[reading aloud] is an extremely deep-rooted and richly meaningful part of my formation and extended family and cultural traditions.' Another, with no children yet, notes 'I really look forward to reading aloud to my children in the future. I miss having those shared stories in a family and it meant so much in my childhood,' while Observer F39 writes:

I don't have children, but the thing I most looked forward to doing with my children was reading stories to them. It is one of the few things now that I have accepted childlessness that can still make me

cry. I have missed out on something that I treasured in my own childhood as a very special memory. I was read to as a child. It is a strong, pleasant memory. I remember once when I was a child the electricity being cut off and my mum reading to us by candlelight because, obviously, the TV was off. She read Ted Hugh[es]'s *The Iron Giant*. I bought it, years later, to read to my own children, it was such a strong memory.

Reading aloud as a way of being together in families is something lived, loved and mythologised.

And yet, family reading, in and out of the RABiT data, is much more varied. The first thing we can note is that parents, grandparents and other carers have many different reasons for reading to or with children, and children may find oral reading appealing (or not) for different reasons. Interviewee SB explains that her son liked reading with her for the stories, while for one of her daughters, it was both the stories and getting to spend one-on-one time with her mother that was important (see [Chapter 5](#), p. 73). Questionnaire participants also note reading to children in order to calm, entertain, develop language skills, share stories and/or induce sleep.

Alongside this variation in purposes, reading aloud in the family is also multigenerational and multidirectional. It is not just adult family members reading to children but children reading to adults, children reading to other children, and adults reading to adults. We see children reading to adults to practise their reading, and children (both young and grown-up) reading to parents and grandparents because their parents and grandparents enjoy it, cannot read or do not have their glasses. We have examples of children watching their parents or other adults reading to each other and of children reading with cousins and siblings:

My first memory of reading aloud was trying to teach my little sister to read. She was desperate to learn. When I went to school, I used to take her to wait behind the air-raid shelter. The book was *Alice in Wonderland*, and the first line (in case you've forgotten) is 'Alice is sitting on the bank...'

(MO F83)

I read when I was a teenager to my grandmother who was, her sight was suspect, and we used to love, she used to love hearing me read *Little Women*. And we did an episode of that most nights and I think we both looked forward to that and we got to know those characters, whose names I've forgotten, but I think one was Meg and one was – I can't remember now, that was over, how old am I, 86? That was probably when I was about fourteen so that's quite a long time to

remember, but I know [...] we'd really look forward to those reading sessions.

(TC, C1765/01)

The texts that are read are not always stories or novels either:

My dad & I read aloud from a 1930s house brochure. We read out what we each felt to be funny, even though we were sat next to each other and could easily read everything in our heads. It was a big part of the interaction, reading aloud and laughing together, and I know I got a kick out of making him laugh. It also led to further discussion about the house he grew up in and my memories of it. I think that's rather nice.

(MO F45)

This is reminiscent of Kalman's study of literacy in Mixquic, Mexico, where we are told that one of her adult participants, Gudelia, reads aloud religious texts with her father, something they both enjoy a great deal (2005, p. 71).

Nor is this reading necessarily 'for pleasure'; interviewee LL discusses reading aloud with her mother and others to address her son's specific needs:

We would perhaps research something or google something as we do nowadays and then we might read that back to each other to, to try to get to the bottom of something or the best solution [...] My son was recently diagnosed with ASD, so my mum might look stuff up and you know and relay it to me and vice versa [...] – sharing information in reports about my son to my family or then with external professionals as well, so that's like trying to sort of absorb information, and you know that you're actually taking it in and understanding it so you can then be making the right decisions.

