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Western University

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Reading as a Lifeline among Aging Readers: Findings from a Qualitative Interview Study with Older Adults

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Abstract: Older adults who identify as readers and choose to read for pleasure in their everyday lives are understudied despite the persistence and pervasiveness of this kind of reading. The phenomenology of reading and critical age studies inform this pilot project that uses in-depth interviews conducted with five readers who are between the ages of 75-90 years and who live in Canada. Data analysis followed principles of close reading and thematic analysis. Findings privilege the voices of the older readers and show how their experiences of reading can be analyzed using the metaphor of reading as a lifeline that, in turn, bridges with notions of resilience and embodied information practices. Reading for pleasure supports resilience and a reflective stance on life among older adults. The findings call for other researchers to engage more readily with older adults and will be of use to librarians and others who provide services, programs, and resources to older adult readers.

1. Introduction

Reading research with individual readers and communal reading audiences continues to garner active scholarly attention around the world. Studies of reading and readers have long been part of library and information science (LIS) research with a long tradition of empirical approaches to understanding the role of reading in people’s lives (Pawley & Robbins, 2013; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006, 2018; Rothbauer, Skjerdingsstad, McKechnie, & Oterholm, 2016). Yet, there is relatively little research that specifically examines older adults’ reading behaviors and practices, and furthermore, existing literature on the topic is outdated. Reading is one of the primary ways that older people use their leisure time, along with television viewing and socializing with friends and family (Strain, Grabusic, Searle, & Dunn, 2002; Toepoel, 2013), yet

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the reading experiences of older adults, including the role reading plays in their everyday lives, remains understudied. Very little is known about how older people make sense of their own reading practices, and what sustained engagement with texts means (or can mean) for people who are negotiating the indeterminacy and contradictions of old age. There is also a demographic imperative to begin to understand more deeply the meaning of leisure and recreation in the everyday lives of the members of one of the fastest growing population segments of contemporary society.

Ideas from critical age studies can inform the study of reading among older people through the exploration of ordinary aspects of aging in the context of reading practices by guiding us to look at “questions of identity, the body, experience, language and metaphor, life-course continuity and disruption, sensation, emotions, and biography...” (Katz, 2014, para. 8). Critical age studies interrogate the often-under-analyzed category of age, examining and questioning the mutually constitutive relationship between aging and its constructions, contexts, and dominant cultural narratives. Gullette (2008) points to the capacity of critical age studies to view any age “as another arena of power and difference, hierarchy and resistance, interlocking systems and discourses that possess histories and current strategies” (1998, pp. 4-5). With the “tremendous scope of issues that gives age studies its identity” (Katz, 2014, para. 10), critical age studies are not restricted to any one field, discipline, or theoretical approach, but instead draw from the social sciences, humanities, and sciences while also “[pressing] forward issues of age and aging into other fields” (Katz, 2014, para. 5). In this context then, we draw aging in from the margins of reading studies to take account of the meanings older people attribute to reading rather than merely surveying and reporting on their reading preferences and habits. We use the

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metaphor of reading as a lifeline to explore findings derived from close readings and thematic analyses of the transcripts of in-depth, conversational interviews¹ with five readers between the ages of 75-90 years. Three imbricated themes emerge: personal reading histories as a method of mapping one’s life, reading as escape, and reading as a way to preserve what is deemed important about living and life. The lifeline metaphor bridges with the concept of resiliency as a way to frame and reframe the creative possibilities of reading for older adult readers.

1.1 Problem statement

With the growing demographic imperative for increased and better knowledge of aging populations in North America and around the world, research that investigates the everyday lives of older people is needed to enliven and enrich policy and planning across all sectors that serve older people. Biomedical approaches dominate research across the disciplines as we seek, especially, to understand more about illnesses related to dementia and aging. However, along with this important research, we also need to know more about the everyday, ordinary experiences of aging. As reading constitutes one of the major ways that older people choose to spend their time, it is a worthwhile and necessary research direction.

While there are a handful of studies examining how older people receive and use texts, much of this research is dominated by investigations of cognitive and linguistic processing or of reading as a type of therapeutic intervention that has an impact on older adults’ feelings of isolation and perceptions of wellbeing. Such work often relies on conceptualizations of elderly people that fail to acknowledge the heterogeneity present in this population and that may

¹ The first author conducted all interviews for this study.

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continue to stigmatize this group with unquestioned assumptions of general dependency and decline presumed to accompany the aging process (Bytheway, 2011; Dalmer, 2017; Phillipson, 2013). Attempts to understand older people’s reading practices that are underpinned with such conceptualizations run the risk of advancing problematic assumptions including a deficit-based model of aging and reading as a functional task (i.e., as a way to improve cognition).

If aging can be understood to be “a convergence of social divisions, a medley of time lines, a mosaic of spaces, and a redistribution of life-course definitions and experiences” (Katz, 1996, p. 138), and if reading is one of the most prevalent ways that older people spend their time, what role does reading play among these experiences of older people? How does reading support shifting identities and identifications, transformed personal relationships, and new ways of moving through space and understanding one’s relationship with place? What does reading mean?

