Life Writing and the Empathetic Circle

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Abstract
This essay revisits Suzanne Keen’s claim in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) that writing perceived as *fictional* is especially effective at evoking readers’ empathy. Building on her discussion of narrative nonfiction in *Narrative Form* (2015) and her prior theorization of narrative empathy, the essay proposes that we should see life writing as a special category of nonfiction that shares with fictional narratives the capacity to invite feeling responses and to evoke readers’ empathy. The distinctiveness of life writing as a mode of nonfiction has infrequently qualified the conclusions of empirical comparisons of the impact of fiction and nonfiction on readers. In an attempt to redress the neglect of life writing in empirical research programs investigating the fiction/nonfiction contrast in narrative empathy, the essay theorizes how strategic narrative empathy might work in a nonfictional context and poses questions for future study.

Keywords
affect, fictionality, narrativity, narrative empathy, paratexts, life writing, *testimonio*
In this essay I consider the potential of nonfiction narrative, especially life-writing and testimonio, to expand the empathetic circle of readers through varieties of authorial strategic empathy, revisiting my claim in Empathy and the Novel (2007) that writing perceived as fictional is especially effective in evoking readers’ empathy (88-89). In a very fine essay in the journal Narrative, Leah Anderst calls attention to my exclusion of “all variety of narratives that announce themselves as referencing the real world rather than an imagined world of fiction” (273). This is a fair criticism, though my work on the novel necessarily focused on theorizing the role of fiction in invoking narrative empathy. Especially in her readings of Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home (2006) and Doris Lessing’s Under My Skin (1994), Anderst goes on effectively to redress the gap she identifies, attending “to the ways that affective responses, and empathetic responses in particular, are also operative in autobiographical narratives” (273). While the empirical research on fictional narratives, especially literary ones, has endorsed my earlier proposal that fiction has a special capacity to evoke empathy, in this essay I consider the proposition that we should also see nonfiction life writing as sharing with fictional narrative the capacity to invite feeling responses and to evoke readers’ empathy. I do acknowledge that nonfictional narrative has been given short shrift in existent empirical research programs, and the distinctiveness of life writing as a mode of nonfiction has not so often entered into empirical comparisons of the impact of fiction and nonfiction.

There are two reasons for this, I believe. First, the category of nonfiction is often caricatured as a unitary, nonliterary, dry, factual mode in studies that employ textbooks or factual reportage as the exemplary items to be compared to fiction—and the interests of readers of nonfiction thus seem to be very different from those of readers of fiction. Second, the formal similarities between literary biography, autobiography, memoir, and testimonio on the one hand and fictional narrative genres on the other have typically been either over-looked or glossed over. Out of these oversights, categorical problems at the levels of genre, readership and/or audience emerge. Some studies starkly juxtapose fiction and nonfiction readers as if they were two mutually exclusive groups, but experience and conversations with many booklovers tell me that a single reader can enjoy and appreciate both fiction and nonfiction, that many novel readers also enjoy forms of life writing and creative nonfiction, and that many nonfiction readers read both dry, factual informational texts and more affectively-charged narrative forms such as history, biography, and memoirs. Some of these readers surely respond with empathy to both fiction and nonfiction life writing. This is just a matter of the common-sense
observation of readers’ behavior and personal testimony, and is thus a start in the right direction. Yet there is a lot of work still to do in theorizing and in studying empirically how readers respond emphatically to nonfiction narratives of actual people’s lives—especially if we want to understand how that experience is similar to or different from their experience of reading fiction.

A brief review of the most-cited empirical study, by Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley, comparing the narrative impact of fiction and nonfiction, sets the stage for this work. There are huge gaps in our knowledge. In order to consider the pathways to narrative empathy that life writing invites by means of affective strategies and cognitive perspective-taking, I will go on to reprise my theory of narrative empathy, defining key terms in my discussion of narrative empathy and fiction and suggesting how my approach might be adopted to help us think about that special kind of nonfiction narrative that we call life writing.