(C1765/74)

While it is certainly true that reading aloud is one of the ways people can join together as families, these practices of family togetherness are far more diverse and nuanced than 'parents reading to children.' And yet despite the range of what actually seems to be going on in families around the world, there remains a message within wider cultural discourses that reading to children is something a parent *should* do. One Observer reflects:

My mum used to read to me when I was younger, but she wasn't confident at reading aloud. She was scared she would get a word wrong and, because my reading age was quite advanced from a really young age, I think she was a little embarrassed that I may be able to read a word that she couldn't. So when I was able to read alone,

I would read my bedtime stories myself. Due to this, I don't remember bonding over books with my family as they are not very bookish, which can mean that I feel a little isolated from them. Also, I didn't really have that theatrical and playful experience of using different voices and excitement while reading aloud at a young age because the experience was so full of angst, worry, and nervousness for my mum.

(F27)

This is a haunting piece of writing, a daughter's expression of what she feels she missed out on, and her experience of her mother's fears. Another Observer writes

I don't remember my parents reading aloud to me. I suspect that my mother may have done. Well, I hope she did but I have no memory of it. My father entertained us with stories and songs but he made them up himself and did not read them out.

(F69)

'I hope she did'. Could this 'hoping' represent an internalisation of the idea that mothers *should* read to children, despite the stories and songs she remembers from her father? These strains of the *should* – the *I didn't really have*, the *I hope* – could tell us something about wider judgements about what parents – arguably, particularly mothers – and carers *should* be doing.

Mace (1998) argues that many literacy campaigns (in different parts of the world, including Britain, the United States and Nigeria) have focussed on the importance of improving the literacy of mothers in order to improve the literacy of their children and, by implication, the nation as a whole. She highlights how these campaigns often position mothers as the main person responsible for their children's literacy development and present the importance of a woman's literacy learning as mainly or solely in terms of their children, rather than being of potential importance in other aspects of a woman's life, a point also made by Cuban and Hayes (1996). Mace further notes that such campaigns may also suggest that being able to read herself is the only way for a mother (or anyone else) to support a child's literacy. She draws on six points made in Barton's influential 'Exploring family literacy' article (1994) to rebut these positions and sum up her own argument: that literacy is more than reading certain types of books; that family is more than mothers; that home literacies are not necessarily the same as school literacies; that family literacy involves different generations interacting in a range of ways; that different people take part in literacy practices, including those more *and* less confident or skilled in forms of reading and writing; and that there are a range of ways to support literacy development (beyond reading to children or explicit teaching).

Twenty-six years later, these are still points that need making. They also lead us nicely back to the ways that some RABiT participants experience reading

aloud in the family. An Observer reminds us that there are different ways for families to support children's literacy:

When I was learning to read my parents used to ask me to read to them [...] when I was able to read properly they gave me a present – a little Bible brought back from Jerusalem by my uncle, which had mother-of-pearl covers. I loved it and my reading has never looked back!

(F77)

Similarly, within Gebre et al.'s (2009) *Everyday Literacies in Africa*, the artist Ayelech explains that she herself is 'illiterate,' but she encourages her children to 'read for me and I enjoy hearing it' (2009, pp. 101–102). The RABiT data and other studies certainly suggest that reading aloud can be part of togetherness in families and can indeed be a way to support children in their literacy learning, but this is not necessarily about a parent reading to a child. The reality seems more varied and interesting.

Friends, lovers, partnership and marriage

I used to read a newspaper aloud with a friend every day as a routine, as well as papers or letters either of us has written. It was very important to both of us.

(questionnaire)

Oral reading is also part of friendship, something people do for or with those close to their hearts. Another questionnaire participant notes 'fan fiction read aloud to me is my FRIENDS reading to me and that's the best thing. I love it' (their capitalisation). Whether these are friends reading aloud in person/online or someone else reading the words of fellow fan-fiction friends may be ambiguous, but the importance of 'FRIENDS reading to me' is clear. This resonates with Finders's (1997) study of the 'hidden' literacies of teenage girls in the United States and her examples of girls reading aloud together from magazines, in person and over the phone, sharing interesting bits of text as part of what we might see as friendship rituals. It may be that few(er) read from print magazines these days, but many of us have observed (or taken part in) similar interactions with online news or social media – that is, the same crowding around the text, the same excited or comic voices, and outraged or amused commentary.