2. Literature review: Older adults and reading

Many of the empirical studies on older readers present fractured results related to time spent reading, reading preferences, and general reading habits. While there are some studies that take account of gender, class, ethnicity, and geography, such research remains scarce.

Surveying over 3300 middle aged and older Canadian readers, McLeod (1981) found that as a reader’s age increases, more time is spent reading books, though the variety of books read tends to narrow. Other surveys, however, have competing results, finding that the reading of books declines amongst older adults (Fisher, 1986; Smith, 1996). Research with sample populations of people older than 55 years of age report that women read more books and read

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more frequently than men (Knulst & Kraaykamp, 1998; Zickuhr & Rainie, 2014). In the U.S., older readers belonging to racialized communities are reportedly less likely to be readers into old age, as are people who were not readers when they were younger (Perrin, 2016). Older readers living in urban areas seem to read more than their rural peers (Chen & Fu, 2008). Very little research has focused on economic and social variables, however, results from general reading surveys provide some evidence that poorer older people with less education read fewer materials and read less frequently (Chen, 2008; Knulst & Kraaykamp, 1998; Luyt & Ann, 2011; Scales & Rhee, 2001). However, daily or almost daily reading is common among older people (Anderson, Louveller, & Woolridge, 1992) and older people have always ranked highly among those who report having read a book for pleasure in the past year (Perrin, 2016; Zickuhr & Rainie, 2014). Over the years, many calls have been made, across sectors, for active encouragement of leisure reading practices among older adults (Chen, 2008; Kingston, 1977; Luyt & Ann, 2011).

Despite the growing research attention on this topic the contemporary reading practices of older adults remain opaque. Furthermore, existing reports on the characteristics of older readers and on older people’s reading habits are often drawn from studies that sample a wider range of ages, which may inadvertently omit contextual clues and findings specific to older adult populations.

2.1 Older readers’ reading habits and practices

One of the chief themes present in the small number of existing studies that examine older adult readers is reading preferences, including the frequency with which older adults read, favourite reading formats and sources, and reading interests and habits. Older adults are reported as being

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selective readers, and as Haase, Robinson, and Beach note, are likely to employ “strategies of economy” (1979, p. 232) to save time and effort when making choices about what to read.

Smith (1993, 1996) studied the reading abilities and practices of American older adults throughout the early- and mid-1990s, finding that newspapers and magazines were preferred reading materials for people 65 years of age and older. These preferences are corroborated in a more recent study by Scales and Rhee (2001). Drawing from data collected for the National Adult Literacy Survey, older adults’ preferred reading materials were primarily periodicals such as newspapers and magazines as well as books, with Smith (1996) reporting that “older adults are more likely to read books, religious materials, correspondence, and magazines for personal use” (p. 216) as compared to younger readers.

Aiex (1987) found that all older readers, regardless of gender, enjoy reading classics, popular fiction such as mysteries, crime and historical fictions, and popular genres of nonfiction including history, travel, finance, and art. In a comprehensive literature review of how older adults use books, Kamin (1984) reported that older readers prefer subjects related to the past, focusing on reading topics such as “history, religion, westerns, and biographies” (p. 10). Several older studies report differences in genre preferences between older women and men. For example, Gourlie (1996), surveying 70 adults over the age of 50, found that women prefer to read cookbooks, humour, and current events whereas men prefer science and technology genres. Traditionally, neither older men nor women have typically reported a preference for health-related topics or speculative fiction (Gourlie, 1996).

As is evident, much of what is known about older adults’ reading practices is derived from reader surveys dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, which could not adequately capture

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evolving social and technological trends that may impact contemporary older adults’ reading. More recent examinations of older adults’ reading preferences focus on modes of e-reading, examining access to reading materials and how they are read. Using semi-structured interviews with 21 older Canadian adults to study their adoption of e-books and e-readers, Quan-Haase, Martin, and Schreurs (2016) identified three factors that mediate older adults’ decision making processes surrounding the adoption of new e-reading technologies: participants’ strong affinity for print books, differences in integrating these technologies into older adults’ everyday lives, and older adults’ varying levels of confidence and willingness to try digital reading technologies. Quan-Haase and her colleagues (Quan-Haase, Martin, & Schreurs ,2014) also reported that older adults express a desire to share reading materials, a process which participants said e-readers hampered. Such research indicates that older adults’ media production and consumption reflect their complicated interest and relationship with media platforms and digital technologies.