Nonfiction readers have gotten a bad rap in some of the existing empirical studies. This often-cited study by Mar and Oatley, “Bookworms versus Nerds: Exposure to Fiction versus Non-Fiction, Divergent Associations with Social Ability, and the Simulation of Fictional Social Worlds,” suggests that

[w]hile frequent readers are often stereotyped as [being] socially awkward, this may only be true of non-fiction readers and not readers of fiction. Comprehending characters in a narrative fiction appears to parallel the comprehension of peers in the actual world, while the comprehension of expository non-fiction shares no such parallels. Frequent fiction readers may thus bolster or maintain their social abilities unlike frequent readers of non-fiction. (694; emphasis added).

Controlling for age, English fluency and intelligence, Mar and Oatley looked at how “[l]ifetime exposure to fiction and non-fiction texts” revealed differences in “performance on empathy/social-acumen measures” (694). In general, fiction print-exposure positively predicted social ability, while non-fiction print-exposure was a negative predictor. The degree of one’s “tendency to become absorbed in a story also predicted empathy scores” (694). The assumptions about non-fiction immediately evident here are its lack of an immersive quality, its expository nature, and the absence of characters that readers may strive to understand. Yet clearly life writing in all its modes shares these specific qualities with narrative fiction, and helps to differentiate from nonfiction. This leads to the possibility that life writing
may engage the narrative emotions of more socially adept “bookworms” as readily as does fiction.

As I have recently written in *Narrative Form: Revised and Expanded Second Edition* (2015),¹ “[n]arrative emotions, considered as an aspect of narrative form, differ from the feelings attributed to fictional characters. Those attributions may be made directly by a narrator employing [a] thought report or psycho-narration about a character’s emotions” (152). I would expand this to include, beyond characters, the represented persons who are the subjects of life writing, as for example when Richard Ellmann writes of James Joyce: “He is by turns gay, morose, trusting, suspicious, uxorious, and misogynous” (2). Like fictional characters, the represented persons of life writing possess feelings that may be revealed through the narrated or quoted monologue attributed to them; biographical subjects also invite inferences from readers responding to external cues delivered through actions or characterization. So if “Stephen Dedalus dresses in black because he is in mourning, and his speech and thoughts reveal that he still grieves for his mother” (Keen, *Narrative Form* 152), James Joyce’s feelings may also be inferred from Ellmann’s assertion that after his mother’s death, “[h]e dressed in black, a Hamlet without a wicked uncle” (Ellmann 143). Representations of emotions certainly pertain to both fictional and nonfictional narratives when the latter center on human agents.

Narrative emotions, however, differ from representations of emotional responses. Again, from *Narrative Form*: “They are forms of affect and they inhere in devices of storytelling” (152). I would assert that narrative emotions are involved in readers’ experience of both fiction and life writing—but almost certainly not in that of the expository prose that represents nonfiction in Mar et al.’s oft-cited study. Narrative emotions go beyond the character identification that makes a story ‘relatable’ in the parlance of today’s students. If it is the case that “[n]arrative emotions are tied up with fictional characters because those actants normally play the role of active agency in plots” (152), as I have argued, then historical persons represented as the active agents in life writing also may evoke them. In both the fictional and nonfictional context, narrative emotions also

belong to the readers who respond to the techniques of storytelling with curiosity, suspense, and surprise. They are shared across the narrative transaction by authors who seek to evoke feelings in readers

¹ This essay builds on and extends my previously published treatment of nonfiction narrative in *Narrative Form* (2015).
employing the powers of narrativity. . . [T]he kinds of feelings that
drive reading or viewing [are] the core affects of narrativity. (152)

In my view a common sort of narrativity is shared by fictional and nonfictional
narrative texts, especially memoir, biography and autobiography, and testimonio, as
well as narrative history. This statement represents an extension of my own
theorizing about narrative emotions, but also fits in with understandings of
narrativity that do not concern themselves with fictionality.