Similarly, reading aloud as part of romance may seem to fit best with our ideas of times gone by, of handwritten letters read aloud by the writer, recipient, horrified parent or even behind-the-scenes Cyrano figure, but the RABiT data suggests that oral reading is still a part of romance. This includes practices that are very much deliberate, such as forms of serenade, the reading of love letters and poems, partners reading novels to each other in bed, as well as those which may be barely noticed, such as the reading of 'snippets' of news, social

media or other texts over the breakfast table to a partner who could be interested or may not even hear. Interviewee DL explains that she rarely reads poetry herself but that poetry has nevertheless played a large role in her life: ‘my husband was, he was a very, very keen reader of poetry [...] he wooed me via the metaphysical poets’ (C1765/28). Interviewee JSP (C1765/88) speaks of always having read out loud with friends, family and boyfriends, though her role has shifted, from being the person most read to, to being the reader. Also aware of shifting lives and shifting practices, a questionnaire participant writes, ‘When I was in a long-distance relationship, I used to read book chapters out loud every evening over Skype. Now we live together and I don’t read out loud so often.’ Continuing the thread, Observer M19 records:

On Wednesday [...] I was reading aloud to my girlfriend in bed as she was upset. Being in a long-distance relationship reading to her like this tends to calm her down when she’s upset when I otherwise can’t because we are talking over the phone.

Can voices replace physical contact or provide another sort of intimacy? In 2012, Chloe Angyal reviewed Lauren Leto’s book, *Judging A Book By Its Lover: A Field Guide to the Hearts and Minds of Readers Everywhere*. She titles her review ‘In praise of the lost, intimate art of reading aloud’ and ends her second paragraph by noting that she was surprised, in a book that is ‘a love letter,’ to find no mention of oral reading. She goes on to share memories of being read to by family members and then by lovers, before making a more explicit connection between reading aloud and falling in love:

Leto is right that for people who love to read, love and reading are often intertwined. And it is true that you can tell a lot about a person by what’s on their bookshelf. But you can fall in love, or in my case, fall further, with a person by listening to them read from what’s on that shelf. Some things – love, a great book, your hilarious voice for Mr. Collins – are too good to keep to yourself.

(Angyal, 2012)

We will return to ideas of intimacy, and to love, later in this chapter and turn now to marriage and partnership. Oral reading is part of state and religious marriage ceremonies all over the world, most often when the magistrate, or religious leader, reads aloud text that the couple must repeat word for word – the voicing of particular words in a particular order acting as the magical spell that can call the marriage into being (see [Chapter 7](#) for more on this). There are also a great many mentions in the RABiT data of partners or married couples reading to one another different sorts of texts, as exemplified by this questionnaire participant: ‘most often I read aloud to my fiancé about recipes, horoscopes, and some interesting articles we have found.’

There are instances coming from shared interests or activities: visits to a museum (with one person reading the placards), cooking or building flat-pack furniture together, reading aloud to share or write family greetings cards, or reading favourite novels or poems. Other examples seem more about creating bridges between the quite different interests or lifeworlds of each partner. Observer F75 writes ‘Quite often I will read extracts of my book to my husband. I will also read to him extracts from my diaries,’ while interviewee PO explains that he and his wife often sit side by side reading their separate books silently,

but sometimes we’ll, you know, I’ll say what I’m reading and she’ll read something. She likes reading stories, novels, but about real things, stories about, say, in Birmingham or in London how kids were then or in Ireland, so she likes reading things that are based on fact but still a story, whereas I like reading science fiction, so she often reads things that are really interesting, so she’ll probably tell me bits more than I’ll tell her things because what happens in 2095 doesn’t really interest her.
(C1765/67)

There are also many examples of routines developed as a couple. One of the participants in Mace’s (1998) study of mothers and literacy remembers:

Many years ago there was a daily newspaper called the Daily Graphic, it has more photographs of daily events than any other paper by far. They purchased this paper daily price 1 1/2d (pre-decimal). Grandfather looked and studied all the pictures and then grandmother would read out the captions to him and I thought that was a very good arrangement.
(p. 111)

Observer (F65) shares a similarly ‘good arrangement’: ‘My husband and I usually have a lazy start to the day when we can get away with it, being retired. We read the papers in bed ... We often share titbits.’ And as we heard in [Chapter 5](#), interviewee AL regularly reads his partner’s messages to him while he (his partner) is driving.