2.2 Benefits of reading

Contrary to the belief that solitary reading of older adults may perpetuate feelings of loneliness and isolation, Smith (1993) points out that reading supports connections to both larger society and local community. Another study found that those older adults who read are more likely to participate in social events (Wolf, 1977). Reading operates as a method for older adults to maintain contact with other people in their lives (Toepoel, 2013) and allows for conversation and exploring shared interests and reading experiences (Wolf, 1977). Furthermore, a shared love of reading can be a profound expression of friendship and love (Cavanagh & Robbins, 2012; McKechnie, Ross, & Rothbauer, 2007). Reading structures time for relaxation and also creates

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opportunities for conversation and other kinds of meaningful communication with others, promoting an overall positive engagement with life.

Recent analyses of the benefits of reading are practical in nature, exploring the contributions of reading and literacy to older adults’ longevity and ability to cope with daily living. Using data from 3635 participants in the Health and Retirement Study, Bavishi, Slade, and Levy (2016) looked for a survival advantage for book readers. They found that not only did book readers live 23 months longer than non-book readers, books were “protective regardless of gender, wealth, education, or health” (p. 44). Other benefits of reading include the ability to better cope with loneliness (Carsello & Creaser, 1983; Duncan & Goggin, 1982; Rane-Szostak & Herth, 1995) and with stress (Smith, 1993; Wolf, 1977).

In their recent study of 32 Chinese Singaporean older library patrons, Luyt and Ann (2011) report that older readers themselves perceive such practical benefits too.

...there was an overly instrumental view of reading on the part of the elderly which tended to associate it with skills, employment, and earning an income. Such a view precluded other more artistic or leisurely uses of reading that may be of use to the older adults at this stage of their lives (p. 211).

One of the few reports of research that extended a more nuanced representation of aesthetic engagement with language and texts among older people found that reading literature offered “contemplative space for feeling” and in the words of one reader, supported the “capacity to find again what is re-freshing is important” (Davis & Magee, n.d.).

3. Methodology

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In an attempt to understand more about what the pleasures of reading might be among older people, an interpretive case study (Stake, 2008) was conducted using a purposive sample of readers who identified as people who liked to read and were willing to talk about their reading, were 70 years of age or older, had been retired for at least five years, and were living independently in their own homes. Participants meeting the inclusion criteria were recruited through personal connections or via research notices posted in selected seniors’ residences. In keeping with a case study methodology designed to explore the meaning of reading with elderly participants, a “person-centred” approach was taken, “valuing interdependence, recognition, respect and trust” (Letich, 2010, p. 129).

The authors also take seriously the obligation in phenomenological studies of reading “to do justice to how readers respond to the words they encounter” (Felski, 2008, p. 17).

Accordingly, the principal investigator (Rothbauer) conducted qualitative narrative interviews (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 153-155) using an open, conversational approach with five readers (four women and one man) between the ages of 75 and 90 years. It was important to provide time and flexibility in the interview structure and setting to allow participants to think about and explore through open conversation, their ideas about reading and, in particular, their sense of what reading meant to them.

Interviews were transcribed by the principal investigator to represent the entire conversation with the participants but did not include non-verbal and involuntary utterances (e.g., coughing or clearing of the throat). The following additional transcript conventions were also employed: square brackets around ellipses indicate removed content that is not relevant;

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ellipses without square brackets indicate natural pauses; and square brackets around words indicate paraphrases, clarification or amendments made for grammatical corrections.

The meanings of the interviews were interpreted through inductive processes of close reading and thematic analysis (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 207-218). The principal investigator led this analysis and consulted with the second author to discuss and confirm emerging findings. The “interview knowledge” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, pp. 53-56) was then recontextualized in a hermeneutic process of reading the thematic findings against the specific metaphor of reading as a lifeline. The lifeline metaphor is a common way to talk about reading both in mainstream and scholarly discourses (Felski, 2008, p. 43; Ross et al., 2018, pp. 154-160). It emerged as a thematic category through close reading of the interview transcripts. Rothbauer, as a reading researcher, was already attuned to this theme through her existing orientation to reading and reading experiences (McKechnie et al., 2007; Rothbauer 2004a, 2004b; Rothbauer et al., 2016). Dalmer’s (2017) scholarly expertise related to multiple contexts of aging provided critical nuances in the interpretation of the interview data, allowing the investigation to deepen the significance of the lifeline metaphor.

The interviews were designed to elicit talk about reading that emerged from the participants’ own understandings of what it meant to each of them to be a reader and to read for pleasure. To begin, each participant was asked direct questions about their reading habits; for example, they might have been asked to talk a bit about what reading was like for them, what they liked to read and why, what they were currently reading, and if they could recall a singularly important book or author in their lives. Conversations then developed and evolved in direct response to these initial questions asked. Each participant was also asked about the role of

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reading in their present-day lives and their perceived benefits of and barriers to reading. None of the participants had any difficulty answering the interview prompts and gave every impression of enjoying the opportunity to share their reading habits and interests.