Definitions of two fundamental concepts must precede any discussion of
narrative emotions: narrativity and affect. An important definition of affect for
literary studies arises from the field of ethics, and indeed the term is used
differently across disciplines. Among scholars of ethics, Brian Massumi’s
influential distinction is widely respected. Massumi suggests that emotion should
not be synonymous with affect (as in much social scientific usage, where the two
terms are often used interchangeably). In his translation of Gilles Deleuze and
Félix Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus (1987), Massumi draws on Spinoza to define
affect as “a state of mind and body marking the transition from one state to another
with either increase or diminishment in the body’s ability to act” (xvi). I have
argued in Narrative Form that, for narrative theorists, this distinction also applies
to narrative: “One connection occurs in the drive to keep reading or viewing. The
core bodily affects of desire, pleasure, and pain may be translated into the realm of
narrative form by means of narrativity” (153). To elaborate:

plots consist of related events and their beginnings allude to states of
affairs that are undergoing change. Change and disruption are thus
the natural states of narrative, which cannot exist for long in stasis.
Something has to happen in order to stimulate the unspooling of
related events that constitute plot, and those changes of state invite
readers to experience versions of affect. Although a dictionary
definition of affect (as a noun) makes it synonymous with feelings
or emotions, its Latin root (and its meaning when it is a verb)
emphasizes affect’s role in influencing action. This is one reason
why the core narrative affects, curiosity, surprise, and suspense,
relate to narrativity. (153; emphasis added)

As for narrativity, it
consists of the qualities that establish a text as narrative: having the events that constitute a plot; possessing a narrator whose discourse makes up the text; arrangement of narrated events in a fashion that suggests temporality, normal or abnormal in its order; characterizing active agents, whether human or otherwise. (153)

We note that fictionality is not a distinguishing feature of narrativity, but the experiences and attitudes of readers may establish make-believe as a *preference* in reading. As for the formal techniques of narrative that can be identified by their qualities, named, and distinguished from one another, these only take on any power as narrative techniques when they are activated by reading or viewing—and so readers’ predispositions are important. The ingredients of narrative-ness remain inert until a reader or viewer enters the scene.

Once the scenario for a narrative communication or transaction exists, then the collection of techniques and contents arranged by a maker into a narrative can be activated. They combine to produce curiosity, surprise and suspense, the three core affects of narrativity as Meir Sternberg argues (“Narrativity” 637). Each of these affects is experienced by a perceiving reader or viewer: they are stimulated by a text but do not exist independently of a reading or viewing experience. As I explain in *Narrative Form*:

*Curiosity* stimulates engagement with narrative by inviting the reader to wonder why. *Surprise* startles the reader or viewer with the unexpected, a reward of narrative in itself that in turn results in renewed curiosity. *Suspense* hinges on the cognitive states of ‘what if,’ enlivened by the anxious feelings of ‘how long?’ All three may be evoked by a single narrative, or a narrative may emphasize one over the others. Different subgenres of narrative may depend more heavily on one or the other, but all narrative that receives its fulfilling completion by being read, listened to, or viewed has exhibited narrativity. Some theorists of narrative believe that narrativity can be assumed to exist inherently in narrative texts, but my account requires reception of the narrative transaction to demonstrate narrativity. (153-54)

Represented emotions need real, embodied audiences in order to exist. As I have earlier argued, “intrinsic formal qualities of narrative evoke the affects of
narrativity in actual readers or viewers. How individual techniques of narrative form actually work in real readers is a matter for both theorizing and testing through empirical study of narrative impact” (154). These studies ought to tackle not only how we read but also what we read. This principle brings us back to the challenge of nonfiction, or factual narrative, as it has been studied by narratologists. I agree with Monika Fludernik that a “division between factual and fictional narratology does not make much sense” (134). Fludernik and I concur that the formal distinctiveness of fiction, theorized by Dorrit Cohn, is difficult to pin down—beyond the implicit existence of real-world referents. Yet real readers strongly feel that there is a difference between fictions about imaginary beings and narratives that offer factual accounts of real persons.

