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# Manipulating inferences: interpretative problems and their effects on readers

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## Abstract

This chapter explores some of the ways in which prose fiction texts can be thought of as manipulating readers because of different kinds of inferential processes they encourage. It focuses in particular on ways in which texts can make it hard for readers to derive inferences from representations of the texts as a whole. The discussion focuses in particular on two novels: Rachel Cusk's (2014) *Outline* and Eimear McBride's (2013) *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, contrasting these with a novel which does not pose such difficulties (Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*). Both Cusk's and McBride's novels have features which make it difficult for readers to represent them as a whole. While it is not hard to understand individual parts of *Outline*, it is hard to grasp it as a whole, partly because it mainly consists of fairly unmediated representations of what other characters say to the narrator. Readers of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* find it hard even to understand what is happening in individual parts of the novel. In the case of McBride's novel, these difficulties encourage a sense of immersion in the text and a sense of the reading experience as relatively 'realistic'. Cusk's novel can be understood as realistic in some ways (in that the narrator does not do much to mediate what others say to her) and unrealistic in others (our daily experience is not reducible to what we hear others say). The chapter argues that we can understand responses to the novels partly by considering the nature of inferential processes they give rise to and that this can help to account for aspects of the experience of reading them. Evidence from readers' and reviewers' responses can also help us to understand how readers treat fictional texts as acts of communication. Within the terms of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), they provide evidence that the texts raise fairly specific expectations of relevance and that readers notice when these seem not to be satisfied.

## 1. Introduction

This chapter explores some of the ways in which fictional texts can be seen as manipulating the inferential processes of readers by making particular kinds of inferred conclusions ('explicatures' and 'implicatures') more or less easy to derive.<sup>1</sup> It focuses in particular on interpretative difficulties which texts can raise and the effects of these. These sometimes relate to relatively 'local' reader inferences derived from specific parts of texts (these have been the most common focus of work on pragmatic stylistics) and sometimes to relatively 'global' inferences based on representations of large parts of texts or texts as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

The chapter considers one novel which makes it relatively difficult for readers to represent the text as a whole (Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, 2014) and one which makes it hard for readers to make local inferences (Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*, 2013). It contrasts these with a novel which does not seem to pose particular difficulties for readers in making either local or global inferences (Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*, 2017). Discussion of the texts is illustrated here by comments on the website goodreads.com, which encourages readers to share recommendations and reviews. These show readers focusing on questions about what worthwhile inferences can be drawn from each of the novels, as well as on the local and global interpretative difficulties raised by Cusk's and McBride's novels.

Clark (2014) suggests that particular kinds of local and global inferences play key roles in the evaluation of texts. Positive evaluations are more likely when readers find it relatively easy to represent parts of texts and texts as a whole, and when these can be used to derive further conclusions which readers consider worthwhile. Clark's model is used to organise the discussion here. The discussion focuses on questions about what worthwhile conclusions can be drawn from reading Batuman's novel, on how to represent Cusk's novel overall, and on difficulties in representing local parts of McBride's novel.

The chapter also considers how these texts vary with regard to how much they encourage an 'immersive' perspective and to how far they can be understood as realistic, relating this discussion to the interpretative difficulties they raise. Batuman's novel encourages a fairly detached perspective, presenting a narrative where events are packaged and presented as having happened in the past. While Cusk's novel shares these features, it can be seen as more realistic in some ways (in that the narrator presents fairly unmediated narratives told to her by others) but not in others (in that our real-life experience does not consist only of such unmediated narratives). McBride's novel encourages a less detached and more immersive reading experience. The linguistic style of the novel is highly marked and arguably not realistic but this encourages an immersive response where

readers feel that they are experiencing events from a perspective similar to that of the main character. These differences can be accounted for partly by considering the inferential processes of readers and, suggesting that work on pragmatics might complement other approaches which have considered immersion and the details of reader experience, such as work on text world theory (Gavins 2007, Gavins and Lahey 2016, Lahey 2014) and work on narrative (see, for example, Gerrig 1993, Ryan 2001). Batuman's novel can be understood as manipulating readers only in the very broad sense that it is designed to give rise to particular kinds of inferential processes and conclusions. Cusk's and McBride's novels are manipulative in a more restrictive sense in that they give rise to difficulties which lead to less overt effects. At a fairly explicit level, readers can consider the nature of both novels, assess their aims, and evaluate their responses to them. Less overtly, each text encourages responses which are more experiential and less easy to describe or paraphrase. Cusk's novel can be understood as a series of summaries of the narrator's encounters and so lead to inferential paths which involve reflection on the nature of life and storytelling. McBride's novel moves further from the relatively detached perspective of Batuman's *The Idiot*, encouraging immersive responses which are far removed from the summaries of experience presented by Cusk.

A concluding argument is that the comments on goodreads.com used as illustrations here provide evidence that readers treat works of prose fiction as communicative acts and so that pragmatic principles apply to them as they do to other communicative acts. While the discussion here does not require understanding of much technical material, the next section introduces the relevance-theoretic distinction between explicatures and implicatures which is presupposed in later discussion.

## **2. Explicatures and implicatures**

The focus here is on how the responses of readers are affected by the ways in which writers have formulated their texts. This section discusses ideas about explicatures and implicatures which have been applied previously and are relevant in accounting for both what writers do when producing prose fiction and what readers do when responding to it.

The central focus of much work on pragmatics is the communication of implicatures, i.e. of assumptions which are communicated implicitly and indirectly. Recent work in pragmatics also focuses on explicitly communicated assumptions. In relevance-theoretic work, these are termed 'explicatures' and, in common with other approaches, seen as communicated partly explicitly.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, fictional texts provide evidence for explicatures and implicatures. Naturally, then, much work in pragmatic stylistics has focused on accounting for these and for how the effects of texts can be partly explained with reference to them. We can illustrate with reference to the utterance produced in direct speech by a character in Rachel Cusk's novel *Outline* in the following passage (the narrator and the man who says this have just met and are sitting next to each other in a plane which is flying to Athens):

(1)           The man to my right turned and asked me the reason for my visit to Athens. I said I was going there for work.

                  'I hope you are staying near water,' he said. 'Athens will be very hot.'

(Cusk 2014: 6)

Pragmatic inferences involved in understanding what is explicitly communicated by the first part of the man's utterance here (its explicatures) include assumptions about the referents of pronouns (*I* and *you*), the time referred to in the utterance, and whether he is making a

statement, asking a question or something else. Inferences about these might result in an explicature which we can represent, fairly simplistically, as (2):

- (2) The man on the plane is expressing his hope that the narrator will be staying near enough to the sea to make it relatively easy to cope with hot weather while in Athens after the flight they are both on.