This case study explores the everyday reading experiences as articulated by older people themselves and as such, this work is situated in the body of naturalistic research into the reading accounts of “real readers” (Ross, 2001; Swann & Allington, 2009). This individualistic and idiographic approach comes with certain limitations, including the small sample size that prohibits generalization to larger populations. The pilot project reported here used a small sample of participants to explore the viability of interviewing older people about the place and meaning of reading in their particular contexts of growing old. The richness of the both the research data and the research process supports developing the pilot into a larger qualitative inquiry into the role of reading among older people which will be able to take into account additional contexts of aging, including recruitment of a more diverse sample of older adults. Another limitation of this study concerns what can be seen as an ambiguous conceptualization of key concepts and interpretation of findings. This is a tradeoff with the methods of descriptive writing and expressive interpretation designed to illustrate the meaning-making that occurs in the contexts of narrative interviews and thematic analysis.

Several methods were used to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) including relying on established research methods in reading research (i.e., qualitative interviews); assessing the meaning of emerging themes by checking for corroboration across participants; establishing rapport and reminding participants throughout the entire research process of their rights to refuse to participate, to withdraw or to not answer questions; and strategies of reflective

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writing, peer scrutiny, thick description, and engagement with previous reading research (Shenton, 2004).

The interviews were filled with gentle laughter and were often punctuated with quiet moments of reflection as participants recalled episodes from their lives that intersected with their stories of reading. As is true in other reading research that takes account of the reading experiences of “real readers” (Ross et al., 2006, 2018; Rothbauer et al., 2016), reading is shown to be about so much more than fitting into categories regarding an individual’s media diet, reading’s cognitive, psychological or affective effects, or appreciation of genre or literary conventions. Conversations about reading functioned as a lens through which to understand and reflect on identity, aging, loss, and the pleasures of life. By asking questions about the role or the place of reading in one’s life, questions are simultaneously asked about life and its many meanings.

3.1 Portraits of readers and their general orientation to reading

Using information extrapolated from the conversational interviews, portraits of the five participants who shared their reading stories with the researchers are presented here. Details are presented in broad brushstrokes to prevent the possibility of deductive disclosure of personal identities that the researchers are bound to protect due to ethical requirements. All readers in this study were heterosexual, three were widowed (one within a couple of years, one within the decade, and one for several decades), two were married, and all were parents and grandparents. The participants were white with Dutch, British, and Canadian origins, and all had lived in

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Canada for most of their lives. Sheila² and Hilda had had professional careers in healthcare and social work, respectively. Edgar was a retired tradesman, and Maud was an accomplished artist. Edgar and Karen were actively involved in volunteer work for local seniors’ organizations and churches. Two of the participants lived in homes that they owned, and three lived in rented apartments, two of which were located in a seniors-only building. Hilda was legally blind due to macular degeneration and two other participants wore hearing aids that were remarked upon during the interviews when they required adjustments. Three of the five participants also described varying experiences with memory loss. Maud, the oldest participant in this study, a widow, had lost her ability to drive in recent months, required the use of a walker to get around, and articulated a growing sense of isolation due to her lack of mobility. Edgar, also a widower, was making plans to move in with one his children in the months following the interview.

4. Findings

The participants comprised a sample of readers who were varied in their reading interests: Sheila and Hilda were avid readers of literary fiction, especially titles written by Canadian authors. Due to her loss of vision, Hilda was reliant on whatever was available from the public library in audio formats, and she expressed disappointment in the available choices. Maud also relied on a public library service that delivered reading materials to her home, and while she exclusively read fiction and preferred literary classics, she was finding some enjoyment in more contemporary works of fiction based on the books that were selected for her, provided the titles did not have “that rude language that they use nowadays.” While Edgar read stereotypical “men’s fiction”

² All names of participants are pseudonyms.

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including works by Dick Francis, Ken Follett, and Philip Margolin, and also enjoyed *Reader’s Digest*, at the time of the interview he was deeply engaged with readings on mindfulness, the only non-fiction reader in the sample. Karen was a voracious reader of mysteries and romance and had piles of mass market books around her home, claiming that she probably had “200 books in the bedroom that I have not read as yet.” Karen was unique in the case study sample for still having an extensive personal library of books that she owned and for regularly purchasing her reading materials. Other readers in this sample also bought books, but usually as gifts for their children and grandchildren. Although all participants had some books in their homes, they had weeded down their personal book collections as they moved houses or as in the case of Hilda, as reading became more difficult she gave her books away:

I gave now 45 books away. The kids and the grandkids were all in the summer home and we celebrate all the birthdays, and I gave a lot of my favourite books away. They really liked it. I have to find out again what titles I gave away. I have the authors like Gabrielle Roy, Richard B. Wright, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence. Those are the ones I just loved, loved, loved.

All participants were also public library users, some were recipients of visiting services for homebound patrons (having reading materials selected and delivered to their homes), others made use of the ability to reserve desired reading materials for pick-up at their local branch, and some visited the physical library to browse. Finally, all five of the older people in this study were lifelong readers. Some could recall times when they read less due to family or work responsibilities or simply because of life circumstances, but all eagerly and easily shared their

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reading histories and their lengthy engagement with the pleasures of reading over the course of their lives.