Other practices may be reactions to the non-routine. ‘My husband once read Lord of the Rings to me when we were camping’ (questionnaire), or new routines developed to cope with new challenges:

Sadly in 2005 my husband had a severe brain haemorrhage and lost his ability to read or write. So since then I have been reading aloud to him every day!! Any letters we receive I read to him.
(MO, F87)

Oddly enough, I still read to my wife from time to time for a very strange reason. She often becomes quite constipated [...] Somewhere

along the line we discovered that the sound of my voice makes her relax! It may have been when I was away and speaking to her on the phone that we discovered this. So from time to time I suggest I read something, either from a book I am reading or whatever comes to hand; the summary of soap opera plotlines in the TV magazine or the blurb on the back of a bank statement. It doesn't matter what, it must be the dull monotone of my voice that does something, and it works nearly every time!

(MO, M51)

This last example also brings us to changes to routines over time, also noted by these questionnaire participants, 'My husband used to read out loud to me but now we go to bed at different times' and 'Had a short-lived habit of reading to my wife at bedtime,' as well as by these Observers:

As a young married couple – perhaps like many – we tried reading to each other in bed, a new chapter on successive nights. A short-lived experiment; I can't really remember why, but rather less on grounds of 'performance' than a joint decision to engage with our own choices of books!

(M72)

Twice this week I have read aloud programme information from the TV on-screen guide to my husband at his request. This was a little more irritating as he could have read it himself. [...]. As I get older I expect to read aloud more especially with or to my husband because things that are difficult to understand are often made clearer read aloud & shared. Produce instructions etc.

(F63)

Interviewee LC also reflects on changes over time and what she sees as 'co-dependency':

Now, my husband doesn't like wearing reading glasses, so I am his reader when we are out – sometimes at home because he likes to cook so he looks at recipes – he'll say, I can't read that, so then I have to read it out loud to him. I know it's a really weird example, but it's becoming more obvious to me that I've become his reader because he can't be bothered, or he's forgetful or he's broken them, so you'll be out shopping and I'm having to read things, or you'll be in a restaurant and I'm having to read what the food is out loud [...] instructions, maps, all those sort of things I've found myself more and more reading those out loud to him, and it's like a

co-dependency, so the more I do it, the less he uses his glasses I suppose.

(C1765/48)

As I have talked about the RABiT research to people in different countries (Britain, Chile, Finland, Ecuador, France, Hungary, Estonia and Ethiopia), many have offered examples from their own hetero- and homosexual partnerships, and are all remarkably similar to the examples already given. Sometimes their examples suggest adoration and at other times irritation (that fine line in any partnership), but there is always a sense of oral reading as something quietly important in the ways we can join and live our lives together. Observer (F83) captures this powerfully when she writes of her late husband: ‘For a wedding present, we were given a cheese board adorned with the legend *Please help yourself*. He read it aloud every time it was used.’

Domesticity

Many of these examples of reading aloud in marriage or partnership also tell us something about what we could call domestic life (and here I am using the term domestic and domesticity to mean in and of the home). From [Chapter 5](#) we may remember interviewee JR discussing the centrality of reading aloud in his married home life, with him and his wife reading aloud to ‘negotiate shopping,’ read newspapers or magazines together or read aloud emails to organise seeing family, ‘everyday stuff’ (C1765/04). Similarly, in his reading aloud diary, Observer M79 writes: ‘My wife read to me (while I chewed my dinner) an article by Hilary Mantel about Princess Diana and the 20th anniversary of her death,’ while another (M63) records: ‘Sun 3, My wife was serving rhubarb crumble and custard for Sunday dinner and I read out a short letter from the previous day’s newspaper,’ and a third starts her reading aloud diary with:

Day 1: In the living room with my husband and dog whilst having coffee, reading from the Times newspaper to my husband – Article on Clothing optional research group who suggest that theatre goers are dared to go naked a musical show!