The representation in (2) is simplified in several ways. It indicates that the narrator and readers need to make not only the inferences mentioned above but also an inference about how near to the water is intended and that the intended distance is partly vague. It does not offer a clear indication of what exactly is inferred.

One key implicature of the man's utterance is represented in (3):

- (3) The narrator will be uncomfortable during her stay if she is not staying somewhere near water.

If pragmatic stylistic analyses involved only the description of explicatures and implicatures like these, this research programme would have limited interest. In fact, researchers have focused on a range of complexities associated with them, including questions about the status and strength of explicatures and implicatures, about who is responsible for them, and about complexities in communicating and identifying them.

Both explicatures and implicatures can be communicated more or less strongly.<sup>4</sup> There are two ways in which the strength of communicated assumptions can vary. First, it can be more or less clear that an individual is intending to be communicative at all. A speaker might, for example, repeat a word for a particular effect or simply because they are thinking of what

to say next. Second, it can be more or less clear that particular inferable conclusions are being intentionally communicated. We can illustrate this by considering some other possible implicatures of the man's utterance in (1), some of which are listed in (4):

- (4) a. The man cares about whether the narrator is comfortable during her stay in Athens.
- b. The man cares about the narrator's well-being.
- c. The man is knowledgeable about Athens.
- d. The man is knowledgeable about Greece.
- e. The man will be able to help with other kinds of advice.

These are only some of the possible implicatures of the man's utterance. One thing to notice about them is that there is less evidence for them than for the implicature in (3) above (they are also more plausibly deniable). Further, if the narrator (or readers) did not recover any of them, we could still say that they have understood the utterance. If they did not recover the implicature in (3), we would be likely to say that they had missed the point of what the man said.

Utterances in general convey more than one implicature. Some are fairly weakly evidenced and unlikely actually to be inferred. Utterances also vary with regard to how many implicatures they support and how strongly. Within relevance theory, the term 'poetic effects' has been used to refer to utterances which achieve relevance by giving rise to a wide range of fairly weak implicatures (for discussion, see Sperber and Wilson 1986: 217-224; Pilkington 2000).

Another area of pragmatic uncertainty was identified in early work on pragmatic stylistics (see, for example Leech and Short 1981: 237-254). This concerns how readers think about the sources of explicatures and implicatures. While the text as a whole is created

by an author who is (to varying degrees) responsible for its explicatures and implicatures, some conclusions are understood as being communicated by narrators and some by characters.

For example, when the man in Cusk's novel produces the utterance in (2), we infer that he is communicating the explicatures and implicatures mentioned above. The narrator is telling us that he said this and so his utterance is embedded within her account of what happened (explicatures here are embedded within other explicatures). Her narration is in turn embedded in the author Cusk's communicative act in writing the novel. Of course, things can be more complicated with multiple 'levels' of communication involved and various kinds of explicit and implicit attitudes communicated along the way. To take one well-known example, when characters speak in the central parts of *Wuthering Heights*, their utterances are conveyed by Nelly Dean, whose utterances are being conveyed by the narrator Lockwood, whose utterances are being conveyed by the author Emily Brontë.

Clearly, writers can formulate texts in ways which affect assumptions about attitudes towards and the reliability of narrators and characters (and themselves as authors, although this is not a topic for this chapter). They can also make it more or less easy for readers to come to conclusions about these and to feel confident about their conclusions. The next section focuses on the three novels considered here, which vary with regard to the kinds of interpretative difficulties they give rise to.

### **3. Understanding the novels: three kinds of difficulties**

Arguably, a key aim in reading a fictional text is to derive interpretations from the text as a whole. As Clark (2009: 199-201) points out, these 'global' inferences can include fairly formal literary ones, e.g. concluding that *Wuthering Heights* is about 'the problems of evil in this world', a view attributed to some critics by Shunami (1973: 452), and more personal ones, e.g. deciding that a friend is or is not likely to enjoy reading the text.<sup>5</sup> Clark (2014)



suggests that local and global inferences play key roles in positive evaluations. Discussing Chekhov's story *The Lady With The Little Dog* (Chekhov 2002) he suggests that the ease of recollecting individual parts of the story and of the story as a whole makes it relatively easy for readers to continue thinking about the story after they have read it and to derive further inferred conclusions from these representations.<sup>6</sup> It is also important that these further conclusions seem to be worth the effort involved in deriving them.

The novels discussed here vary with regard to how easy it is to reach inferential conclusions based on them. Here are the opening passages of each novel.

(5)

### FALL

I didn't know what email was until I got to college. I had heard of email and knew that in some sense I would "have" it. "You'll be so fancy," said my mother's sister, who had married a computer scientist, "sending your e, mails." She emphasised the "e" and paused before "mail."

That summer, I heard email mentioned with increasing frequency. "Things are changing so fast," my father said. "Today at work I surfed the World Wide Web. One second, I was in the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. One second later, I was in Anıtkabir." Anıtkabir, Atatürk's mausoleum, was located in Ankara. I had no idea what my father was talking about, but I knew there was no meaningful sense in which he had been "in" Ankara that day, so I didn't really pay attention.

(Batuman 2017: 3)

(6) **Outline**

I

Before the flight I was invited for lunch at a London club with a billionaire I'd been promised had liberal credentials. He talked in his open-necked shirt about the new software he was developing, that could help organisations identify the employees most likely to rob and betray them in the future. We were meant to be discussing a literary magazine he was thinking of starting up; unfortunately I had to leave before we arrived at that subject. He insisted on paying for a taxi to the airport, which was useful since I was late and had a heavy suitcase.

(Cusk 2014: 3)

- (7) For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day.

Walking up corridors up the stairs. Are you alright? Will you sit, he says. No. I want she says. I want to see my son. Smell from dettol through her skin. Mops diamond floor tiles all as strong. All the burn your eyes out if you had some. Her heart going pat. Going dum dum dum. Don't mind me she's going to your room. See the. Jesus. What have they done? Jesus. Bile

for. Tidal burn. Ssssh. All over. Mother. She cries. Oh no. Oh  
no no no.