So, for example, it has been observed that the immersion reading of fiction invites higher levels of narrative empathy than such a reading of other kinds of texts, or even than our experience of people in real life. I believe that some readers find it easier to share feelings with fictional characters than with real life individuals, in part because our fiction reading doesn’t demand anything of us. We can let our caution and skepticism relax when we read fiction: it doesn’t matter if we are fooled by it because we go into the experience knowing that it is unreal (Keen, Empathy 168). The controversies around successful books such as Three Cups of Tea or other memoirs that have later been revealed as fictionalized suggest that the label under which readers experience a story conditions their responses and their expectations. If you have believed in the real man in the story, maybe even going so far as to donate to his charity, and then you have found out that his memoir was exaggerated or even invented from whole cloth, you may feel defrauded. Yet if you are not a very young child, you are far less likely to feel tricked or taken advantage of when you recognize that a first person narrator in a fictional autobiography never really lived—although there are some interesting cases involving fictional works that were misunderstood as autobiographies.

I have hypothesized that the “no strings attached” expectation invoked by the paratextual label, “fiction” releases the readers to make empathetic connections without fear that they will be required to reciprocate, make commitments, or act in the real world. Here I add a hypothesis about the paratextual labels of certain subsets of “nonfiction,” those subsets of life writing that exist right on the borders of their sister genres of fiction: with near-fictional autobiographies (related in the first person) we have the life writing genres of memoir, autobiography, and testimonio; with the near-third-person bildungsroman we have biography. These generic words matter because they often appear physically on books themselves
(beneath the title or in the back-cover identifiers), determining where they will sit in bookstores or how metadata identifies them in search engines. The empirical research on the impact of paratexts is indeed fascinating and well worth our attention.

Appel and Malečkar hypothesize that the conditions set by paratexts trigger different needs, a need for cognition in reading nonfiction and a need for affect when reading fiction (459). Before we even start reading, they think, we are guided by paratexts to expect to be transported more fully into, more thoroughly immersed in fictional worlds. Story labels effect the mode and degree of our transportation (474). This is a different question than the one asked by studies comparing the underlying dispositions of fiction and nonfiction readers (are they bookworms or nerds?). It is no surprise that we find voluntary novel readers tend to have greater empathy while nonfiction (factual) readers tend to have lower empathy, but this contrast in itself does not argue for a causal relationship arising from the genre. However, if the paratext alone sets us up to engage more cognitively with nonfiction and more emotionally with fiction, then the modest generic label does condition very different kinds of reading experience. I would hypothesize that subgenres of nonfiction focused on the perspectives of human agents, including memoir, testimonio, and biography may attract (or form) higher-empathy readers than dryer, more factual and overtly argumentative or analytical forms of nonfiction. But that comparative work, providing an opportunity for future collaborative scholarship, has yet to be done.

Research on the impact of reading has been remarkably enriched by such collaborations. Ulrike Altmann and her collaborators performed a neuroimaging study which revealed readers’ activation patterns as they read factual narratives, patterns which suggested that an action-based reconstruction was elicited; the brain areas involved in fiction reading, on the other hand, suggested the operation of constructive simulation, which is closely tied to the way our brain imagines future events. This work supports the suggestion of Mar et al. that factual and fictional works orient readers toward real-world interactions and imaginative simulations, respectively (173). Anne Mangen and Don Kuiken’s very suggestive study “Lost in an iPad: Narrative Engagement on Paper and Tablet” also has some interesting implications for the connection between immersion and nonfiction, for they did find that nonfiction read on an iPad disrupted transportation, indirectly impeding empathy (154).