(M70)

These provide colourful (if perhaps old-fashioned in the gender roles they suggest) pictures of the domestic. We have people reading aloud at kitchen tables, in the bath, living rooms, gardens and beds.

We can also see the domestic as a range of activities associated with the safety of this home space. A number of instances involve cooking or eating. Observer F37 remembers: ‘I was read aloud to by my Mum [...] She used to read a story to us when we ate tea. I remember eating sausages whilst listening to a story from a series called ‘Blackberry Farm’,’ while interviewee SB recalls,

We made pumpkin cake last week [...] I read out the instructions, so I tell her to measure 50 grams, yeah because she likes to do rather than read it out [...] so I read out the instructions and then she would be weighing the stuff and mixing.

(C1765/07)

And questionnaire participants echo with ‘I read recipes to my boyfriend, my Mum or my Grandma when we’re cooking together’ and ‘when first married my husband and I read aloud novels as the other one cooked’.

Yet cooking and eating are certainly not the only domestic activities that feature, as the Observers remind us: ‘In my third pregnancy I was into knitting Aran jumpers and my husband read all the Jane Austens and Trollopes to me and George Eliots’ (F84) and ‘During my married life of 30 years, there were times when my husband would read to me after breakfast, sometimes in Spanish or Italian, of which I had a basic knowledge. While he read I embroidered or worked on tapestry’ (F90). An academic I met at a conference in Finland explained: ‘I read my husband detective novels while he cleans the cooker. It seems to be the only way to get it done.’ Here we have domestic oral reading as something both practical and imaginatively sustaining, a form of togetherness elevating the domestic from the ‘ordinary’ drudgery of cooking, cleaning or sewing to the ‘extraordinary’ of George Eliot, detective fiction or the Italian language.

Intimacy, service and death

A great many of examples we have seen so far in this chapter of families, friends and partners reading aloud together are examples of oral reading in or as domesticity: oral reading in the physical space, activities and routines of the ‘inner’ world of the home as opposed to the ‘outer’ world(s) of the public sphere. Another way of thinking about this ‘inner’ is offered by ideas of intimacy, by which I mean an interpersonal or emotional closeness. A great many of the instances of reading aloud already explored within this chapter are also examples of forms of intimacy: grandchildren bundling into their grandmother’s bed for an early morning story or partners reading aloud to alleviate their other halves’ pain. We can also see intimacy in the recording of voices: the voice made gift. A mother writes, ‘When my daughter was very small and I was away for work, I made a recording of me reading some of her favourite books’ (MO, F41). Another shares, ‘My partner has created several talking books of my favourite childhood stories’ and notes the emotional nature of ‘My partner investing so much time to recording books for me – the ability to hear his voice when I’m away from him’ (F54). A third remembers

As a child my mother’s father recorded a number of the Thomas the Tank Engine stories to cassette for me, though I have not remembered

this for many years. ‘Duck the Diesel Engine’ was my absolute favourite. My grandfather was a Yorkshire man, softly spoken, he read, as I recall, at a very consistent pace.

(M44)

As with the earlier example of a young man reading aloud to his partner over the phone to comfort her, there seems to be something particularly intimate about the voice in these examples. Anne Karpf starts her extraordinary examination of *The Human Voice* (2011) by noting the links between the voice, forms of identity and emotion, the ability of the voice to communicate love and generate trust, and how ‘the voice lies at the heart of what it means to be human’ (p. 3). With due awareness that not everyone has the same uses of voice and ear, and are of course no less human for it, Karpf’s point nevertheless resonates with much of the RABiT research and the challenge of expressing (perhaps even more so in writing) what it is that the voice brings or does, particularly in relation to oral reading as acts of intimacy. Observer F24 tells us something important and relevant to this challenge when she writes, ‘When I’m depressed it’s a lot harder to read aloud, because there’s something quite raw and vulnerable about it.’