(McBride 2013: 2)

Readers unfamiliar with these texts are likely to see the opening of McBride's novel as significantly different from the others. It is much easier to come up with representations of explicatures (directly communicated assumptions) and implicatures (indirectly communicated assumptions) of the first two extracts, even if some of these are incomplete at least at first (in these cases, readers will assume that they can flesh out representations as they discover more by reading on). In reading the passages from Batuman's and Cusk's novels, we do not yet know who the referent of / is in each case but we know that this person is narrating the story. In the passage from Batuman's novel, we know that the narrator is telling us about beginning college, about being about to have access to email, and so on. In Cusk's novel, we know that the narrator is telling us about having lunch with a billionaire before getting on a flight. In the passage from McBride's novel, things are much less clear. We do not know who is speaking or thinking the thoughts or utterances represented or even whether the same person is the thinker or speaker of each part. We cannot assign clear referents for the various pronouns and can only develop much less clear representations of what might be happening as we read through the passage. Readers of McBride's novel are far more likely than readers of the other three passages to make assumptions that they correct later as they read on.<sup>7</sup>

There is a significant difference between uncertainties about implicatures of relatively clear explicatures (e.g. implicatures about what exactly the girl in Batuman's novel is thinking about email and her father's reports on visiting Ankara via the World Wide Web) and uncertainties about explicatures themselves (e.g. about who is speaking or thinking at

the start of McBride's novel, what is for who, who will soon do what, and so on) which lead in turn to uncertainties about implicatures.

The rest of this section indicates some of the difficulties the novels pose for readers, illustrated by comments on goodreads.com and in other reviews, and considers how inferential processes contribute to the experiences of readers. The texts can be seen as differing both in degree of difficulty and in how difficulties arise. For *The Idiot*, the issues are mainly about what worthwhile inferences can be inferred from the novel as a whole. For *Outline*, it is also hard for readers to represent the novel as a whole. For *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, it is difficult even to recover explicatures and implicatures of individual parts of the novel, and representations of these.

### 3.1 Looking for worthwhile conclusions: *The Idiot*

In *The Idiot*, a first-person narrator, Selin, tells us about her first year at Harvard University in the early 1990s, classes she attends and people she meets, including Ivan, a slightly older maths student. She is fascinated by language (studying linguistics and Russian) and by questions about the relationship between language and thought, disagreeing with a linguistics tutor who says that language does not shape thought.<sup>8</sup> She finds she can communicate with Ivan much more positively by email than in person and her relationship with him has connections with an eccentric story used in Russian class which contains only words learners should already know at the stage at which they read each section. Eventually, she follows Ivan to Hungary in the summer and takes on a temporary language teaching job there.

There are no significant difficulties in working out explicatures or implicatures of this novel. It is also fairly easy to represent the novel as a whole. Where some readers struggle is in deriving conclusions which seem worthwhile from their local and global representations.

A simple summary of the novel would say that it tells the story of a young woman's first year at university in the mid-1990s, the relationships she has with other characters and with ideas about language, literature and the world. One reviewer on goodreads.com (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30962053-the-idiot>) summarised it by saying, ' . . . this is Selin's account of her freshman year at Harvard (c. 1995) and the summer of travel in Paris, Hungary and Turkey that follows' (Rebecca Foster, goodreads.com). A more detailed representation would include representations of her character ('highly-strung', according to the book's cover), of her concerns about herself, relationships, her place in the world, and academic topics, of some of the people she interacts with, including her friend Svetlana and Ivan, with whom she has a complex relationship which never becomes an established romantic one, and of what she does, including teaching English and going to Hungary in the summer to teach and to be near Ivan.

Some readers respond positively to the novel, clearly finding worthwhile conclusions to draw from it:

- (8) Extracts from 'positive' reviews of *The Idiot* on goodreads.com:
  - a. I can't think of another book I've enjoyed more than this one in my adult life.  
(Madison)
  - b. The Idiot is a comic masterpiece about a portrait of the young woman as a budding intellectual, someone who (wilfully? or not?) misunderstands social codes and what things mean.  
(Li Sian)

For others, there seems to be little worth concluding from reading the novel:

(9) Extracts from 'negative' reviews of *The Idiot* on goodreads.com:

a. Around the 90-page mark I realized I was retaining next to nothing. I was pretty much zoning out while reading. From boredom. I pushed through, but admittedly started skimming about 70% in. I never got into it, and I never figured out what it was I was reading.

(C.M. Arnold)

b. I suppose it's appropriate that one of the recurring themes in Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* is the sensation of being trapped – in conversation, in a situation, in a location. Because about two-thirds of the way through this frustrating and tedious novel, I realized I too was trapped – too curious to simply jettison the story, all too aware that the plot was heading into ever more stagnant territory. In the end, I couldn't help but feel that the title, although ostensibly a reference to the Dostoyevsky classic, was actually referring to me.

(Paul)

Some readers take a negative attitude in summarising what happens in the novel:

(10) Negative comments on what happens in *The Idiot* on goodreads.com:

a. This is a novel in which nothing truly happens: nothing good, nothing bad, and nothing exciting. At over four

hundred pages of what read like a rambling stream of consciousness, I never felt invested in the story or connected with any of the characters.

(Kimberly V)

- b. NOTHING REALLY HAPPENS. IT'S LIKE KNAUSGÅRD BUT WITH HUNGARIANS.

(Bruno)<sup>9</sup>

Some readers report beginning negatively (and some report 'DNF', i.e. that they 'did not finish' the book). Some who begin negatively change their mind and move on to more positive responses:

- (11) Extracts on goodreads.com from reviews which report a change of mind when reading *The Idiot*:

- a. I was ready to give up on *The Idiot* at page 100. There was no distinct plot - nothing major seemed to be happening except for a girl describing her classes at university. But I persisted. Thank god for that.

(Barry Pierce)

- b. I went into this book with hesitation, because I have seen some harsh reviews. But, after 100 pages I became utterly consumed by it.

(Yanira)

Reviews overall suggest that readers do not have difficulties following what Selin reports in the novel but that there is variation with regard to what readers make of

this. There are some minor disagreements about what the characters are like and readers also vary in what they make of them. While most readers have negative attitudes to Ivan, readers vary with regard to Selin. Readers seem broadly to agree about what she is like but to vary with regard to whether they respond positively or negatively to her personality. More significant variations are about what readers infer from the novel as a whole. Some readers derive significant conclusions based on what they have read while others struggle to find any worthwhile conclusions. The positive responses focus on what it is like to be a young person coming into adulthood, often connected with memories of their own lives, and some on ideas about language, literature and life.