4.1 Reading as a lifeline

Working inductively from multiple close readings of the interview transcripts, the theme of reading as a lifeline emerged and was further developed by reading it against Oxford English Dictionary definitions of the term “lifeline”. Three overlapping themes cohere around the lifeline metaphor: personal reading histories as a method of navigating one’s life; reading as a means of escape and as an essential line of communication; and reading as a way to preserve what is deemed important about living and life.

4.1.1 Reading as a “line of life”

Lifeline, *n.*

1. *Palmistry*. *Usu.* as two words. A mark following the crease of the skin on the palm of the hand supposed to indicate the length of one's life

3. a. The course of a person’s life, represented as a line from birth to death;
 (“lifeline,” OED Online).

Reviewing the definitions and etymology of the headword “lifeline” in the *OED* leads to a rabbit hole exploration of cross-references to related terms such as “life” and “line.” The palmistry sense of “line of life” is cross-referenced to the sense of “line” as a “course of action, procedure, life, thought, or conduct” (“line, n.2.”, OED Online). Both definitions suggest a conceptualization for understanding a reading account or history as a lifeline that represents one’s course of life. Although the interviews were not designed to capture participants’

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exhaustive accounts of their lifelong reading histories, the frequent mentions of varied reading experiences over their lives were almost always contextualized with references to friends and to family members. When asked if there were times in their lives when they did not read, all participants described an ebb and flow of reading engagement throughout their lives with its intensity disrupted by major family events such as childbirth and parenting, illnesses, and the deaths of loved ones. They also noted that their work sometimes took them away from their reading, although like Karen, Hilda still managed to always find time for reading:

I always read before I went to sleep, every single day and I would have books on my night table and I would read. I would read in the day time, and I would read quite often in the morning if I would wake up early. I would say that I read all of the time [throughout my life].

Sheila and Karen were avid record-keepers of their reading. As Karen sat down on her sofa to settle into the interview, it quickly became apparent that she had hauled out several plastic totes full of papers for the occasion: they were filled with printed and handwritten notes as well as newspaper and magazine clippings. Karen described using them to keep track of her reading and her favorite authors and their multiple series, something that she has been doing “for as long as [she] could remember.” She noted new books, books that she read and when she read them, books that she still needed to read, and periodically she would revise and update her lists. It became clear that the records were a proud accumulation of evidence of a reading life, and that their contents were directly tied to Karen’s identity as a reader.

Another participant, Sheila, also kept meticulous records of her reading choices, writing titles and authors into notebooks dating back decades, all organized by year. During the

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interview she would refer to her notebooks, thinking about a particular time in her life, looking up the years and then reviewing what she was reading at that time. Conversation easily turned at these moments to recollections and memories of life events involving families and friends. She would also from time to time, gently stroke the notebooks as she talked, signifying, perhaps, a tenderness for the reading life these notebooks represent.

Hilda “never did” keep track of her reading—as a friend of Sheila, she laughingly said that she “always relied on Sheila.” Despite this lack of a record of her reading, throughout the interview, Hilda’s stories of her reading were intimately woven into her recollections of family—her own history as young girl growing up in Holland during the Second World War, as well as references to more recent family gatherings, visits, and encounters. Almost all of her reading memories, including some of her earliest memories, involved family, illustrating the capacity of reading to allow for both escape and engagement:

We had a large family [12 siblings] and I used to sit on the chair with my knees up, my elbows on the table, my thumbs behind my ears to drown out the sounds of my siblings and that is how I would read for hours and hours.

And I used to tell [fairy tale] stories to my siblings at night. We had the bedroom doors open and I would tell a story—gruesome if I could. And they would always fall asleep and then I wouldn’t hear a thing, and I would [call out], “now, who’s awake” and there wouldn’t be an answer.

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When Hilda emigrated to Canada, she recalled, “that was one of the worries I had...wondering how, because I loved to read so much, what will there be in Canada?” She fell in love with Canadian literary fiction and until she lost her vision, read it almost exclusively.

Neither Maud nor Edgar kept track of their reading, but like the others they used significant moments from their lives to orient themselves to the role of reading in their lives, illustrating its inextricable warp and weft. Edgar’s wife died two years prior and he was still grieving her loss. His reading narrative was unmistakably alive with his memories of a beloved spouse. His apartment walls were covered with photos and paintings of his wife and since her death, he described a serious, self-directed reading course on mindfulness. About five years earlier he had “picked up a book [on mindfulness]” which introduced the topic to him, but he sustained his interest through bereavement classes after his wife’s death. At the time of the interview, Edgar continued to regularly meet at the hospice with about 30 others for a mindfulness book club and discussion group. Much of the interview focused on the way that reading (and writing, as he wrote poems inspired “by the love of my wife”) allowed Edgar to grieve and to cope. Edgar’s reading at the time of our interview was also a way to maintain a connection with his wife. His story of reading is an example of how reading can mark a significant break and the start of a divergent path on a reader’s lifeline.