The above examples of oral reading, live and recorded, are intimate – gifts of the voice and of time as a pilot study participant noted: ‘it feels like you are being given a bit of a gift I think when somebody perhaps reads to you.’ Interviewee JV provides a powerful illustration:

I had a recent experience where my partner was not well and it sort of, it ended up being not quite for medicinal purposes, but lie down and I’ll read you a story, and it brought back, not quite memories – it was an adult story, I was reading a novel – so, but that quiet, calm, someone not well, it was soothing, it was lovely, it was just a time to be together, it was a time to be calm, that was a new experience [...] He felt poorly, and I thought, actually it would be good – lie down, in bed, and so I’ll read you a story, the idea came from just lie down in bed – and I thought, well I’m here, let’s – instead of me chatting, because we could chat for – but he was tired, and he was poorly, and he just needed quiet time, and I thought well that might sort of help to make you feel better – you’ve got nothing to do apart from listen – you don’t need to respond – you don’t need to acknowledge anything – just lie down and listen, and it will be nice. Yeah. So yeah, so I read the *Old Man and the Sea*, and interestingly, you know, it was [a] wee book, [...] it was an afternoon of let’s just calm down, and about – the whole thing took probably about 4 and a half hours but it – it just – it flew in – and afterwards we thought, wow – we talk about it now – but wow. It was just a time to do something that could last that long, on one thing [...] it was quite a bit emotional moment, actually, where

the engagement of one reader and one listener was dead interesting I think.

This may remind us of how many of the practices in this chapter are acts of intimacy of service, of helping others with gifts of voice, text and time, like the questionnaire participant ‘Reading to my elderly blind mother,’ interviewee TA reading to his grandmother as she could not read, interviewee PO reading to his wife after her stroke, interviewees MG and KB reading to their elderly mothers and Observer F26 reading poetry to her dying friend. Another Observer (F65) regularly reads in a hospice:

Another of the first people I read to, I should so love to write his name [...] I went in one Christmas Eve and he had died. His relations had just gone, and the nurse said to me, ‘would you like to go to see him?’ I said, ‘well he won’t want to read will he?’ [...] I wasn’t being facetious, just shocked and don’t really know where that came from. In retrospect, I really wish I had read to him, right then. I wish I had given him my voice in his passage even after life had left him, out of respect, private respect, and thanks for what we had shared. I did thank him, but I didn’t read.

Forms of reading aloud associated with death may be the most intimate of all. There is certainly reading aloud at funerals, including of eulogies and poems. This is a common literacy practice if we think of the ‘common’ as the culturally prevalent rather than the frequent in the lives of most individuals (as discussed in [Chapter 3](#)). Reading at funerals is also discussed in [Chapter 4](#) in relation to the Mass Observation data, but here I’d like to present the thoughts of three participants in relation to the intimacy of this form of reading. Pilot study participant M50s recalls:

At my mother’s funeral, I read a eulogy, and that was a pre-prepared written text. I wrote it and I read it, and I’m not sure how much I was reading because I knew the text pretty well, and I remember I had tears in my eyes, and I couldn’t see the text particularly well anyway, so that was an odd hybrid between reading aloud and reciting.

Interviewee MB explains something of her experience:

You cannot afford to catch the eyes of anybody. Because normally if you are reading or telling a story of whatever, at a concert, you are looking at the folk because you want the feedback, you want the reaction, so you can really feel you are there and sharing, but at a funeral it’s quite different. A friend asked me to do the eulogy at her funeral [...] and I found it extremely difficult to write it and very hard

to actually read it, and I think you usually get to within one sentence of the end and you've held yourself together, you've got yourself standing properly, proper stance and able to do it and then it's about the last sentence you crumple, and you feel, well I did it [...] if you are asked to do something like that, you cannot say no, but it is very stressful. I always think one of the really important things about doing something as emotional as that is to stand properly, get your back straight, get your feet apart, kind of make yourself as physically strong as you can be for actually reading [...] You're still looking about the room as you'd always do, but you're just not catching anybody's eyes. At my friend's funeral, I was asked to read two poems, and it was a small church, it was in Fair Isle [...] and I looked up, when I was reading, and I just saw one of her daughters, who was a teenager, who was wearing her mam's beautiful clothes at the funeral and for a moment I nearly lost it.