Arguably, most if not all readers of fiction are looking to infer conclusions which justify the effort involved in reading the book. While it seems that readers of *The Idiot* find it fairly easy to make local and global inferences, it seems that some readers find it hard to make further inferences from these which justify the effort involved in deriving them.

### 3.2 Problems with global representations: *Outline*

*The Idiot* is a fairly standard first-person narrative and readers can fairly easily represent it as a whole. *Outline* (the first novel in a trilogy) creates more difficulties, arising largely from the relative indistinctness of the narrator and the fact that the book mainly consists of the relatively unmediated narratives of people she interacts with. The French translation of the novel is *Disent-ils*. A word-for word translation of this back into English would be 'say they'. More idiomatic translations might be 'do they say', treating the inversion as an interrogative marker, 'so they say' or, more loosely, 'supposedly'. An arguably better translation would simply be 'they say', given that inversion is common in reporting speech in French. The French translator seems to have picked up on the fact that most of the novel consists of the



narrator's reports of what other characters say to her and to have chosen to reflect that in the title. Moore (2018) suggests that the novel can be understood as an exercise in representation using 'negative space', comparing Cusk's narrative technique to that of negative-space drawing exercises where 'students . . . are asked to draw everything surrounding a figure, filling up the page, until the blank shape of the figure emerges'.

Like *The Idiot*, *Outline* has a first-person narrator, a writer who tells us about a number of encounters she has as she travels to Greece to teach on a creative writing course. She meets many people who tell her about themselves. She says some things about herself, and reveals some of her thoughts, but a key feature of the book is that the narrator does not reveal much about herself. Her name (Faye) occurs only once, around four-fifths of the way through the book, used by another character when speaking to her. As the novel develops, our sense of the narrator arguably becomes less clear as what we discover about her is accompanied by the many stories coming from others. The narrator seems not to have been selective in choosing particular events or people, nor to have packaged them into a clear and clearly interpretable narrative (though of course Cusk has made decisions about this). Some commentators have suggested that the novel can be understood as a kind of outline (so we can understand the original English title, as well as the title of the French translation, as reflecting salient features of the novel). One example comes in this review from goodreads.com (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/21400742-outline>):

- (12) To live as a detection device in the middle of a busy street is a legitimate choice – and a tempting one to make. To observe the world as it leisurely unfolds without your interference means to avoid the difficulties of constant selection. If you are just a passive receiver, all bits of the ceaseless flow of information fit your narrative; there's no need to shape them in accordance

with your purposes. In exchange for cohesion, you get all kinds of bypassing, unfinished, often interesting stories. In other words, you get an outline.

(Frona, goodreads.com)

This line of interpretation suggests ideas about the narrator herself being an outline and the other characters providing outlines, each of which could be developed into one or several more traditional stories. This can lead to interpretations which focus on the nature of life, writing, experiences, and so on, including the idea that Cusk has presented us with an outline which could be the first step towards developing a novel (we might wonder whether the novel is a kind of first rough outline sketched by the author who is herself a creative writer). This is supported to some extent by a scene in the novel where another novelist, Angeliki, takes out a pen and notepad and makes a note of something the narrator has just said to her (we are not sure exactly what she notes but the narrator has been talking about marriage in general, her own marriage, and then about her mother).

One of the most common observations about the style of *Outline* (and the other books in the trilogy) focuses on the passivity of the narrator who, in Lockwood's (2018: 11) words, 'practises a torrential listening'. The novel mainly consists of the narrator, Faye, telling us what others have told her. This view is sometimes overstated. The narrator does tell us some things about her own utterances, thoughts and feelings. As just noted, for example, the narrator tells Angeliki some things about her marriage and her relationship with her mother which Angeliki finds interesting enough to make a note of. It is true, though, that we find out very little about the narrator's life and personality. Like the other characters, we discover only as much about her as she reveals by telling us what she says and thinks at particular moments.

Overall, then, the novel presents a number of narratives, some of them including expressions of what the narrators of the stories think/thought or feel/felt at particular moments. Many readers comment on the sense that these narratives are quite unmediated. Having read the novel, then, we have read a number of narratives, relatively unmediated, and not connected into one overall narrative (except in that they are the series of narratives Faye has heard during her trip to Greece).

What are the effects of this? One is that it is not easy for readers to represent the novel as a whole in a way that makes it easy to draw conclusions from, except as a very simple summary such as the one in the first sentence of the summary on goodreads.com ('A woman writer goes to Athens in the height of summer to teach a writing course.') or a slightly longer one which comes from adding the second sentence of the summary ('Though her own circumstances remain indistinct, she becomes the audience to a chain of narratives, as the people she meets tell her one after another the stories of their lives'). By contrast, it would be very hard to represent a summary of the novel which included adequate representations of all of the things she hears (and sees and thinks). This is a greater level of difficulty than the one posed by *The Idiot* since readers find it hard even to represent the novel as a whole, which of course makes it hard to draw significant conclusions from such an overall representation. Two aspects of responses to the novel are that readers generally agree about what it does and that responses vary with regard to how positive or negative they are. The following extracts from reviews illustrate these:

(13) Extracts on goodreads.com from reviews of *Outline*:

- a. *Outline*, so aptly named, is a sketchbook of lives, charcoal drawings of souls captured in profile.

(Julie Christine)

b. The novel is a collection of conversations . . . I can already hear the criticisms of this book: "It's boring." (It isn't.) "It's pretentious." (It's actually the furthest thing from pretentious--it's not trying to be anything other than what it is.)

(Julie Ehlers)

c. In short, it's a novel that's much easier to admire than to love. It's very well written with some truly brilliant observations, it's intelligent, it holds its focus. It's also a novel that arouses the suspicion now and again that there might be a conceit involved, the presence of the emperor's new clothes factor. I enjoyed reading it; at the same time I have a feeling I'll remember nothing about it six months from now.

(Violet Wells)

d. mm I read the first 66 pages before setting this aside. I didn't dislike the writing; I even found it quite profound in places, but there's not enough story to peg such philosophical depth on. This makes it the very opposite of unputdownable.

(Rebecca Foster)

e. Like watching paint dry without the action of having paint run down the wall.