One of the most powerful emotional effects of reading or viewing narratives occurs when the qualities of narrativity mesh with representations that evoke
sensations of narrative empathy. As I explain in *Empathy and the Novel*, narrative empathy differs from sympathy (5). Sympathy means an emotion felt for a person (or fictional representation of one) that relates to but does not match the targeted being’s feeling. (“I feel for you” rather than “I feel with you”). Sometimes called empathetic concern, sympathy may or may not follow upon an experience of narrative empathy. Narrative empathy’s shared feeling enables a reader or viewer to contagiously experience the emotions and sensations of a representation. It is intensified by the core affects of narrativity, so that readers or viewers may feel, for example, that the curiosity experienced by a detective in a mystery novel mirrors their own drive to figure out “whodunit?” Suspenseful narratives may make readers feel breathless, and we may even experience the “bodily matching” of our racing heart as a response to heightened suspense. Yet an important principle in the study of narrative form and its various impacts holds that we should not blend the effects of form and theme as if they were causally linked. A reader does not have to empathize with the detective’s curiosity in order to experience the narrative affect of curiosity about “what’s next.” Indeed, the core affects of narrativity often operate along sympathetic lines: a character feels scared, while a reader shares in the suspense without becoming actively fearful. Perhaps most obviously of all, the reader may be surprised by a narrator’s revelation of something about a character or plot that wouldn’t be surprising at all to the fictive individuals within the story world.

Narrative empathy is a special case that we may get with narrative transactions moving from maker to audience. I acknowledge the legitimate narrative emotions that occur when the actual reader differs dramatically from the implied or ideal reader of a text: indeed, I think experiencing the potential of an expanded perspective to some degree piggybacks on our ability to be a successful reader of a text that does not seem to script us into its narrative audience. As a matter of narrative form, narrative empathy depends for an accurate definition on multiple stages in the narrative transaction. Authors experience it and try to embed it in their fictional creations; texts contain invitations to it both in their representations and in their narrative techniques; readers in certain cases may feel it as a consequence of reading (Keen, *Narrative Form* 155). In *The Handbook of Narratology*, I define narrative empathy this way:

Narrative empathy is the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition. Narrative empathy plays a role in
the aesthetics of production when authors experience it, in mental simulation during reading, in the aesthetics of reception when readers experience it, and in the narrative poetics of texts when formal strategies invite it. Narrative empathy overarches narratological categories, involving actors, narrative situations, matters of pace and duration, and storyworld features such as settings. The diversity of the narratological concepts involved . . . suggests that narrative empathy should not simply be equated with character identification nor exclusively verified by readers’ reports of identification. . . . Empathetic effects of narrative have been theorized by literary critics, philosophers, and psychologists, and they have been evaluated by means of experiments in discourse processing, empirical approaches to narrative impact, and through introspection. (Keen, “Narrative Empathy” 524)

As this definition suggests, narrative empathy consists of phenomena that operate in and on creation and reception. I have described the substrata of narrative empathy in greater detail elsewhere, but I will briefly summarize my definitions here:

*Readers’ empathy* is the phenomenon involved when readers, listeners, gamers, or film audiences catch and share the feelings of the representation. An audience member may have a variety of strong emotions about a text, but these responses differ from readers’ empathy, though the two kinds of feeling may influence each other and may play into the judgments that the audience member makes about the text or performance. (Keen, *Narrative Form* 155)

Readers’ empathy involves the conviction that your bodily sensations, moods, and motivations match the character’s—a common form of readers’ empathy occurs in some experiences of strong character identification. It can be a very brief, even fleeting experience, but strong experiences of readers’ empathy can be sustained or recurrent during a reading or viewing. Readers’ empathy does not lead invariably to the approbation of a text: it may be too intense and result in the kind of personal distress that causes interruptions in reading or viewing. Readers’ empathy is not limited to emotion-sharing with characters. A reader (and very often viewers and gamers) may feel the kind of empathy called motor mimicry through strong spatial
orientation in a described or represented landscape. Gamers controlling the movements of avatars through gamescapes may be especially adept at empathic inhabitation of a represented storyworld. Empirical studies may help us to understand which techniques of representation most effectively invite readers’ empathy or block it—for not all art invites readers’ empathy.