Like Edgar, Maud tended to focus her thoughts about reading on her most recent experiences. In the midst of a discussion about what she was reading at the time of the interview, she said:

I must tell you one book I really really thought was good. I don’t know if I remember the title correctly, but it’s called “The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Jumped Out the Window

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and Disappeared”³ that belonged to my nephew. That made me laugh out loud because when you’re older, you live through all those things, and it was just hilarious [...]. Oh, very funny, very funny [...]. It was so horrible but it was so funny.

As Maud recalled reading Jonas Jonasson’s bestselling work, she was at her most animated—clearly conveying her pleasure with this book and her response to it. Part of her pleasure with this reading experience had to do with her recognition of the humor and absurdity that is often associated with aging (and of living) into extreme old age, a perspective which she felt only “other older people would get.” After this book, she read another translated story about elderly people living in “a home who stole some money”⁴ which she also found humorous. This kind of reading, like Edgar’s mindfulness readings, marked a new path in Maud’s reading history, with a move towards stories that allowed her to feel pleasure during what were sometimes quite difficult experiences of aging (discussed further below). When combined with the other cases, it becomes apparent that reading functions as a way to navigate and chart one’s life events. This metaphor of reading suggests it is a way of keeping such events in sharp relief, however, as illuminated in the ensuing section, a competing metaphor posits reading as a way to escape one’s life, giving rise to a tension that is often evident in the same accounts.

4.1.2 Reading as means of escape

³ Maud almost got it right: Jonas Jonasson’s book (translated from Swedish to English in 2012) is called *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared*.

⁴ Likely the first book in Catharina Ingelman-Sundberg’s League of Pensioners series, called *The Little Old Lady Who Broke All the Rules*.

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3. b. Something that is depended on or which provides a means of escape from a difficult situation; an essential line of communication, supply route, etc.

(“lifeline”, OED Online)

The notion of reading as escape is commonly observed in reading studies as well as in ordinary understandings of what it means to read (Rothbauer, 2004; Ross et al., 2018, pp. 21-22). In this case study, while this dimension of the lifeline metaphor is apparent in all of the reading accounts offered by the older readers who participated, it is best illustrated by Maud. A few months shy of her ninetieth birthday, Maud was the oldest participant in the case study, and unlike the others, she also lived with significant physical pain that she experienced on a daily basis. She also experienced hearing loss saying, “that it got very very bad in the last two years. I have no hearing in my left ear and haven’t had for years, but this one [the right ear] is failing me now.” The interview was conducted in the late morning at her dining table in a small apartment, darkened by the heavy foliage of a large maple tree whose branches touched the only window in the room. The walls featured several richly colored art works which were later revealed to be her own artistic output from a lengthy visit to the Canadian Arctic some six or seven years earlier. Maud explained that she was now more or less homebound since losing the ability to drive the past winter, and that despite some communication via Facebook with far-flung grandchildren, and visits from local friends and family members, she was feeling a bit isolated. At the beginning of the interview, after reviewing the criteria for participating, Maud immediately and emphatically declared, “I like to read for *pleasure*” and over the course of the interview, it was evident that reading did indeed constitute the primary pleasure of her daily life. She was dependent on others for her reading materials—a friend, a grandson, and a niece gave her books, and the library delivered a bag of six books every month. Consequently, she said, “It was very

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hard to say [what I like to read] because I read anything,” and then followed up by saying, “I used to when I was younger—I would often read for information. I don’t do that so much anymore. I just read for enjoyment.” Her account of her recent reads reflects a diverse range of titles: Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*; American bestsellers such as *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett and *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd; the recent multiple award-winning Canadian titles, *Us Conductors* by Sean Michaels, and *The Book of Negroes* by Laurence Hill; and British writer David Lodge’s *Deaf Sentence*. She had also recently read Austen, Tolkien, Dickens, and Solzhenitsyn along with a number of “light” murder mysteries that the library sent to her, the titles of which she could not recall.

Reading clearly constitutes a pleasurable pastime for Maud, and as she has grown older, it has replaced other activities. Maud said that she reads every day now “because I don’t go out much” and “because I can’t do very much else. I used to like rug hooking and painting and all that kind of stuff, and now, I do very little.” When talking for a few minutes about one of her favorite books, Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s *The Little Prince*, that was, at the time of the interview, being staged as a ballet by the National Ballet of Canada, Maud reflected,

So, I thought when I saw the ballet, that would be really nice, but I don’t go to anything like that because of my hearing problems. I don’t even—I used to listen to the radio a lot, to CBC [the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation]. I don’t listen to it at all because it is such hard work. I can’t get it.