(Brian)

Clearly, some readers struggle to find conclusions worth deriving from the novel, as they do for *The Idiot*. Some readers do manage this, though. Here are three quotes indicating lines of interpretation:

(14) Extracts on goodreads.com from reviews of *Outline*:

- a. This is a book about thought in its clearest and purest form.  
(Jaidee)
- b. The subject of the conversations is the failure of the domestic relationship, mostly marital, occasionally filial. It is a brittle and lonely satire on self-scrutiny.  
(Julie Christine)
- c. Joan Didion once wrote that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live." Rachel Cusk's "Outline" illustrates this love of storytelling.  
(Caitlin)

So far, then, we have considered a novel (*The Idiot*) with a first-person narrator whose significant interpretative problems mainly concern what can be concluded from the novel as a whole and another (*Outline*) which makes it hard for readers to represent that text as a whole. Next, we consider a novel which makes interpretation hard at the (local) level of individual explicatures and implicatures.

### 3.3 Problems with local inferences: *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*

Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* is a significantly more challenging novel.<sup>10</sup>

As the passage above shows, it is much harder to make inferences about what is being said

(including about the referents of pronouns and other aspects of explicatures), who is speaking or thinking the content of individual parts, and what is happening at each stage. Many readers report negative responses and many report giving up on it. Others carry on and provide very positive evaluations. Clark (forthcoming) outlines some of the difficulties and develops arguments about how different ways of responding to them lead to different kinds of evaluations.

What is a reader to make of the opening passage quoted above? They can tell that someone is saying or thinking that something is for someone (whoever is referred to by *you* in the first orthographic sentence), that the referent of the second *you* (maybe the same person) will soon do something, and so on. They cannot tell who is saying or thinking the thoughts or utterances represented by each phrase. As Clark (forthcoming) points out, the opening passages of novels often contain indeterminacies of various types. To take just one example, readers of the opening of Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (which begins with chapter 2) do not know which dog is dead, who Mrs. Shears is, or where the events being described have taken place:

(15)

2

It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shears' house.

(Haddon 2003: 1)

They expect, however, (and are right in this case) that they will soon find out more. This turns out not to be the case for McBride's novel. Readers can eventually piece together more about what is happening and some of this will emerge naturally through reading. But the novel never makes it easy to make inferences about its explicatures and implicatures. Clark (forthcoming) discusses some of the effects of this and argues that readers who

continue to read the novel without taking trouble to try to infer explicatures, details of what is happening when, and so on, have an experience closer to what McBride intended for them, and are more likely to respond positively to the book, than readers who put in extra effort to make inferences such as these.

We can compare these three novels, then, by considering how they vary with regard to how difficult they are. *The Idiot* is the easiest to follow, raising difficulties about interpretations as a whole. *Outline* makes it harder for readers to represent the novel as a whole as well as to derive conclusions from such representations. *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* makes it hard for readers even to understand what is going on throughout the book.

As mentioned above, the claim is not that readers cannot get to a stage where they have a representation of each novel in mind and can make inferences based on this. Rather, **the novels** vary with regard to how difficult **they** are, the nature of the difficulties, and the different kinds of effects these difficulties give rise to for readers.

#### **4. Experiencing the novels: immersion and realism**

Work in pragmatic stylistics has not said much about how texts can encourage more or less ‘immersive’ or ‘realistic’ reading experiences or about how writers use particular techniques to support these. Immersion and the nature of reading experiences have been explored more fully in other approaches to stylistics, notably in text world theory (see, for example, Gavins 2007, Gavins and Lahey 2016, Lahey 2014) and in work on narrative (see, for example, Gerrig 1993, Ryan 2001). Immersion and a sense of realism are not exactly the same thing, of course. A reader might feel immersed in an experience which is quite far from reality or feel detached from something that seems realistic. This section considers the inferential experiences of reading the novels considered here, and to what extent they provide an ‘immersive’ or ‘realistic’ experience. It argues that *The Idiot* encourages a fairly detached response, treating the novel as a fairly ‘packaged’ representation of the events the

novel presents, that *Outline* also encourages a fairly detached perspective, but a distinctive one which is realistic in some ways (presenting fairly unmediated narrative from the narrator and from the characters, the latter embedded in the narrator's narrative), and that *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* encourages an immersive response and a reading experience which feels quite realistic (one which encourages readers to feel that they are sharing the experience of the girl whose story it represents). McBride has said that one of her aims was for readers to feel close to the perspective of the girl who is the main character and she seems to have succeeded in this. This section considers how she has done this and to what extent the different experiences of reading the novels can be accounted for by considering the inferential processes they each encourage.

#### 4.1 'Realism' and immersion

The experience of reading a novel is, of course, completely real in that the reader is interacting in the real world with a real object produced by one or more others and that real cognitive processes are caused by the experience. At the same time, the experience is different from other kinds of experiences and so there is a sense in which we understand our relationship to characters and events as 'unreal'. When we say that a reading experience is relatively 'realistic', therefore, we mean either that readers perceive it as such or that the nature of the experience is in some ways closer to experiences we have when not reading texts like these. Schaeffer and Vultur (2005: 238), for example, suggest that 'adopting the stance of immersion implies being absorbed in the mentally represented content in such a way as to treat it — up to a point — as if it were the actual object or situation'. We can consider our responses to a range of experiences, including 'fictional' ones such as the experience of reading a novel, reading poetry, viewing a film and looking at artworks, in this way. We can also think of the experience of understanding utterances in everyday interactions as more or less immersive. The use of the historic present, for example, can be



seen as a technique for immersing listeners or readers more fully in a story, as in example (16):

(16) A funny thing happened last night. I was out with my friends and we went to the cinema. We get in and somebody's sitting in our seats . . .

The change to historic present in the third sentence here encourages the listener to adopt a perspective close to that of the person telling the story at the time when she went into the cinema. The listener would be likely to adopt a more detached perspective if the speaker had produced (17):

(17) A funny thing happened last night. I was out with my friends and we went to the cinema. We got in and somebody was sitting in our seats . . .

One difference between the two versions is that the historic present encourages a more 'immersive' perspective. Another is that the past tense suggests that the events have been arranged in packages of similar types. Pragmatically, we are more likely to treat the narrative in (17) as a whole, creating a representation of the whole sequence of events the speaker is telling us about and deriving inferences from that. In (16), we are more likely to treat the first two sentences as a separate 'scene-setting' component which provides contextual assumptions to help us respond to the section in present tense and perhaps to treat each part of that more separately than we would when understanding (17). Two ideas developed in this chapter are that readers often aim to arrive at a situation where they can treat novels as a whole and derive inferential conclusions from them and that novels vary in how much

they facilitate this. *The Idiot* makes this easier than the novels by Cusk and McBride, each of which make this less easy in different ways.