Authors’ empathy appears to be involved in the creative process for writers, dramatists, film-makers and other narrative artists, including life-writers. This comes into play during the daydreaming imagining that may precede or accompany composition. One way in which it may be exhibited is through autobiographical representations, that is, when a writer self-narrates. I am not a life-writer myself, but I am a sometime poet, and I think that as a writer one can sometimes engage in acts of memory of a past self that empathize with that earlier person, but that our memories of our past selves may just as readily feel estranged, embarrassed for, or even alienated from that younger person. I employ Dorrit Cohn’s terminology of dissonant or consonant narration to suggest the distance (or closeness) between the narrating self and experiencing self that is the object of the narration. Even in life writing (or in my writerly experience the poetry of personal memory) an author’s empathy with her subject is not automatic. It is not the only rhetorical stance that a writer may wish to deploy. There is some evidence that successful creators of fictional worlds and their imaginary inhabitants may simply be more highly empathetic individuals, when measured against the general population. Whether lifewriters (historians, biographers, memoirists, and journalists involved in creating testimonio) are also more highly empathic than the general population is an open question. This would be a promising research question to be taken up by scholars seeking a project. Consulting the letters, writing journals, and interviews of writers can reveal traces of evidence about authors’ empathy, although a researcher must always remain attentive to the context, especially in the case of interviews. It would be no surprise to discover Oprah Winfrey eliciting confessions of empathy from authors, since this influential taste-maker places a high value on empathy and coaches her wide viewership to read empathetically. Narrative empathy has a reputation for enhancing a work’s sales, in part as a result of Winfrey’s advocacy.

Narrative empathy can also accomplish a great deal more in its readers than just stimulating an appetite for more reading if a writer chooses to unleash its power. Authors can employ narrative empathy strategically in order to reach different audiences with specific hoped-for results in mind. On reflection, and in response to Leah Anderst’s challenge, I concur that a lot of life writing vividly illustrates the use of “strategic narrative empathy,” a concept I have previously theorized and
summarize here in order to consider how it might function in nonfiction.

Authors’ efforts to use strategic narrative empathy show their ambition to reach target audiences with representations that sway the feelings of their readers (Keen, “Strategic” 478-80). (Of course, actual readers’ responsiveness to this authorial empathy varies with their own dispositions and experiences, and no one narrative reliably evokes an empathetic response from all its readers or viewers.) Sometimes motivated by the desire to effect social change or raise awareness, narrative artists employ representational techniques aimed at moving their readers. I think we can see those aims quite vividly reflected in works of life writing, and especially in testimonio. This is especially the case in nonfiction narratives that link up with the advancement of human rights. Aiming for popularity and robust sales may also inspire writers to try to craft empathy-evoking works. Strategic empathizing works by calling upon familiarity; it attempts to transcend differences in order to deflect biased reactions to characters from outgroups. It can also rely on representations of universal human experiences to connect through shared feelings. This is how I have most recently described strategic empathy, in Narrative Form:

I use three terms to distinguish the varieties of authorial strategic empathy, terms which suggest the potential reach of writers’ imaginative extension towards audiences nearer and further away. Bounded strategic empathy addresses the maker’s in-group, close-by in time and space, and aspects of identity. It relies on mutual experiences to stimulate readers’ feeling for familiar others. While bounded strategic empathy may risk preventing outsiders from joining in the shared feeling it evokes, it benefits from cultivation of trust through recognition and a sense of rightness. Though other-directed, bounded strategic empathy may show an implicit bias towards targets that are similar to the author and located in the work’s here and now. Ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses targeted audiences with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the needy, the disenfranchised, or the misunderstood, often with a specific appeal for recognition, assistance or justice While matching identity and experience limits the audience for bounded strategic empathy, ambassadorial empathy is most limited by the historical moment of publication and reception. An ambassadorial text goes out into the world to recruit readers/viewers/audiences by means of emotional fusion with current causes. Ambassadorial strategic empathy is time-sensitive, context- and issue- dependent: it has a sell-by date, after which it remains historically interesting. (156-57)
For example, Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* (1837) shows signs of ambassadorial empathy on the part of children abused in workhouses (Keen, “Strategic” 486). Historical and contextual study can recover evidence of ambassadorial strategic empathy at work: the New Poor Law that established the workhouse system never recovered entirely from Dickens’ effective attack.