Reading also has what might be called an analgesic effect for her. When asked directly what the benefits of reading were for her, Maud replied, “It helps if you’re in pain. I have a lot of pain and reading is very good. I get very interested in what I’m reading and I don’t realize how

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much pain I have.” Furthermore, in Maud’s insights about her reading, she threaded in mentions of the people who shared books with her by bringing her their copies of various titles. Using Maud’s reading as an exemplar, it is evident that external to the books themselves, reading also functioned as a line of communication and as a means of sociality for her. Maud’s case illustrates how reading transcends a seeming contradiction, spanning an escape *from*—pain and isolation, and an escape *to*—vicarious experience, pleasure, and connections with others.

4.1.3 Reading as life preserver

2. a. Chiefly *Naut.* A line or rope intended to be instrumental in saving life, such as a line strongly secured along a vessel to which sailors may hook their safety harnesses, a rope attached to a lifebuoy, or one used by firefighters (“lifeline”, OED Online)

In Maud’s case, the human network associated with her access to reading materials suggests an overlooked method of making and sustaining connections in a quotidian existence that is circumscribed by the effects of aging. Reading activities are associated with preserving vitality by encouraging interactions with others whether these others are situated in physical or textual worlds. Other readers in this study also shared stories that illustrate how reading functioned to preserve their quality of life by helping to maintain their identities as readers. Hilda, an avid reader for some 80 plus years, was legally blind and read by listening to audiobooks. It was interesting to ask Hilda what her life would be like if she could no longer read, as sighted readers usually answer this by imagining, with some horror, what it would be to be blind. Hilda answered,

It would be horrendous. It would be just that. And still a loss. Dammit, how I wish I could see better, you know... You cannot just read, just pick up a book and just read. It’s

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a loss. But then at age 84 I could read very well, so many people do not reach that age.

And I am able to walk, and I do exercises, am independent in the house.

She expressed frustration and sorrow at the loss of her autonomy as a reader throughout the interview, but at same time, she rarely made a distinction between reading and listening as sighted readers might, suggesting perhaps, that her engagement with narrative and with language is all-consuming. Hilda often “re-reads” audiobooks three or four times, a reading practice that she carried over from print texts. She reads a book once to enjoy the plot, and then again to revel in the language and style—an experience that she explicitly described as being “able to see what you read.” Hilda’s books are touchstones for her and are, in her words, “friends,” signifying a rich and joyful life.

Sheila also somewhat wistfully referred to her books as her “old friends.” Several times during the interview, she mentioned that she and her husband were at a point in their lives where they were downsizing and books were among the items to be donated or given away. At one point during the lengthy interview, Sheila got up from the table, pointing to the bookshelves that held books that she wanted to keep. Her pleasure with the old favorites was obvious as she stroked their spines and read out the names of the authors of the books on the shelf, among them Alice Munro, Barbara Pym, Lillian Beckwith, Jane Austen, Peter Gzowski,⁵ W. O. Mitchell, Tolkien, and an anthology of prose and poetry from high school. This small collection opened out, however, to the multitude of books that Sheila had read over her life as recorded by hand in her notebooks. More than any response to the interview questions, Sheila’s joyful engagement with her reading life was evinced by her entire orientation to an opportunity to share her reading

⁵ Peter Gzowski, deceased 2002, was a much-loved Canadian broadcaster.

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history, reading preferences, and daily reading practices. The hour-long interview was infused with her love of reading and literature.

Reading for Karen is also all-consuming and life-affirming, albeit in a different way. Karen structured her day around her reading activities. It could be argued that Karen has constructed a post-retirement career focused on her reading. As discussed above, she compiled detailed and voluminous notes on her reading; the research, writing, and organization of records associated with her favorite authors constitute a significant everyday activity. When asked if she read every day, Karen replied, “I read when I eat my breakfast. I read with my lunch and I read with my supper and then sometimes I’ll read before I go to bed.” This intense engagement was in evidence everywhere in her apartment, including a wicker basket sitting prominently on her dining table, refreshed regularly with five or six new books next in line to be read. Karen’s reading and its related work give clear purpose and pleasure to her daily life.

It is perhaps an overstatement to claim that reading functions as a life preserver, but in keeping with the OED definition, reading is the line that connects to the rescue vehicle or to the lifebuoy, not the lifebuoy itself. Whatever is on the other end of the lifeline varies from reader to reader, but the older participants in this case study give ample evidence that reading does connect them to meaning, to purpose, to pleasure, to people, and to the world.

5. Discussion: Framing the creative possibilities of reading as resiliency and pleasure

Using the metaphor of reading as a lifeline as a means to understand the reading experiences of the older readers in this case study ran the risk of representing its participants as people needing help to escape the travails associated with aging: segregation, decline, disease, and disability.

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The authors have also aimed to show, through rich description and detailed interview excerpts that feature the participants’ own voices, that reading supports resiliency for older people in their ordinary, everyday lives. Drawing from interviews with older people on resilience, geographer and gerontologist Wiles (2017, para. 6) writes:

A wealth of research has illuminated a wide range of personal strategies and behaviours related to resilience; the older people we listened to also spoke of individual characteristics and strategies they saw as being related to resilience. These include things such as accommodating and adapting to changes and fluctuations but also knowing when to push for change; attitudes of endurance and gratitude; balancing acceptance and struggle or resistance; being mindful of having a sense of purpose; maintaining social resources and connectedness; contributing to and being involved in communities of interest; engaging in spiritual practice; reflective story-telling and life review; and even critical consciousness of and resistance to ageist norms and values in society.