(C1765/83)

And DL, who, as we heard earlier, was wooed by her husband with the meta-physical poets, speaks of his funeral:

One of his favourite poems was a Dylan Thomas poem called 'Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night,' which was really, he was addressing to his father when he was dying and [my husband] used to read it to me, and you know, a long, long time ago. But when it was his own funeral, I decided I had to read that poem at the funeral. I read the whole eulogy, and I finished the eulogy with that poem [...] there are contrasts in the verses, sort of, telling his father to rage because he'd always raged against everything and fight this, fight this death, but then there are other verses which are not as strong somehow, there's a great contrast [...] because I had rehearsed it, I was able to really make the people I was reading to in that congregation really think about those words.

(C1765/28)

In different ways, these three people tell us something of the difficult but important intimacy (and service) of reading aloud for the dead and those they leave behind. Finally, the memory of this Observer (M, age unknown) helps us see that it is not only at funerals that we see lives – and love – expressed or contained within oral reading:

The only instance I can recall in reading aloud was at school for my English Oral exam, and we had to select a book and a chapter from it to read to the teacher. The chapter had to have meaning/drama, and the book you selected it from had to mean something too. I picked a

Reader's Digest book called *Collision Course* [...] I selected this book as it was my Father's book [...] It means a lot to me now as I haven't my Father but I still have the book and think of the times we spent together reading.

Mediation

In this chapter, we have explored practices where the most important thing seems to be the ways that different people use or experience the vocalisation of written texts as ways to be together, as larger and smaller groups, as couples, family members, and as people physically alone and yet in communion or fellowship with distant others through texts shared and voices heard. There is, though, something else going on, at least some of the time. Sometimes the oral reading is part of a linking, translating, relocating, re-contextualising or reframing between outer worlds of strangers, work or public affairs and inner worlds of domesticity, intimacy and established relationships. This, I am arguing, is a form of mediation.

Within literacy studies, the term 'mediation' has been used for acts of brokerage or service, when literacy 'mediators' support others with forms of reading and writing; for example, in unfamiliar genres, registers or languages (Baynham, 1993; Baynham & Masing, 2000; Papen, 2010). These forms of mediation – for example, scribes in Mexican plazas (Kalman, 1999) or youth workers helping young people in Quebec with healthcare literacies (Thériault, 2016) – can involve people reading or writing for or with others, incorporating aspects of informal learning and the challenging of power structures. Building on this understanding of mediation, Rockwell (2013) writes of the 'oral mediation of literacy' in her study of teachers' uses of textbooks in Mexican school classrooms. She notes how teachers use oral questioning and discussion to 'mediate,' recontextualise or scaffold understanding of what they want students to gain from these texts, stressing how teachers shape students' experiences of their textbooks through forms of 'oral interventions' (Rockwell, 2013, p. 187) including reading aloud. Like the earlier examples of literacy mediation, teachers are supporting their learners in accessing a form of literacy (a textbook) by bringing something external and challenging (and potentially alien) into the realm of the familiar. The teachers are also, though, controlling the key messages that the students take from the texts.