Let me just broach one example by referring to a powerful work of testimonio, Dave Eggers’ *What Is the What* (2006), which relates the story of Valentino Achak Deng, one of the Sudanese Lost Boys. Will its evident ambassadorial empathy, which includes on its last page a direct address to its contemporary reader, still work in another generation when the Lost Boys are gone? Does nonfiction that employs ambassadorial empathy for a contemporary purpose gain power in the historical moment of its publication?—do its readers actually act, taking steps to support the charitable organization promoted in the novel? Then, what happens as time passes? Does ambassadorial empathy expire and cease to evoke an emotional response after the immediate context no longer pertains? Do we read old life writing the same way that we read fiction—*more empathetically* because we can’t be asked to act? Or does the real-world referentiality of new or recent life writing reinforce our empathetic and altruistic response?

As I explain in *Narrative Form*, the term altruism was coined by Auguste Comte to describe other-directed reflective emotions that lead to our working on behalf of others, with ethical consequences. Today it is considered the costliest form of pro-social behavior, as the altruist acts on behalf of another at some personal cost or risk. Because real-life empathy has been linked to altruism, many people believe that narrative empathy works the same way (see Keen, “Altruism Makes a Space for Empathy”). This belief motivates many arguments about the potential impact of emotionally engaging narratives (*Narrative Form* 160-61), arguments that may have a special legitimacy when referring to life writing that comes out of contemporary circumstances which can be directly addressed, whether personally or politically.

For example, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argue that as personal narratives about human rights abuses raise the consciousness of an expanding world readership, these texts can “prompt acts of engagement with persons having experienced rights abuses” (226). However, I have previously observed, for the writer or maker, deploying narrative emotions can be a high-stakes gamble, asking if the tactic of evoking readers’ or viewers’ emotions works reliably? Furthermore, does it work as a driver of desirable social change? (Keen, *Narrative Form* 161). In
Rachel Ablow’s account, “Much of the work that has been published since the 1970s has been rather more skeptical regarding the progressive potential of literary emotion” (301); Lauren Berlant criticizes authors who make emotional appeals to compassion as a spur for political action or social change (2-4). I have also expressed skepticism about the idea that narrative empathy is strongly linked to real-life altruism. The purported impact of narrative empathy on readers’ or viewers’ subsequent selfless behavior on behalf of others is in fact a good subject for future research into narrative impact. It would be especially interesting to know whether the responses set off by such paratextual labels as “fiction” or “nonfiction” result in different levels of helping behavior, or impulses towards altruism, in readers who experience empathy. I am also very curious as to whether the nonfictional frame of life writing alters the duration of the emotional impact that a text can have over the years. For surely at least one kind of strategic narrative empathizing should survive the passing of time.

Some narratives outlast their original contexts to evoke readers’ empathy in posterity audiences, years after their first publication. These texts transcend the bounded and ambassadorial forms of strategic empathy that they may employ. Broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every audience (in the present day and later on) to experience emotional fusion by emphasizing our common human experiences, feelings, hopes, and vulnerabilities. Narrative empathy in the form of an author’s broadcast strategic empathizing employs universals that will reach everyone, including distant others, connecting faraway subjects to sensitive readers and viewers. Broadcast strategic empathy employs narrative devices to overcome the predictable here-and-now biases that can limit the range of less robust strategic empathizing. The original makers of many older narratives that readers still find moving today, after centuries or even millennia, have used broadcast strategic empathizing. Finally, a single text may blend empathetic appeals to multiple audiences, employing a mixture of bounded, ambassadorial, and broadcast strategic empathy. This raises the question of the durability of specific narrative techniques.