Novels which are told in third person with a consistent past tense are generally easier to treat as reports of a whole packaged narrative from which we can draw conclusions. First-person narratives seem to encourage a more engaged response but can still lead to a representation of the novel as a whole from which inferences can be drawn. Novels which combine more than one perspective are more dynamic and lead to more complex representations and responses.

*The Idiot* uses first-person throughout and the story is more or less chronological, leading us through a period in the lives of the characters set in the past. Selin tells us her story, having chosen what to tell us, in what order, and how. We follow the characters through their stories and can then make inferences about what they have told us. We have seen above that the novel nevertheless raises some interpretative difficulties for readers.

Cusk's and McBride's novels are also more or less chronological but they are significantly different in how they tell their stories. In both cases, they make it less easy for readers to arrive at a representation of the whole package and to draw inferences from that. Cusk's novel is closer to *The Idiot* than McBride's. The narrator tells us about a lunch before her visit to Greece, the flight, and then what happens to her there. What makes this less typical of first-person novels is that she mainly tells us what others have told her, not shaping the narrative as much as we might typically expect. McBride's novel is significantly different. Readers find it hard to identify referents, who is speaking or thinking, and what is happening. It is much harder for readers to follow the narrative and many readers give up without finishing the book.

The rest of this section considers the three novels in turn and suggests how we can account for the reading experiences they encourage, partly by considering what kinds of inferential processes they lead readers to carry out. Batuman's novel is unrealistic in

presenting events and the thoughts and utterances of characters in structured prose. Cusk's novel is unrealistic in some ways but arguably more realistic in others. It can be understood as realistic in that the narrator does not do much to mediate what others say to her but also as unrealistic in that our daily experience is not reducible to what we hear others say. Like Batuman's novel, it is inevitably unrealistic in presenting events and the thoughts and utterances of characters in structured prose. However, we might argue that it is more realistic in that the narratives seem not to have been selected to form a coherent overall narrative. McBride's novel is unrealistic in that it is quite different from anything we encounter in everyday interactions or experience. However, its attempt to represent fairly unmediated and unorganised experience can be seen as representing something quite realistic.

#### 4.2 Reading *The Idiot*

The opening extract from *The Idiot* is typical of the novel in that it does not pose special problems of pragmatic interpretation for readers. Some pragmatic inferences are very straightforward and those which cannot be resolved straight away will be resolvable before reading much further. Readers will recognise that the heading indicates that the opening passage takes place in Fall/Autumn and the reference to getting to college will indicate that the book begins at the start of an academic year. The reference to email being new will place the action around the 1990s. Readers will vary with regard to when they assume email first became available, of course. Anyone who researches the novel will discover that the author Elif Batuman went to Harvard in 1995 and so will place the events around then. There are some indications to help readers make inferences about specific parts of the story, e.g. the inverted commas around *have* indicating the narrator's lack of confidence about what "having" email meant, the comma in *e, mail* and further explanation of how her aunt uttered this phrase, and so on.

Quite quickly, readers are likely to feel confident about what they are reading and to carry on making inferences about events and characters which they can use to make further inferences. The reader's experience will, then, largely consist of piecing together a fairly coherent story and then making inferences about what it is about and what to make of it (which some of them struggle with, of course). The overall experience, then, will be not much different from hearing an everyday oral narrative but extended over a longer period of time. As with all novels, readers can speed up and slow down, pause to think about things so far, and continue to make inferences about the novel while going about the rest of their lives. We might summarise this as a fairly straightforward and not very challenging reading experience, with difficulties associated with making global inferences about the point of the novel.

#### 4.3 Reading *Outline*

As mentioned above, the most common kinds of observations about *Outline* focus on the narrator's passivity as she mainly tells us about what others have told her. There is far less shaping and packaging than we might expect in other novels (including *The Idiot*). Cusk has made some interesting comments about what she was aiming to do:

(18) I wanted to try and close the gap between my experience of life and truth and how those things were represented in fiction.

(Why Rachel Cusk avoided plot when writing her latest novel. *The Next Chapter*, CBC Radio, Canada, 27

November 2017. available at:

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/full-episode-july-28-2018-1.4414510/why-rachel-cusk-avoided-plot-when->

[writing-her-latest-novel-1.4414612](#) [last accessed 7th  
November 2018])

What is the effect of this style on readers and how can pragmatic theories help us to understand it? In what ways does the novel 'close the gap between' Cusk's 'experience of life and truth' and the way these are usually represented in fiction?

Readers who are expecting a packaged narrative which they can use to make inferences from will be disappointed. Instead, the novel appears to be fairly formless, shaped only by the fact that narratives come from whoever the narrator interacts with. The narrator herself becomes less salient as she is surrounded by what others tell us and our idea of her arguably becomes less clear (although some readers have suggested that we understand her in the light of how the others respond to her).

At the same time, individual passages seem to conform to what we might expect from typical prose fiction, as illustrated by the opening passage quoted above. The narrator tells us that she was invited to dinner before a flight. The use of *the* before *flight* suggests a definite one we can access and we are likely to expect to discover what the referent is soon. We can infer that she is referring to a flight to Athens which she soon tells us about. The use of passive forms (*I was invited, I'd been promised*) is not problematic as we assume that it is not important for us to know who invited her or who said the person she dines with had liberal credentials. And so on. Difficulties arise when some of our likely expectations are not met. There are no special problems about assigning reference or deriving implicatures from each passage. However, characters come and go seemingly based only on the order in which the narrator encounters them and there is little sense of a connected overall narrative. The other character who appears most often is a man she meets on her flight to Athens and refers to often as 'my neighbour' even though he was only her neighbour during that flight in the sense that he was sitting next to her.

So there are no problems with individual parts of the novel. We can fairly straightforwardly infer explicatures and implicatures of each of them, but it is hard to connect these into an overall narrative. At each stage, the novel works quite straightforwardly but readers will find it hard to construct an overall representation of the novel.

One effect of this is that the implicatures supported by each section constitute a fairly wide range and are less strong than they would be if connected into an overall narrative. We could refer to the notion of ‘mutual parallel adjustment’ in describing this (for discussion of this notion, see Clark 2013: 142-154). This refers to the idea that the processes of inferring explicatures, contextual assumptions and implicatures affect each other as we infer them in online processing. We could illustrate this with reference to the utterance from the novel made by the narrator’s neighbour mentioned above, reproduced here as (19):

(19) ‘ I hope you are staying near water,’ he said. ‘Athens will  
be very hot.’