The RABiT data is full of examples of the reading of extracts from newspapers and social media posts, the selective 'bringing in' of news from the outside world into the inner sphere of the domestic or familial: the breakfast table, the fireside, the bed. Someone reads the news aloud, often on a small hand-held device (conjuring the outside in) and so it arrives in the domestic space already 'translated' into a familiar voice, with an interpretation or verdict expressed through that voice (distressed, amused or something else); in this way, the external news is presented or packaged for intimate consumption. I am arguing

that this too is a form of mediation, not because the person being read to could not read it for themselves but because the oral reading is an act of bringing something external (local, national or international news) into the familiar (the home, the family, the relationship), with the reader's selection, voice and commentary supporting a particular understanding of, and reaction to, the text, for both reader and listener. Questionnaire participants indicate that they read 'Social media posts – to share their content with family or friends in the room with me.' Interviewee MG explains her desire to read news aloud to her husband as about both a sharing of the shocking and a form of checking her own understanding:

I do probably the most annoying reading out loud, which is to my husband, when I'm reading something from the papers that has incensed me [...] it's always, almost always because I feel very cross and I want to share it with him, I want him to know, just in case he's missed this, and I think it's really important [laughs], and I think it's just a way of expressing, expressing how I feel about it. It's no good just reading something I think is awful, to yourself, it's that feeling that it needs to be shared with someone else to find out how they're feeling about it – am I overreacting to that? Was – have I read it – have I understood it even correctly? [...] say it's talking about homelessness, like localised homelessness or the, something you can directly relate to [...] it does generate conversation.

(C1765/47)

As in Rockwell's (2013) example above, this mediation can be seen as both support and control, with the reader supporting access to, as well as filtering, messages from the outside world. It is also, as emphasised by MG above, a form of self-support, facilitating the processing or managing of particularly striking news – whether funny or horrific or incomprehensible. The reader may also be managing how the read text relates to other language practices; for example, using it to start or slant a particular discussion. A questionnaire participant reports reading aloud driven by 'outrage/despair at depths of stupid politics (Trump, Brexit). Esp[.] from younger co-workers who can't believe what is going on. Usually a prelude to a discussion,' and another reads out 'newspaper articles when I want to share the story. I typically do this because I want to engage in discussion.' Here the mediation may be mainly for the benefit of the reader, who wants to talk about it, rather than the listeners.

Crucially, control over or mediation of written texts (a form of exercise of power) may be unwanted. Observer F55 remembers:

An ex-boyfriend used to read out the information by each item in [a] museum, which I found deeply embarrassing because people can read the plaque for themselves when they get to the relevant section. It

seemed to suggest a lack of awareness [...] Maybe even a bit patronising to suggest that they or I needed him to read it.

In [Chapter 7](#) we will also look at examples from work and prison contexts of power wielded by those who read for others.

Conclusion and love

This chapter has argued that reading aloud can be a way of being with others – and that ‘being together’ takes many forms: as members of communities, as family, as lovers, partners and spouses. It has argued that this relates to ideas of domesticity and intimacy and the polarities of public and private that both domesticity and intimacy suggest, as well as that oral reading can be used as a form of mediation between these spheres. Within these arguments is the idea that reading aloud has something to do with not only power but also love. We have examined many examples where the time together, the physical proximity, the voice(s) and the content of the text itself may be expressions or enactments of love. Observer M79 remembers:

As a child, I was always chosen to read aloud to the class, a result perhaps of my early love of reading, which was a brief escape from an unhappy childhood. To a person of low self-esteem, being read aloud to forms a temporary feeling of being some value after all, and worthy of this spell of attention from another person.

Interviewee NS explores what reading to a child has in common with religious reading or the reading aloud of poetry, and in doing so arrives at love:

What I think is in common is the joy of sharing language with another human being or other human beings, and that of course is different to reading silently. What is different is that with a child, that’s a very intimate, nurturing situation, so it’s likely to be one to one, unless other members of the family are around, but essentially it’s one to one, and it’s really starting from before the time the child can understand what you are saying, so the whole context of it is physical warmth and nurturing and sound and growing up as sound as something associated with being loved. [...] in the church service I hope there would be some context of loving and being loved because that’s something that takes place in an accepting community; in the reading poetry aloud, it’s a common attention, and that’s, that is a kind of love.

(C1765/38)

I also remember a woman in the Glasgow Women’s Library *Story Café* group explaining that throughout her marriage she used to read to her husband and now after his death continues to read to him.

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