Assuming that authors’ empathy leads writers, game-designers, and filmmakers hoping to evoke readers or viewers empathy to use techniques to effect a strategic transaction of narrative empathy, we should inquire what techniques are most reliable? How exactly does narrative empathy relate to narrative form? As I have discussed in other works on narrative empathy, narrative theorists have associated the use of representational strategies and techniques in fiction with different empathetic effects on readers, though these claims have not always been substantiated through empirical research on readers’ responses (Keen, “A Theory”
Fredric Jameson’s discussion of generic conventions (*Political Unconscious*), Victor Nell’s pioneering empirical research on immersion reading (*Lost in a Book*), Martha Nussbaum’s observations about the effects of lengthy fictions (*Love’s Knowledge*), David Miall’s theorizing about foregrounding (‘Beyond the Schema Given’), Dolf Zillman’s research on disorder or defamiliarization and emotional involvement (‘Mechanisms’), and Ralf Schneider’s study of manipulations of narrative situation to channel the perspective or person of the narration and the representation of fictional characters’ consciousness (‘Toward a Cognitive Theory’). Specific techniques have been associated with narrative empathy, including Andringa’s work on point of view (‘Point of View and Viewer Empathy’), Moninka Fludernik and Ansgar Nünning’s separate contributions on metanarrative interjections (Fludernik, ‘Metanarrative’; Nünning, ‘Towards a Definition’), and my own contentions about the impact of paratexts on perceptions of fictionality (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 88–89). Other elements of fictional worldmaking thought to be involved in narrative empathy include the vivid use of settings and traversing of boundaries (Friedman, *Mappings*), the emphasis on a ‘you’ narratee (Armstrong, ‘Affective Turn’), and serial repetition of narratives set in a stable storyworld (Warhol, *Having a Good Cry*). (*Narrative Form* 158)

Many of these techniques, if not absolutely all of them, have their counterparts or their direct uses in nonfiction narrative. Does the paratext “nonfiction” alter the way the same technique is perceived or how it operates to evoke empathy in its readers? A great deal could be gained from further study of these questions via experiments designed to compare and contrast people’s responses to specific narrative techniques in fictional and nonfictional contexts.

All readers differ in the degree of empathy in their responses even to the most naturalistic, verisimilar nonfictional narratives, because actual readers are individuals with their own histories, identities, and experiences, whereas even the nonfictional subjects of life writing are comprised of a fixed set of words, depicted actions or behaviors within the parameters of the text. I have argued elsewhere that theorists of narrative form need to acknowledge the profound degree to which
readers shape the fictional worlds they co-create (“Readers’ Temperament”). Readers also co-create the nonfiction that they read—heaven knows I gave a lot of my 10-year-old self to Anne Frank when I first read her. Perhaps a difference will remain in the degree of investment nonfiction readers have in the certainty that the nonfiction text tells the truth—even though we widely understand memoir to have pretty flexible relations with verifiability.

So are we nerds or bookworms? Both categories seem a little antisocial, and any kind of reading seems to require its own defense. Like fiction reading, encountering works of life writing exercises our skills of mental visualizing, cultivates our empathy and sympathy, and cements us into communities of fellow-readers. Life writing introduces us to universals of experience in spite of every kind of human difference, which biographies, memoirs, autobiographies and testimonial works clearly represent. Allowing oneself to engage with a written life, even one radically different from ours in terms of identity and experience, links us with our kin, by which I mean all those other uniquely story-telling animals—all the rest of humankind. And if the recognition of our blessings and responsibilities as people who share this world with so many others begins when we are lost in a book, then just think of what we can do when we put that book down.

Works Cited


About the Author

Suzanne Keen writes about narrative empathy and the impact of immersion reading. Her affective and cognitive studies combine expertise in the novel and narrative theory with interests in neuroscience, developmental and social psychology, and emotion science. Her books include Thomas Hardy’s Brains, Empathy and the Novel, Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction, Victorian Renovations of the Novel, and a volume of poetry. Co-editor of Contemporary Women’s Writing, she has guest edited special issues of Poetics Today and Style. She serves as Thomas H. Broadus Professor of English and Dean of the College at Washington and Lee University.

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