(Cusk 2014: 6)

One thing we need to infer when he says ‘Athens will be very hot’ is which sense of the ambiguous word *hot* he intends. To understand this, we need to infer that *hot* here refers to a high temperature and that it means that the general temperature of the city will be high for a European city in summer. This makes it possible to infer the implicature that being near water will make it easier to cool off. So the hypothesised implicature supports the inference about the intended sense of *hot* and the inference about the sense of *hot* supports the implicature.

Similarly, we can also think of global inferences supporting local inferences and vice versa. Clark (2009) suggests, for example, that local inferences about the group of characters in William Golding’s (1955) novel *The Inheritors* possibly being able to

communicate telepathically support global inferences about this group as a whole and the meaning of the novel and vice versa. Clark also points out that relatively global inferences can become more or less strongly supported as we read. This process is difficult for readers of *Outline* to the extent that they struggle to make global inferences.

The account developed so far is, however, too strong. It is not the case that readers cannot make global inferences from the novel. We saw above that some readers on goodreads have developed more global inferences about the nature of life, relationships and writing. We might also pursue interpretative paths which are about life being a kind of 'outline' in that it is not definitively shaped and is constantly being shaped. We might also consider that the book is making comments about how novels in general present something quite detached, 'packaged' and unrealistic. This might also support inferences about this book being in some ways realistic (and in others not). Inferences about *Outline* being realistic can be thought of fairly explicit and detached ones rather than ones which create or constitute a feeling that the book is realistic, i.e. readers are likely to explicitly think about how realistic the novel is rather than simply to have an experience which can be described as realistic. As we will see, this is different from the ways in which *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* can be seen as realistic.

#### 4.4 Reading *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*

McBride's novel is significantly different from *The Idiot* and *Outline* with regard to the inferential demands it makes on readers. The difficulties it poses are salient from the very beginning. In fact, earlier versions of the opening were more challenging and McBride's editors persuaded her to make the opening easier for readers. In an interview for the Guardian in 2014, she described her editors' advice, her response to that, and some of her aims for the novel:

(20) "They thought I maybe needed to lower the reader into it a little more easily, and so I did that . . . I wanted to try to give the reader a very different type of reading experience."

(Susanna Rustin, 'A Life In . . . Eimear McBride', *The Guardian*, 16 May 2014, available at:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/16/eimear-mcbride-girl-is-a-half-formed-thing-interview> [last accessed 7th November 2018])

Clark (forthcoming) discusses an interview with the critic and literary scholar John Mullan for the Guardian's Book Club (<https://membership.theguardian.com/event/book-club-with-eimear-mcbride-26195584699>), where McBride said that one aim of her style was for readers to experience the book from the perspective of the girl rather than to take a more detached perspective. McBride said this to Mullan in response to a question about why the girl has no name throughout the novel. Giving the girl a name, she said, would have encouraged a sense of detachment which she wanted to avoid. How would this work? Readers of *The Idiot* quickly discover the narrator's name. The name Selin first appears on page 12 (we learn the narrator's surname, Karadağ, on page 3, the first page of the first chapter). Some readers will know the narrator's name before they open the book (Selin is mentioned on the back cover). This means that they can think of the novel as being about Selin. Soon, they will be able to entertain thoughts such as these:

(21) Possible thoughts before and during reading of *The Idiot*:

- a. This is a book about a young woman called Selin Karadağ told by Selin.



- b. Selin is telling us about experiences when she started to study at Harvard.
- c. Selin is Turkish-American.
- d. Selin is intrigued by email, which is a new technology at the time she is telling us about.

Readers can go on to make further inferences about the narrators and their personalities, including thoughts about how similar or different they and their experiences are to themselves and to other people they know.

Of course, readers can make similar assumptions about ‘the narrator’ of *Outline* (whose name is mentioned only once and in passing when uttered by another character) and ‘the girl’ of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* but, arguably, the lack of a name contributes to their less clearly defined status. However, the lack of a name is not the only thing which makes the narrators hard to represent. Faye not only has no name for most of the novel. She is also not much described and we understand her mainly by how she responds to others (although, as mentioned above, it is not accurate to suggest that the novel only consists of what others say to her).

In the case of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*, there are far greater difficulties. We read representations of what characters (including the girl) say, and of thoughts of the girl, without clear guidance about who is responsible for each part. They are expressed in fragmented linguistic structures. Arguably, all of the book consists of incomplete thoughts, including representations of the words of others as they appear in the girl’s consciousness. Collard (2016: 205-206) suggests that the book presents a “[s]tream of pre-conscious” and “an attempt . . . to represent thought at the point immediately **before** it becomes articulate speech, before it is ordered into rational utterance”.

McBride's aim of giving readers access to the girl's consciousness means that our inferential experience is much like the girl's. We aim to make what we can of this 'stream of pre-conscious', as the girl herself does, but without access to all of the contextual assumptions available to her at each moment. Clark (forthcoming) suggests that readers vary with regard to how much effort they put in to try to work out explicatures and implicatures of passages in the novel. Readers might wonder who the speaker or thinker of each part is, what the referents of referring expressions are, and so on, and they might put a lot of effort into this. Or they might continue with very partial representations. Here is a very simplified representation of what a reader of the first few sentences might end up with once they have gone to the effort of looking for evidence to flesh out what the sentences represent (I do not have complete confidence about each of these and other readers might recover different explicatures):

(22) Fairly 'full' explicatures of opening sentences of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*:

The girl's mother is saying to the girl's brother that it is for him to decide what the girl will be called when she is born. The girl's mother is saying that her brother will soon decide this. The girl's mother is saying that her brother will give her a name (or 'give' in the sense of letting others know information on what her name will be)

Here is a much less complete representation:

(23) Partial representation of opening sentences of *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*:

Somebody is saying that something is for someone. Someone is saying that someone will soon do something. Someone is saying that someone will give the referent of *her* a name.

As Clark (forthcoming) points out, it is challenging and effortful to entertain representations like those in (23) and to carry on reading and drawing inferences based on representations like these. However, for many readers, carrying on like this leads to a rewarding experience. As the book develops, they begin to be able to draw more inferences and to piece things together more fully. Moving towards representations like those in (22) takes effort to find evidence to support inferences. Carrying on with representations like those in (23) involves effort in continuing to entertain such complex representations and trying to draw conclusions based on them. As readers move on, they begin to be able to draw a fuller range of inferences and to be more confident about what is happening.