The three iterations of the lifeline metaphor show how reading enables resiliency by supporting autonomy and independence and, when reading is shared with other people, can promote a reflective stance on one’s life.

The research approach and findings reported here also connect to recent interest in information behavior research that recognizes and addresses the role of the body (Cox, Griffin, & Hartel, 2017; Lloyd, 2010). The qualitative interviews on the topic and practice of reading reported here were designed to draw out readers’ own perceptions about the role and meaning of reading in their own lives. To convey one’s understanding of the experience of reading

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necessarily requires attention and reflection on how reading is embodied. The physical activities that involve connecting to texts of all kinds, the sensory engagement of consuming and recalling texts, the sheer materiality of the texts themselves, as well as of their artefactual traces, the pleasures of sharing reading and ideas about reading are all clear indications of how the body is implicated in the accounts of reading offered by the readers in this study. Furthermore, as Cox et al. write, “the acts of reading and writing are embodied...and have always been at the heart of information behavior research...” (2017, p. 399).

The findings of the inquiry also reflect a recognition of embodiment through consideration of the intersection of texts, of reading practices and environments, and of aging bodies in general. In many of the reading accounts offered by the participants, there was an emphasis on what they did with their “reading bodies” over different temporal episodes throughout the course of their lives. “Reading bodies” were sometimes (and sometimes simultaneously) sources of strength and struggle—bodies that had read over many decades and that knew how to adopt a stance towards reading that gave pleasure, comfort, and resilience; but reading bodies that also responded, not always satisfactorily, to changes in health and mobility. Participants had to navigate this divide between strength and struggle, negotiating different facets depending on the day, time of day, week, or year. The three dimensions of the lifeline metaphor explicitly touch on embodied aspects of reading from the physical reminders and record-keeping associated with a reading life, to the analgesic properties of absorbed reading that provided escape from the pains and losses associated with growing old, and the reflective aspects of reading that create space to commemorate important and enjoyable life moments. A

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consideration of the ways in which information is embodied in such reading experiences is a rich vein for further research.

Conversations with the five participants represent one step towards creating momentum for other studies in supporting the first of the American Library Association’s *Guidelines for Library and Information Services to Older Adults* (2008), that is, to obtain current data about older populations. In keeping with the Reference and User Services Association’s *Library Services to Older Adults Guidelines* (2008), these findings serve as a call and an invitation for LIS professionals and scholars to “utilize the experiences and expertise of older adults,” honoring the diversity inherent in older adult populations that has the tendency to be overlooked (Dalmer, 2017, p. 15). In addition to the need for subsequent research to privilege the voices of older adult participants, practitioners and researchers must also question assumptions related to older adults’ obstacles to reading. Such barriers may be attributed more so to socially constructed problems than the often-assumed cognitive or physical ailments.

While reading is documented to confer a “survival advantage” (Bavashi et al., 2016), the findings of this study point to advantages beyond the biological. As older adults increasingly elect to age in their homes and in their communities for as long as possible (Vasara, 2015), libraries have the capacity to become integral institutions in their communities, engaging with the older adult as a whole person, not merely as a sum of their interests, quirks, or ailments. Libraries, then, both in practice and in research, must respond with a concerted effort to enhance the existing, outdated research with and about aging populations. This present study, for example, can be used as a starting point to bolster what little is currently known about engaging with older adults in readers’ advisory interactions (Ahlvers, 2006). This study assumes an

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individualistic perspective but there is an urgent need for perspectives regarding older people, reading, and libraries that ask questions about the ways in which they are interconnected and interdependent. More must be understood about older adult readers’ everyday lives in contemporary society to more responsively support their wellbeing.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a small disruption to biomedical discourses on the benefits of reading for older people by closely examining participant narratives on their own reading and by not distilling reading experiences into overly simplified categories. This disruption is also possible because we purposively applied a critical age studies approach, and therefore struggled against replicating socially and culturally embedded, stereotypical assumptions associated with old age. This case study enlivens and enriches the existing body of research on reading and older people by making contributions to knowledge about older people’s aesthetic and affective engagements with texts of all kinds across their life course, but especially in their post-retirement years. The insights gained by looking closely at what reading means to a small sample of older adults illustrates that policy and planning concerned with the well-being of older people in contemporary society can benefit from a deeper consideration of everyday practices such as reading for pleasure. The findings show that the activities and connections made through leisure reading enable older people to both cope with and celebrate their lives and their stories. Reading does this by infusing daily life with pleasurable escape or mindful engagement, and by building bridges to resilient attitudes and behaviours.

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