Representations like those in (22) are similar to those we arrive at when reading *The Idiot* and *Outline*. They amount to 'packaged' representations of a type not easy to arrive at for books like this. Representations like those in (23) are significantly closer to inferences the girl would make as she experiences the events in the novel, and closer to the kinds of experiences we have in everyday life when not listening to or reading packaged stories.

Overall, then, we could see *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* as encouraging a fairly immersive experience and one that feels quite realistic. And we can understand this to some extent by considering the nature of the inferential processes it encourages for readers.

Eventually, we can end up with a representation of the book as a whole, which will include thoughts about its form and inferences we have made while reading. These might include assumptions about experience and about reading. Such interpretations are similar to some of the possible interpretations of *Outline* mentioned above.

## 5. Fictional texts as communicative acts

This section considers one more point which these texts provide evidence for, which is about the status of novels as communicative acts. In discussing the relevance of pragmatic theories in general, and of relevance theory in particular, to accounts of the interpretation of literary texts, Wilson (2011, 2018) points out that the behaviour of readers provides at least some evidence that they make inferences about what texts intentionally convey and so that we should not completely accept the view that author intentions are never relevant in considering texts, a view associated with Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1946) discussion of the 'intentional fallacy'. Wilson points out that readers make inferences which help them to work out explicatures, e.g. about the referents of pronouns, which partly involve assumptions about intentions, while also considering that, of course, readers also derive some inferential conclusions which authors could not have intended.

The responses of readers when discussing texts also provide evidence that readers treat fictional texts such as these novels as communicative acts. The comments on goodreads.com discussed above show that many readers are asking what the point is of the texts they read and what significant conclusions they might derive from them. Of course, as mentioned above, readers who discuss books on goodreads.com are clearly prepared to look for interpretations and to discuss possible interpretations. This does not mean that all readers respond in similar ways. However, the comments do provide evidence that readers look for effects from reading which will justify the effort involved in reading and deriving interpretations. This fits with relevance-theoretic assumptions about what we expect from intentional communication (enough effects to justify the effort involved in deriving them).

Ideas from narrative theory also seem relevant here. Labov and Waletzky (1967) suggest that oral narratives often include an 'evaluation' which indicates the point of a story or the value in processing it. Lambrou (2014) provides evidence from narratives told by the

same individual at different points in time which suggests that evaluations (and complicating actions) are perceived as important elements of narratives. Comments on goodreads.com suggest that readers are also looking to see what makes narratives worthwhile, although authors of prose fiction rarely provide any explicit indications of this and we might not treat them as reliable if they did. Some authors do provide some help with this, though. Clark (2009) discusses the epigraph in William Golding's (1955) novel, which suggests some lines of interpretation. Batuman's *The Idiot* also begins with a suggestive epigraph from Proust:

But the characteristic feature of the ridiculous age I was going through—awkward indeed but by no means infertile—is that we do not consult our intelligence and that the most trivial attributes of other people seem to us to form an inseparable part of their personality. In a world thronged with monsters and with gods, we know little peace of mind. There is hardly a single action we perform in that phase which we would not give anything, in later life, to be able to annul. Whereas what we ought to regret is that we no longer possess the spontaneity which made us perform them. In later life we look at things in a more practical way, in full conformity with the rest of society, but adolescence is the only period in which we learn anything.

*MARCEL PROUST: In Search of Lost Time , Volume II:  
Within A Budding Grove*

This surely guides readers to look for interpretations which consider both positive and negative ways of thinking about Selin, as well as thoughts about the time of her life which the novel is about and how we should think about that.

Both Golding's and Batuman's novels, then, provide further evidence that some authors and readers expect texts to have a point by giving some indications of what it might be. It is also noticeable that neither of them give strong or very definite indications. Neither Cusk's nor McBride's novels do this. It seems, then, that considering the inferential processes of readers, and what their comments reveal, suggests that they are perceived by authors and readers, at least to some extent, as communicative acts.

## **6. Conclusions**

This chapter has considered some ways in which texts can cause interpretative difficulties for readers, considering difficulties associated with three aspects of interpretation: deriving conclusions seen as worthwhile from texts, representing texts as a whole, and understanding local parts of texts. It considered how these relate to the extent to which reader experiences can be understood as realistic or immersive. Some kinds of interpretative difficulties lead to experiences which feel more realistic, more immersive or both. While the chapter did not look in systematic detail at what readers have said about how they respond to the novels, the comments used for illustration here provide some evidence about how readers treat texts and support the view that novels are generally treated as communicative acts with some concern for the intentions of their authors. This means that they fall within the scope of pragmatic theories. As well as further developing accounts of the role of inferential processes in the production, interpretation and evaluation of texts, future research would benefit from making connections with other approaches which focus on the experience of readers, such as text world theory and a range of approaches which have been applied in work on narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> Clark (2009) considers the distinction between relatively local and relatively global inferences in reading William Golding's *The Inheritors*. For a discussion of the distinct but related notion of global coherence, see Unger (2006).

<sup>3</sup> For discussion, see Carston (2002), Clark (2013), Sperber and Wilson (1986).

<sup>4</sup> This section focuses only on the strength of implicatures to illustrate this but questions about the strength of explicatures are also relevant in accounting for some of the interpretative difficulties discussed below.

<sup>5</sup> This latter, of course, goes beyond what an author is likely to have intentionally communicated and so is likely to be a non-communicated implication rather than a communicated implicature.

<sup>6</sup> While readers of texts which are harder to represent might also spend time thinking about further inferences, the amount of effort involved in doing so is considerably higher.

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<sup>7</sup> In the first published review of the book, David Collard (2013) mistakenly referred to the 'two-year-old female narrator', a mistaken assumption I also made on first reading the novel (in fact, the girl who narrates the story is not yet born at this stage).

<sup>8</sup> Readers familiar with ideas in linguistics are likely to recognise that this refers to debates about the misleadingly labelled and much-discussed 'Sapir-Whorf' hypothesis (see discussion, for example, in Gumperz and Levinson 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Bruno nevertheless gave the book 4 stars. This is his entire review.

<sup>10</sup> For a very useful discussion of the novel, including discussion of how McBride wrote it, how she found a publisher, its reception, and details of its form, see Collard (2016).